

# A Betting Shop in Prison

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THE POPULATION in a large modern prison is a compact community living very much like people in a small enclosed town. It has its doctors, welfare services, teachers and schools. Also in residence are the ministers of religions serving the spiritual needs of the various denominations. On the industrial side of the community's life, one would find blacksmiths, bakeries, machine shops and in some places, printing presses and weaving looms.

The internal welfare services are many and varied and will often better those supplied to the general public in the community outside the prison. The most important is the gym. Not only will this building supply all the requirements to maintain physical fitness and healthy competition, it is often equipped with a first class stage, the envy of many visiting drama groups. At the opposite end of the building you would find a projection room and a projector for regular cinema shows. It is a certainty the prison will have its shop where the community can purchase all manner of things, from cigarettes and confectionery, to food items to supplement their daily rations. Many prisons today have their own sports arena, complete with a running track, jumping

pits, etc. Even swimming pools are not considered to be rare amenities these days.

With all these services available to them, one would think the prisoners' lot is complete, but this is not so, for one of their greatest pleasures, enjoyed by so many, is also one of the greatest curses of prison life; gambling.

To staff and inmates alike gambling in prison is a constant source of danger, not because of the act itself but of the power it provides to a few, or even one man. This man is known as the prison "bookie" or "baron". It would at this juncture be right to explain the difference between a bookie and a baron. A baron is the man who loans tobacco to his fellow prisoners at a rate of interest. This interest rate will increase with the amount of time required to repay the loan. Now if the time lag is great then it is possible for the interest returnable to quickly exceed the original loan. A bookie is self explanatory the only difference from the bookie we all know is that he deals in tobacco, usually in one-eighth units. In many prisons the bookie and the baron are one man or one syndicate. The staff spend many hours watching them and the poor prisoner who

gets into their clutches lives in daily fear of them. Violence and even murder have been committed because of and for them, but more about this aspect later.

There is an old saying, known to many of us. It goes: "If you can't join them, break them". Obviously the staff cannot join the prison bookie but surely they can break him. In recent years it has been made legal and possible for anyone over the age of 18 to go into a betting shop and place a bet, an act that takes just a few minutes. All is above board and straightforward and the transaction is a safe one for both sides. Now if the authorities are prepared to supply all the agenda of modern living, stages, film shows, swimming pools, running tracks, shops and dozens of now accepted everyday amenities, surely a betting shop in a prison is not such a fantastic idea. Here are some of the points in favour of the proposal.

It is more than likely that if a prisoner could have a wager officially he would no longer risk his stake with the present underground method. He would be treated fairly. If a winner paid the correct odds, and if a loser, the correct amount would be deducted from his earnings. This would ensure a measure of control for if the official prison bookmaker refused to accept a wager from a prisoner, only a fool or an inmate bookie would accept a bet from another inmate when his credit was known to be unsound by the authorities.

An alcoholic serving a long prison sentence could possibly derive some benefit from his incarceration. He would at least be able to "dry out" so, providing he had the will-power or he joined Alcoholics Anonymous on release, his sentence might be a blessing in disguise. However, no such blessing befalls the compulsive gambler, in fact, his lot might even become worse, he is ready prey for the bookie. In prison as in civvy street he will gamble away everything. He will steal his mate's tobacco, beg and borrow, promise and cajole, in an effort to satisfy his insatiable desire for a gamble. Even if his gambling becomes legal he will continue to go to the limits, but no longer would it be necessary to steal his mate's ounce of tobacco to pay to the bookie when his betting will be a cash transaction controlled through the wages or canteen books. The gambling aspects of a man's character, coupled with his record might also provide useful clues to the Parole Board when and if this system ever becomes law.

Because betting is such a clandestine affair in prison, rarely do the authorities know of its true extent. The gamblers code is, however, known and although this will vary slightly from prison to prison it remains generally rigid in application. For instance, when a prisoner becomes so heavily in debt to the bookie or baron, that he cannot hope to settle his account by betting he can escape from the

prison. Now this one act will square all accounts with bookie or baron, no matter if the duration of the escape is for one hour or one month. Of course the act of escaping will carry a further six months' imprisonment, nevertheless this is preferable to the vengeance exacted by the bookie or his henchman.

Because of betting debts, violence against staff is not unknown. At one time it was thought a period of confinement in the punishment cells cancelled a debt. Indirectly that is true. Let us suppose the bookie has a grievance against an officer who has reprimanded him and he wants to get even. It does not require a great deal of imagination to see how easily this can be done without the bookie becoming directly involved. I wonder how often gambling and its aftermath have been responsible for assaults against staff because, quite often when an assault has been made the inquiring officer will have to admit to finding no obvious motive for it. Everyone knows an attack on a member of the staff is a very serious offence in prison. It may carry, on conviction, a further sentence of imprisonment and loss of privileges, but all this a weak prisoner will prefer to being beaten up or razor slashed or both. Bodily harm to fellow inmates is a common enough occurrence. Inquiry here will often reveal that the failure to honour a debt has brought upon

the unfortunate wretch the vengeance of the type already mentioned.

The generally accepted currency for gambling in prison is tobacco, the usual denominations being from one-eighth of an ounce, then up in eighths to a full ounce. One may think these are trifling amounts but when trading for cash is done, or in some cases trading for another article, then an ounce of tobacco is reckoned as worth one pound (20s.). It is rare nowadays to be able to purchase these half-ounce packets of tobacco from one's own tobacconist, but the wholesaler does continue to pack tobacco for prisons in half-ounce packets. It follows that the half-ounce packet only has to be quartered to produce the eighth-ounce portions, units acceptable as stakes. When many prisoners do not have, in or outside of prison, the most hygienic habits, some of this tobacco, passed from pocket to pocket and literally from hand to mouth, is in a very dilapidated state, certainly not in a condition acceptable to many of us accustomed as we are to the fresh, clean packets and their contents. In the interest of hygiene therefore, gambling with tobacco should be stopped and open cash transactions authorised by the authorities.

Running a betting shop is a highly skilled job requiring a knowledge of mathematics plus accuracy and speed. If a member of the discipline staff was to be delegated to run such a service he

would naturally require training. There is nothing unusual about this, for the Prison Service already trains its own photographers, projectionists, cooks, physical training instructors and many others. Naturally there would have to be safeguards in the scheme for I cannot imagine what the Press reports would be if a prisoner were to "break the bank" whilst in prison. The first and obvious safeguard would be that betting stakes would be limited to the money a man earns in prison; secondly, stakes would be limited to size and a ceiling placed upon the odds given (maybe 10-1 or perhaps 20-1) only experience would decree

what was a reasonable return for a given outlay. However, these are minor points; the principle of a betting shop, or no betting shop, is the major issue at stake.

I have presented a case for the official introduction of betting in prison, controlled and run by a member of the staff. I do not feel it is my duty to elaborate here on why we should not allow betting, for that should be done by another. One thing is an "odds on" certainty, betting in prison will never be eradicated so let it be in the open and under some sort of surveillance, this will ensure fairness to the backers, and death I hope, to the prisoner bookmaker.



*"No Smith, I am NOT the bookie's runner"*