

# The WAGER, Vol. 3(27) - All eyes on France: World Cup '98

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Much like the Olympics, the World Cup championships unite the global community in an international fellowship of skill, agility, strength... and betting. With expanded television coverage and Internet attention, World Cup soccer has become more fan-accessible than ever before. But accompanying this information technology is a parallel development of the international sports gambling infrastructure.

Recent months have borne witness to a proliferation of gambling activity, legal and illegal, focusing on the World Cup championship and its preliminary matches. In addition to the usual office betting pools, soccer bettors can now place their wagers using an elaborate network of cyber-casinos and offshore Internet bookmakers. One such service is BETonline, hosted by the British Sporting Life website. The site, which is open to UK residents over the age of 18, allows netizens to place bets from approximately \$5 to \$825. Receiving about 500,000 hits each day, BETonline claims to be the third most popular sports web site in the world [1]. Also cashing in on soccer fever is the state-run English gambling firm, Tote, which launched a sizable advertising campaign last winter to promote its World Cup telephone betting service [2]. Yet not all soccer betting takes place under the auspices of government regulation and corporate-style bookmakers. A recent crackdown in Asia has revealed both the scope and nature of underworld gaming (see Figure below).

## Selected Incidents of Syndicate-style Illegal World Cup Gambling

- A Hong Kong soccer player was charged with conspiring with other players to fix games in return for bribes. The match in question was a March World Cup qualifier game in which Hong-Kong lost 2-0 to Thailand.
- In conjunction with the above-mentioned game-fixing crackdown, authorities confiscated a computer system that had recorded \$500,000 of betting activity in the three hour period prior to the first game of the World Cup finals.
- Police in Malaysia shut down a gambling syndicate accused of running a grand total of \$2.5 million in bets over a nine month period. Investigators charge that the group was taking in up to \$66,667 per World Cup qualifying match.
- Authorities in Hong Kong seized approximately \$154,900 worth of World Cup bets. The day before, three others suspected of illegal soccer gambling were released on bail.

The issue of Internet gaming is hardly a new one in the gambling community. But the case of the World Cup offers pause to consider the topic from a different

perspective. What are the inherent properties of soccer that predispose it to this kind of wagering? How does soccer differ from football, baseball, basketball and how do these differences reveal themselves in the gambling paradigms with which they are associated? For example, soccer is a low-scoring game which usually precludes the double-digit spreads to which Americans are accustomed. Do the international nature of the tournament and its associated production of nationalism affect betting habits? It is possible that soccer's pre-existing culture of violence and lawlessness could provide a ripe atmosphere for illegal gambling. For Americans, who are accustomed to a few playoff games and a Super Bowl or World Series, the intense concentration of bracketed matches in a short period of time allows for a heightened pace and high number of possible outcomes when compared with baseball, football, and basketball. Just as the skills needed to score a goal differ from those needed to shoot a basket, so should we be cognizant of the inherent subtleties that suggest a more sensitive, multi-layered treatment of sports gambling.

#### Sources:

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