

Addictions Psychiatry Prize

Gambling in the Shadows: Unveiling Gaps in UK Safer Gambling Reforms for the Digital Era

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Abstract

Introduction

This article provides a brief analysis of the 2023 UK government white paper “High states: Gambling reform for the digital age.”¹ Whilst there are substantial positive measures outlined by the government in their review, major issues remain unaddressed. This article uses a case study to reflect on the impact of social media affiliates in the promotion of gambling activity and the gambling commission’s limited ability to address illegal gambling sites.

Case Study

A 27-year-old man presented to the emergency department with suicidal ideation following struggles with gambling addiction. He had lost approximately £44,000 over seven years. He had never presented to mental health services before and had kept his addiction a secret from loved ones. His case highlights the role of social media influencers and illegal gambling websites in sustaining harm to vulnerable gamblers.

Discussion

Analysis of the literature demonstrates the scale of the problem the UK is facing with over 1.8 million people in the UK identified as problem gamblers.¹ Vital steps are being made to ensure protection of children, implement financial checks, and improve the complaints process for individuals who feel they have been mistreated under the social responsibility clause of the responsible gambling regulations. However, the response to affiliate advertising and illegal gambling appears to be inadequate.

Conclusion

While recognizing the UK government's efforts in the 2023 white paper, this article contends that critical issues persist, particularly in addressing illegal offshore gambling and regulating social media affiliates. It advocates for further research collaboration with social media platforms to mitigate automatic gambling promotions and better protect vulnerable users.

1.0 Introduction:

UK safer gambling regulations have been under intense scrutiny in recent years with the UK government's 2023 white paper entitled "High stakes: Gambling reform for the digital age" offering a review of the Gambling Act of 2005.¹ The government has rightfully determined that gambling risks have increased with the availability of online gambling however, this essay uses a clinical example to argue that the proposed steps are insufficient to protect vulnerable gamblers. Social media promotion of gambling websites and specialised algorithms mean those with gambling problems can be easily targeted and offshore gambling sites are taking advantage of loopholes in the GamStop programme (an independent self-exclusion scheme for online gambling) to abuse and profit from vulnerable people.

2.0 Literature Review:

2.1 Defining the problem

"High stakes: gambling reform for the digital age" is an evidence-based review which suggests that there are around 300,000 gambling addicts in the UK with a further 1.8 million showing signs of harmful gambling behaviour.¹ An estimated 117 to 496 suicides occur annually due to gambling-related harm.² Neuroscientific studies have shown a remarkable similarity between gambling addiction and substance addiction. Pathological dopaminergic responses are observed in the striatum and ventromedial prefrontal cortex of people with a gambling addiction.³⁻⁵ This mechanism has been highlighted by the propensity for gambling addiction to develop in patients with Parkinson's disease who are being treated with a dopamine receptor agonist.⁴ However, studies have shown that the brain atrophy observed on neuroimaging in many substance addictions

are not observed in pathological gambling patients. This discrepancy is thought to be due to the effects of the substance on the brain rather than the neurobiological addiction process.³

In a study I conducted in 2021 I found that the public perceived gambling as more addictive than alcohol, gaming, and cocaine.⁶ However, online gambling increases the chances that people can hide their addiction from their loved ones because there are fewer physical symptoms than other addictions. While there's significant social recognition and concern about gambling behaviour, its benefits can't be realised if vulnerable individuals aren't identified by their personal networks. If people were still spending time in gambling shops, then others would have more opportunity to recognise signs of addiction, but this is unlikely to be recognised when people are spending a lot of time on their phones.

2.2 Analysing the UK government's response

From my analysis of the white paper ¹, UK responsible gambling strategy seems to have three prongs of attack:

1. Preventing underage gambling and verifying player's identity. In future, this may include credit and income checks to enforce relative deposit limits
2. Restriction of gambling advertisements and promotions
3. Identification of problem gamblers and safeguarding these players from further harm. This includes deposit limits, time limits, and loss limits.

Regarding underage gambling and verification of identity, the steps set out by the government appear to be achievable. UK gambling firms are held to high standards of ID verification and although there have been incidences of children using their parent's ID to create accounts, these are few and far between.⁷ The obvious problem with this strategy is that failure to police and prevent illegal gambling firms from accepting bets from UK citizens and thus underage gambling can still occur without any repercussions.

Secondly, important and substantial reforms to gambling advertising and promotions have been proposed. These mainly apply to traditional forms of advertising such as TV, radio, and sport-specific advertisements.

In sports, the premier league has faced scrutiny for its response to player's gambling addiction as seen in the case of Ivan Toney and Sandro Tonali who were both handed suspensions from playing.⁸ Paul Merson has argued that these players should have received mental health support and that these punishments consolidate the view amongst fans that they cannot speak about their addiction.⁹ Nevertheless, this report confirms that "The Premier League has agreed to voluntarily end front-of-shirt sponsorships by gambling firms." It is estimated that this agreement will cost premier league clubs £60 million.

The report does discuss social media.¹ It recognises that the world of advertising is changing and that there is difficulty regulating affiliate advertising. Affiliates are people who are paid commissions to promote gambling companies online via social media. This is an area that the gambling

commission has struggled to address and appears unwilling at this time to take any firm action.

While we welcome efforts from the industry to raise standards for affiliates, this does not dilute the clear responsibilities the Gambling Commission will continue to place on operators for all activities undertaken in their name. We believe this is the best way to guarantee strong compliance and maintain clear responsibilities. In particular, we are already clear that any direct marketing to self-excluded customers by affiliates will be regarded as a breach of licence conditions by the licensee on whose behalf the affiliate is contacting the customer.

The Gambling Commission continues to keep this area under review and will not hesitate to take action if there is evidence of standards slipping. The Online Advertising Programme will also take a wider look at regulation for online affiliates.¹

From this extract, it is clear that using social media posts to recommend betting on a certain platform cannot be viewed as targeting self-excluded customers. The affiliate is not responsible directly for the way a social media algorithm promotes topics and would only be culpable if they specifically reached out to an individual. Without combined action with social media platforms themselves, this will remain a loophole which will lead to further exploitation of vulnerable gamblers.

However, arguably the weakest of the government's protective measures is found in its tertiary prevention strategy. The government says the following

about the social responsibility clause of the responsible gambling requirements:

Approximately 2,000 customer complaints per year to alternative dispute resolution (ADR) providers and the Gambling Commission relate to social responsibility breaches, gambling harm and safer gambling. However, these are currently out of scope for ADR, and the Commission cannot require operators to repay individual customers. This means customers seeking personal redress in these areas currently have no choice but to pursue potentially costly and uncertain court action.

We want customers to have further protections quickly. We will work with industry and all stakeholders in the sector to create an ombudsman that is fully operationally independent and is credible with customers. The body will adjudicate complaints relating to social responsibility or gambling harm where an operator is not able to resolve these. The information that an ombudsman collates through complaints will assist the Gambling Commission in planning its enforcement activity and help industry to improve processes and support vulnerable consumers. We expect all operators to take steps to offer appropriate redress to customers where needed and if the ombudsman does not attract sufficient cooperation or deliver the protections as we expect, we will legislate to put its position beyond doubt.¹

This statement highlights the lack of consumer protection in the industry and the ability of gambling companies to abuse gambling addicts without

retribution. Since 2005, no complaints about responsible gambling could be reviewed by an alternative dispute service and thus there was no protection for individuals. This equates to approximately 36,000 complaints over 18 years. Despite large fines for Ladbrokes and William Hill this year, the protection for the individual player is non-existent. Whilst there is an acknowledgement of the problem by the government, this white paper has not indicated any timeframe by which this new ombudsman will be established or outlined its potential remit.¹

3.0 Case study:

A 27-year-old male presented to the emergency department with suicidal ideation. The patient had been planning on using a ligature over the weekend while his girlfriend was away. He had come to the emergency department after reading an article by an ex-professional footballer about his struggles with gambling which had persuaded him to seek help. He had never presented to mental health services before, had not attempted suicide before, and had not written a suicide note.

He had been suffering from low mood over the last 12 months and believed this was related to increased financial pressure due to his online gambling habits. He had not disclosed his financial situation to his partner due to a sense of guilt and a determination to win back his money so she wouldn't have to know. He said he had not sought help because he was convinced that his mood was related to his own financial decisions and that he bore the responsibility for fixing this.

He had initially started gambling online whilst at university and exclusively gambled on sporting events. Growing up as an avid tennis fan, he had followed tennis-related social media accounts. This subsequently led to seeing posts from accounts on Twitter (now known as X) which suggested and promoted bets on tennis markets. Using his knowledge of tennis, he had decided to "back himself," and even paid to join the 'VIP' packages of these Twitter advisors for their 'best bets.' He lost a substantial amount of money doing this and so moved on to higher stakes to recuperate his losses. He also started betting on events he had little to no interest in such as basketball and foreign football tournaments.

When he was 25, he permanently excluded himself from most UK gambling sites. He disclosed that he had subsequently tried to reopen these accounts without success but had managed to find alternative online sportsbooks. He estimates he lost over £20,000 over those 5 years on UK betting sites.

Following a 6-month bet-free period, he turned to non-GamStop online casinos with sportsbooks. These were almost always regulated by the Curaçao e-gaming licence.

He was able to access these sites despite blocks on his bank accounts and a parental block on his cellular data access. The lack of regulation means these companies are not recognised as gambling firms in transactions. He estimates that he lost around 12,000 pounds a year on these sites. Unlike the UK gambling websites, he never received any warnings about his losses and never had anyone reach out to see if he was gambling responsibly. He ended up taking out a loan to pay off his credit card bill and self-excluded from these sites. He filed a complaint with the Curaçao licensing board but was told that

the operator had acted responsibly in his case. This led to his presentation at the emergency department. He has received an email from the gambling commission saying that because he had sought out the company online, they had not committed a crime.

He had a family history of gambling but was unsure whether this was the cause of his paternal grandfather's suicide as he was very young when he died. There was no other history of mental illness in the family.

He had no significant medical conditions but was being seen regularly by orthopaedics for an unspecified knee complaint. He was not currently taking any medication.

He lived with his long-term partner (together over 10 years) whom he had never disclosed his gambling. He worked as a junior solicitor for a local firm and said that he was well-paid. He had recently been reprimanded for watching basketball at work (a match he had bet on). He had never smoked, drank between 8-12 units of alcohol a week, and had never used any recreational drugs.

On mental state examination, he was dressed in a suit and well-kempt. He avoided eye contact throughout our long discussion. His speech was at a normal rate, tone and rhythm with good spontaneity of speech. His mood was both subjectively and objectively dysphoric with a reactive affect. There was no evidence of formal thought disorder, but he was currently experiencing suicidal ideation. No perceptual abnormalities. Cognition was not formally assessed but appeared grossly intact. His insight could be characterised as mixed as he was

aware of the reasons why he was experiencing low mood, but he was not convinced that this constituted a mental illness.

The patient agreed to engage with his GP and community mental health services. He was not keen to engage with the northern gambling addiction service but recognised that he could be described as having an addiction. He wanted to explore cognitive behavioural therapy and get some support to tell his girlfriend. The mental health liaison team explained that this would take some time to organise but that they felt that he was currently safe to go home. He agreed and was discharged.

4.0 Discussion:

This case highlights two of the major challenges facing the UK government in preventing harmful gambling: Covert social media promotions and offshore GamStop loopholes.

Exploring 'X' (formerly known as Twitter) under the hashtag GamblingTwitter, I found thousands of tipsters and cappers suggesting bets (See Appendix 1). Many seemed to be sponsored by various gambling companies and promoted the free bets and bet boosts of their affiliated company. I was struck by the number of tennis betting recommendations and found one post which explained that it is good for gamblers because there is so much tennis throughout the year. You can bet on a tennis match every day of the year and throughout most of the day. Tennis is also famously susceptible to corruption and several posts claimed that they knew a match was fixed.

Moreover, many of the comments on these posts were appalling. Some people talk about how they don't know how they are going to pay their rent this month but cannot wait for the next tip. Others would post incredibly abusive and disturbing comments when the tipster lost. I would be remiss not to mention the abuse tennis players receive themselves from gamblers, especially female players.¹⁰

Reflecting on the case it became clear how easily a tennis fan on social media could become a gambling addict. After searching this hashtag, I began receiving posts in my feed from accounts discussing betting tips that I had never seen. Additionally, these posts were often commenting on or sharing an official ATP or WTA post (the official tennis organisers). Social media is a treasure trove for predatory gambling sites as addicts congregate and can be targeted anywhere, and at any time.

The Curaçao e-gaming licence seems to be widely ignored, and I was surprised to hear about the gambling commission's lack of involvement. Curaçao is a former colony of the Netherlands and is currently a self-governing constituent country. It offers a gambling licence with minimal regulation, and I was unable to find any case where the Curaçao alternative dispute resolution service had found in favour of the player.⁷

The Netherlands have banned companies operating with a Curaçao licence from interacting with Dutch players and yet the rest of Europe has not followed suit.¹¹ One company, Santeda International, has quickly developed several online sites since 2020. The concern about these sites goes beyond the lack of adherence to social responsibility guidelines in the UK. The casinos accept

deposits from unverified players but do not allow withdrawals until age-verified. This allows children and teenagers the ability to deposit and gamble without age checks. Furthermore, it is a crime to advertise gambling to a UK citizen without a Gambling Commission licence, but this does not prohibit websites and social media posts. Surely this is an oversight.

5.0 Conclusion:

The UK government's 2023 white paper entitled "High stakes: Gambling reform for the digital age" is a significant step forward in preventing gambling addiction and reducing the burden of disease on those already affected. However, inaction regarding illegal offshore gambling and the inability to regulate and control affiliate advertising on social media platforms substantially weaken the government's proposals. Further research needs to be conducted on how best to work with social media platforms to solve automatic promotions of gambling activity and protect vulnerable users.

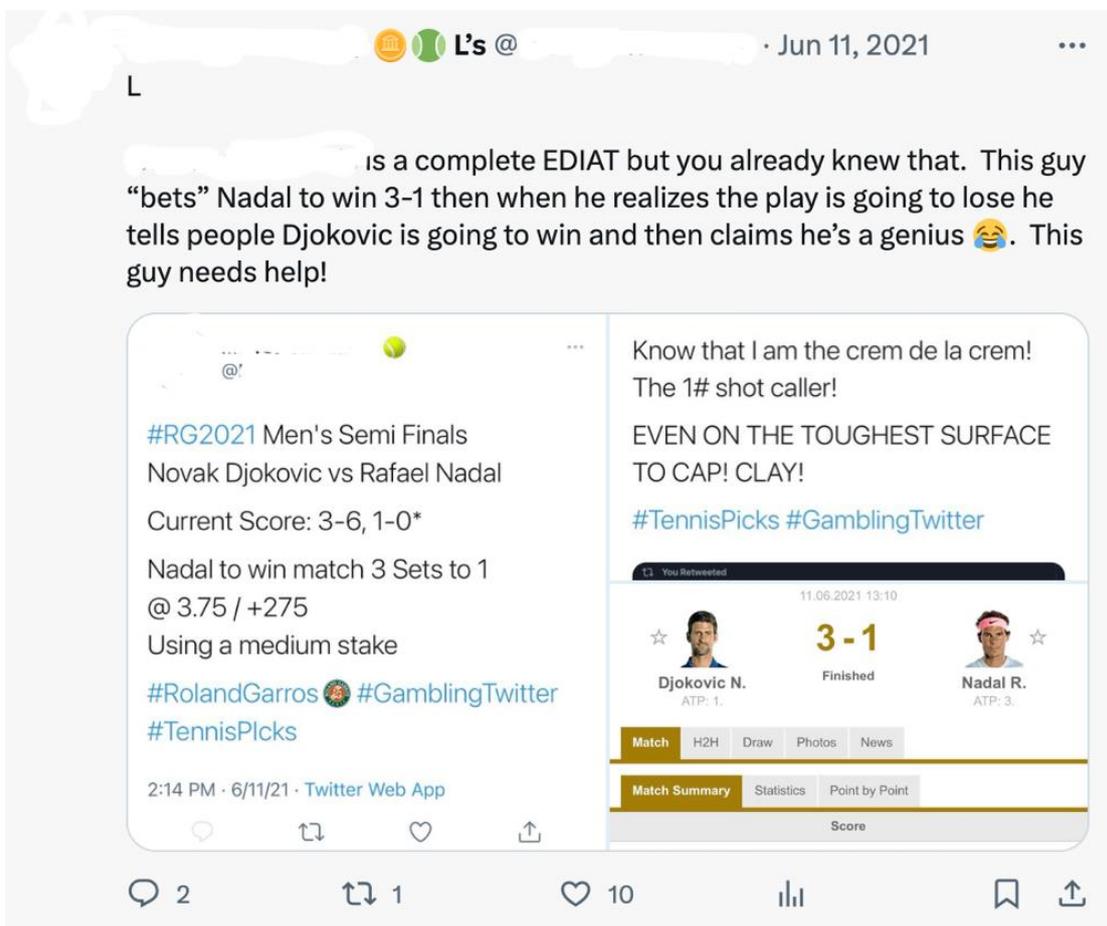
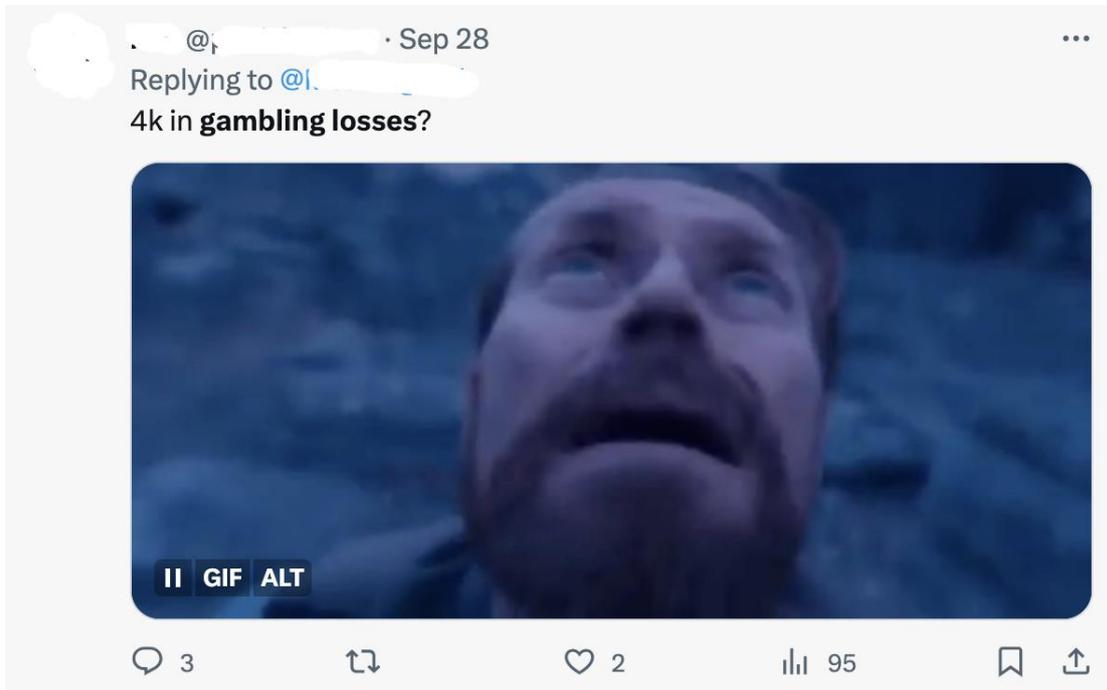
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Appendix 1

Here is a snapshot of Twitter comments and posts referenced in this article:





Nov 29



Replying to @... and @...
tryna make up my **gambling losses** here 🤔🤔



1



11



Nov 29



chasing **gambling losses** is one of my favorite traditions since **gambling** became legalized in our 7th state



37



5h



ATP **Tennis** Plays

(1U) Nardi ML vs Coboli (+114)

(1U) Stricker ML vs Fils (+130)

(1U) Medjedovic -3 vs Shelbayh (-128)

(1U) Van Assche/Michelsen O23.5 (-116)

Let's have a day 🍀

Like if tailing along 👍 [#GamblingTwitter](#)



6



8



91

9.9K



Nov 29

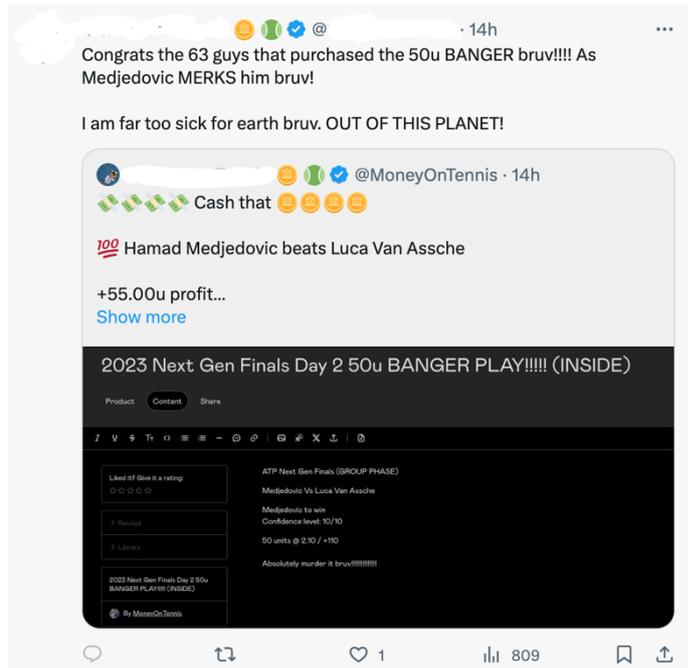
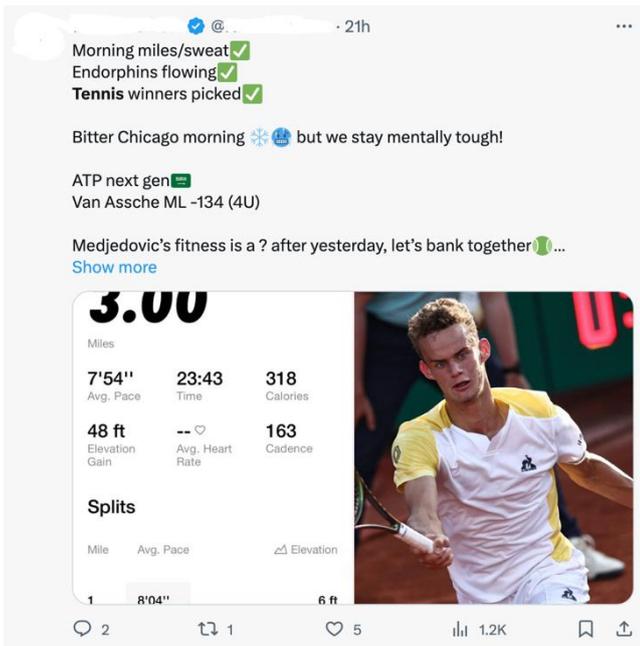
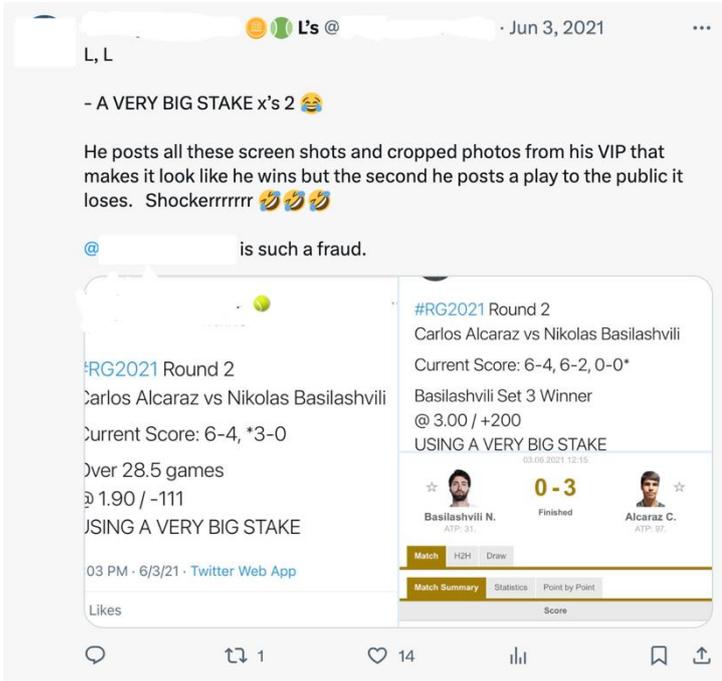
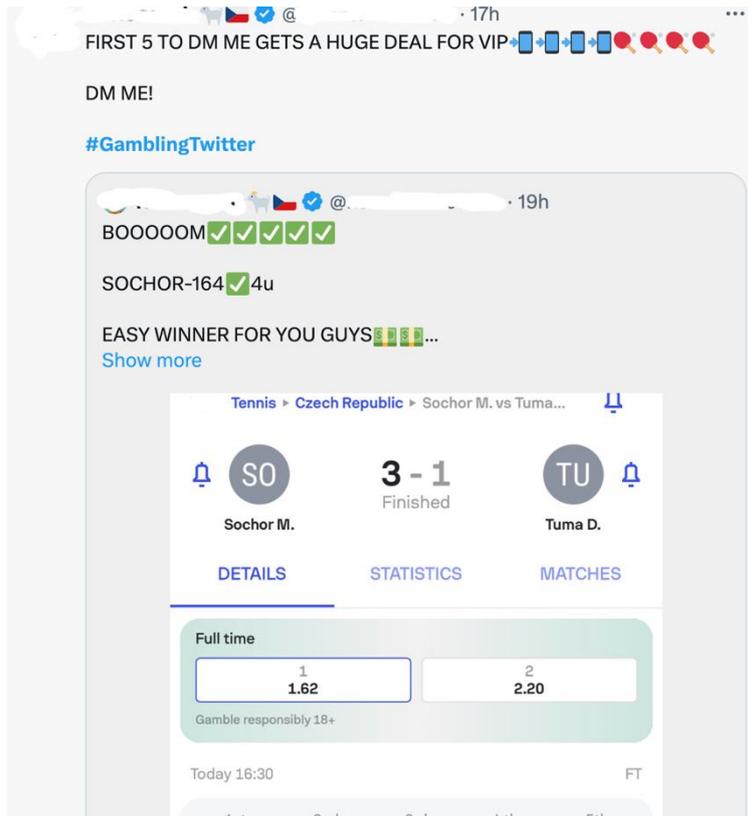


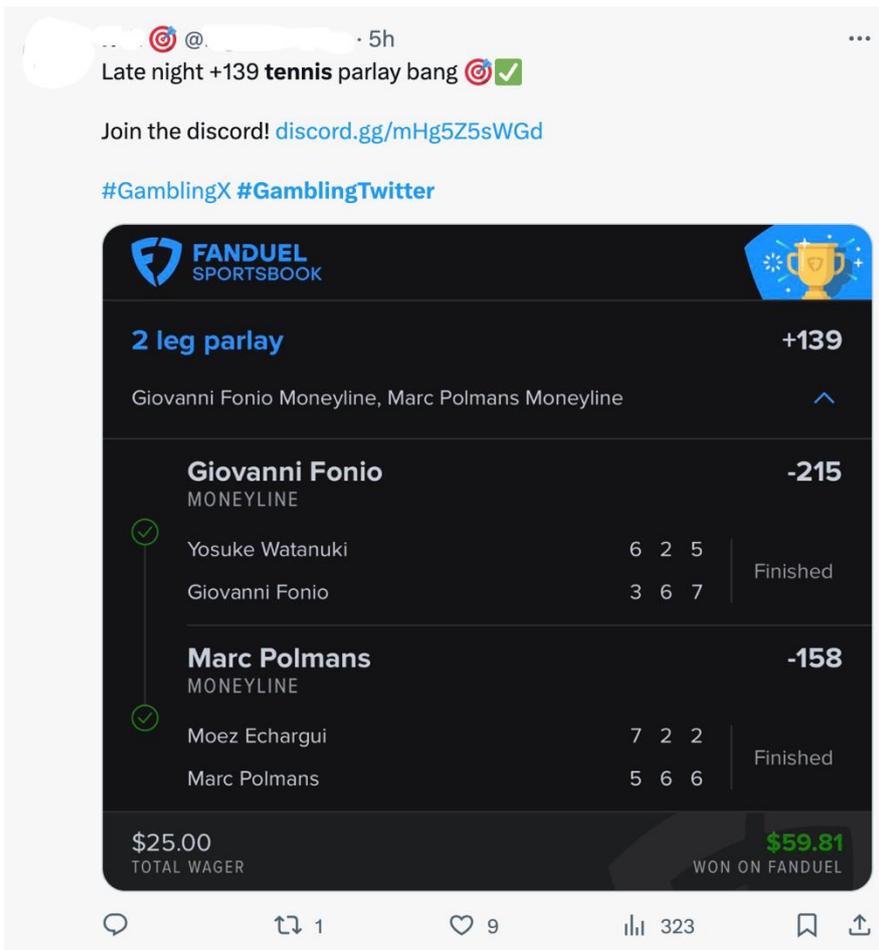
One of them nights I'm wishing I had a woman to take my mind off my **gambling losses** 😞



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10 Codes for Betting / Trading / Capping Discipline on Tennis:

- Exercise caution when evaluating left-handed players. Lefties bring a unique style and attributes to the court, which can frustrate right-handed opponents. However, they also have notable weaknesses that certain right-handers can exploit. While it's important to acknowledge the advantages of left-handed players, remember that not all right-handers struggle against them. Players like Djokovic, Murray, Hurkacz, Tsitsipas, and Zverev tend to perform well against left-handed opponents. Djokovic's strong record against Nadal is a testament to this.
 - Approach the early rounds of tournaments, particularly Grand Slams and Masters 1000 events, with caution. Assessing the mental and physical condition of players is essential before making any judgments. Players often keep injuries or health issues under wraps to avoid giving their opponents an advantage. Sometimes, injured players might still participate in major events due to pressure from sponsors or the potential prize money. Additionally, keep in mind that early-round matches can feature unexpected matchups between injured players.
 - Focus on match-ups as the primary factor for long-term success. Merely considering the results of individual matches between players isn't enough. Understanding how players' styles and strengths match up against each other, considering factors like weather, surface, and fitness/rhythm, is key. Pay particular attention to the serve vs. return of serve dynamics, as this gives you a glimpse into what the rally may look like.
 - Avoid overestimating a player's mental toughness while neglecting the importance of match-ups. To consistently predict match outcomes, it's crucial to identify players with the technical skills required to succeed in specific match-ups. While mental strength is valuable, it won't compensate for a lack of necessary skills. Steer clear of biased arguments, such as past letdowns or personal preferences, when assessing players. Prioritize objective analysis over subjective biases. Remember, being "hot" doesn't guarantee success if it's not backed by the right conditions. She might be hot, but is she hot on that surface under those weather conditions, with the rhythm she's playing in?
 - When using statistics, ensure they are contextual and meaningful. Relying solely on past tanking incidents or injuries to predict future outcomes can lead to flawed conclusions. Understand the context of statistics and focus on match-up analysis, court surface, players' form and health and weather conditions. This holistic approach will yield more accurate predictions.
 - Grasp how the physics of different surfaces impact tennis matches:
 - HARD COURTS** offer consistent and predictable bounce, allowing players to anticipate and time their shots precisely. The traction on hard courts enables quick changes of direction, favouring players with counterpunching skills and dynamic footwork. Djokovic, Medvedev, Tsitsipas, De Minaur, Nishioka, and Bonzi excel on hard courts due to these advantages. However, they may not enjoy the same benefits on the more slippery clay and grass surfaces.
 - CLAY COURTS** generate a higher, more vertical bounce due to their loose composition. The ball sinks into the clay, decelerating and rising higher, favouring players who rely on topspin shots. However, the impact of this bounce can vary with weather conditions. In sunny weather, topspin shots are more effective, while in colder weather with lower bounce, players with flatter and more powerful shots may have an edge.

Changing directions and moving on clay can pose challenges due to the surface's characteristics. The loose composition reduces traction and grip, causing players' shoes to sink slightly, impeding quick movements. Skilled players intentionally slide on the surface, reducing friction for smooth transitions. Mastering sliding demands practice, balance, and momentum control.

Reading the bounce's trajectory and making calculated movements to position oneself optimally for each shot is optimal on clay as a result of the slippery nature. Footwork on clay courts becomes a delicate dance, where players must anticipate the ball's path and adjust their steps accordingly. This adaptability is crucial for maintaining balance and stability while covering a larger area of the court. Each step becomes a strategic calculation, a subtle art of placing oneself in the right position to unleash a winning shot or defend against an opponent's attack. The nature of clay courts demands players to commit to their shots well in advance, as the surface's slipperiness doesn't allow for last-minute adjustments. Whether players are on the offensive, launching powerful attacks, or aiming to remain neutral in a rally, they must make quick in advance decisions and execute them with conviction. Ultimately clay rewards those who can anticipate and act decisively.

 - GRASS COURTS** provide a low and skidding bounce, presenting a challenge for opponents. The low friction of the surface allows the ball to move swiftly, resulting in a faster-paced game with quick tempo rallies. This surface favours players with excellent wrist racquet head control, hand-eye coordination, timing and reflexes.

Grass courts naturally suit players with attacking styles, as the fast nature of the surface rewards aggressive shot-making and encourages serve-and-volley play. Players who can move lightly on their feet and exhibit finesse on the court, like Federer, excel in baseline rallies as well. Strong net skills, slice shots, and serves are invaluable assets on grass. Counterpunchers who appreciate the lower bounce and possess light footwork, coupled with variety in their game, can also excel on grass courts. Examples of such players include Bonzi, Goffin, Nishioka, and Gaston.
 - Understand how atmospheric conditions impact tennis matches:
 - Altitude affects the ball's speed and distance, with higher altitudes resulting in faster shots. Defensive shots like slices or higher lobs counter wind's effect. Aggressive shots become riskier due to altered trajectory.
 - High humidity makes air heavy, stifling, and impacts performance. It causes discomfort, fatigue, difficulty in breathing, and decreased stamina. Combined with heat, it increases sweating, risking dehydration if not managed properly.
 - Wind disrupts serve and toss, affecting accuracy and power. Players must adjust technique or toss placement to compensate for wind's impact. Defensive shots like slices or higher lobs counter wind's effect. Aggressive shots become riskier due to altered trajectory.
 - Heat influences players' performance high temperatures lead to fatigue, dehydration, and decreased stamina, resulting in slower speed, impaired reaction time and compromised decision-making. The ball's behaviour changes, bouncing higher and traveling faster through the air.
 - Sunshine can affect air density and court surface temperature, influencing the speed and bounce of the ball. The same as heat pretty much.

These atmospheric conditions add unique challenges and strategic considerations for players, requiring them to adapt their gameplay accordingly.
 - Minimise exposure to the media as much as possible, as it can erode your edge. Reading the media influences your subconscious perception of players, matches, and tournaments. Media narratives often cater to engaging the public rather than providing objective analysis. While journalists are simply doing their job, as someone betting or trading on tennis, it's crucial to avoid playing into these storylines and fantasies. Strive for a realistic perspective, free from external influences.
 - Be selective about which commentators you listen to. Preferably watch on the Bet365 stream where there isn't any commentary present. This is what I do and I never hear a word. If you are watching on a TV platform, disregard commentators who lack expertise or are more focused on appealing to a general audience. Former professionals and coaches can provide valuable insights, but it's important to verify if they are up-to-date with the modern game. Avoid mainstream commentators who may cloud your judgment. Even if you're unaware of being influenced, their biased or uninformed opinions can negatively impact your decisions.
 - If you have access to platforms such as the Betfair Trading Exchange in the UK or parts of Europe, it is beneficial to take advantage of them due to their lack of commission on odds, resulting in more accurate prices and making hedging a more viable option. Hedging involves mitigating potential losses by placing additional bets. It is advisable to consider hedging when a player is leading by a set and a break, particularly on clay courts, as this surface is known for its unpredictability. Hedging is also referred to as "cashing out."
- Choking in tennis is more prevalent compared to other sports due to its technical nature, individualistic aspect, and mentally demanding scoring system. The sport requires precise skills and strategies under immense pressure, while the unforgiving scoring system adds to the mental challenge. Fluctuations in performance are common, making hedging a prudent approach. Hedging involves placing additional bets to offset initial wagers, minimising potential losses. In tennis, where outcomes are unpredictable, hedging helps mitigate risks from player performance, injuries, and external factors. Although it may require more patience with traditional bookmakers, analysing odds, monitoring player performance and making calculated decisions can increase long-term success. Hedging is advisable to safeguard bets in this sport, considering its unique challenges. It is the toughest sport in the world. Take it from me!