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College Football Betting vs NFL Wagering – What's The Difference?

By Paul Mroczka

For sportsbooks and bettors alike one of the biggest and most exciting times of the year is the

sweep of about 6 months that contains the college and professional football betting seasons. A lot of wagering is done on both NCAA and NFL contests. But betting on one and winning does not mean you can wager on the other and win. In fact, if you've focused entirely on NFL games and have tried to switch to college football, you may have looked at the over/unders and point spreads with dismay. The same may be true if you're an old hand at the amateur ranks but a neophyte when it comes to the NFL.

The two most common football bets are the point spread and the over/under. A typical NFL point spread would look like this—Miami Dolphins (+6) Vs Carolina Panthers (–6). If listed by a sportsbook, Miami would be on the top line and Carolina below them on the bottom line. The home team is always listed second or on the bottom. With our example, Carolina is favored by 6 points. If you put money on the Panthers, they must win by 7 points for you to collect. If they win by 5 points or less, then you lose your bet. If they win by 6, then the game is a tie and this usually results in a "push," which means all bets are off and your wager is returned to you.

The over/under on this same contest is listed as "36 ov." The 36 refers to the total number of points scored by both teams. If you bet the under and 35 or fewer points are scored, you win; if you wager on the over and 37 or more points are scored, you win. If 36 points are scored, it doesn't matter which side of the number you put your money on, it's a push and your original wager is returned to you.

These are typical numbers for a professional game. In the NFL, it's extremely rare to see a point spread higher than 10 points and an over under higher than 40. Now let's take a look at a college contest. This game is between one of the lowest ranked teams in the country, the North Texas Eagles, and the National Champions, the Texas Longhorns.

The point spread for this game is listed as North Texas (+41) Vs. Texas (–41). No, that is not a misprint. The Point spread is 41. The over/under for the game is 54. Once again, that is not a misprint. The over/under is 54!

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Compare the point spread for the Dolphins and the Panthers with that for North Texas and Texas. The Panthers are one of the best teams in the NFL and the Dolphins, although making progress, are in the bottom echelon. Why is the NFL point spread and over/under so different from that of the NCAA?

NFL point spreads and over/unders are based on the premise that a team will do what it has to win, but it will usually not humiliate an opponent. They won't do this for many reasons. First, in the NFL winning by 1 point or thirty points does not affect the standings. A win is a win and a loss is a loss. Also, humiliating another team is seen as being unprofessional. Finally, coaches and a team get nothing out of running up the score on an opponent, except maybe some extra-tired players and some additional injuries.

The point spread and over/unders are also based on the fact that every NFL team, no matter how bad it may be, is made up of players that have attained a certain level of competence in playing the game. That means that although one team may have more talent, experience or better coaches, on any given

day a last place team can beat a first place team. It happens all the time.

NCAA point spreads and over/unders take the same premise and basic fact into consideration but reverse both of them, thus making the point spreads and over/unders look a bit out of kilter.

The point spread in college football is formed around the premise that a team will do everything it can to show that it's superior to another team, including run up the score. Now why would they do such an unsportsmanlike thing? It's true that most college football teams are in a conference. Some of the more powerful conferences are the PAC-10, Big 10, Big 12, Southeastern, Atlantic Coast and Big East. Most, but not all, of the top teams are associated with these conferences. There are also some college clubs that are Independents, meaning they don't belong to a conference. Notre Dame is one such school.

Along with fighting to be the best in their conference, teams are also vying to be ranked nationally. One of the ways they can increase their national prominence is by drubbing weaker teams. In fact, if Texas doesn't hammer North Texas, it's guaranteed to hurt their national ranking and to cause doubt amongst those who decide which club is number 1, 2, 3 and so forth. If the Longhorns barely beat the Eagles, it will be almost the same as losing to them.

Thus, in the NCAA a win is only a win within the conference. Nationally, there are wins, drubbings, wallopings and losses. There's a lot to be gained by a powerhouse revealing, exhibiting and using all of its strength.

Note the over/under in the North Texas-Texas game and compare it to the point spread. It's very telling. The over/under is 54 and yet the point spread is 41. That means that handicappers expect the Longhorns to score a heck of a lot of points—somewhere around 48 to 51—and the Eagles to score very few—3 to 10. These are not pie in the sky numbers. They're fairly close to how the Longhorns fared against teams such as the Eagles last year.

College point spreads and over/unders are based on the fact that although some teams match-up well,

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there's a great disparity between the have and have nots. Thus, unlike the NFL where there's a certain amount of parity, partly due to the economics dictated by the hard salary cap, colleges with a lot of financial support for their programs tend to have much better teams than those that lack backing.

Does this mean that all NCAA football games exhibit such extreme point spreads and high over/unders? Of course not, all of this is dictated by the relative strength of each team. But about 65% of the first week of handicapped college games have double digit point spreads and almost every contest has an over/under that's greater than 40 points.

In football betting, whether NFL or NCAA, you must do your homework. Along with studying team previews be sure to check team trends and injury reports. Past history as it relates to the present composition of each team is also important.

For college football, consider what is at stake for each team in terms of their national ranking. When betting on the pros, be mindful of a team's quarterback situation, its offensive line and its defense in relationship to the type of offense it's going to face. These factors are the same for college ball but often the weaknesses and disparities are much more evident in the amateur ranks.

Although the numbers tend to be higher for college football, and with good reason, remember that the

over/unders and point spreads in both amateur and professional football are based on a premise relating to the relative weight of a win and facts connected to parity and disparity amongst teams. When you consider each contest in this context, your football betting choices become a bit more evident.

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College Football Betting And Nfl Betting Are Not The Same Thing

By Luken Karel

There are at least a half-dozen factors that separate college football betting from NFL betting. For

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starters, action on college football is much more likely to come from sophisticated bettors, known as "sharps" or "wiseguys", who often possess some insight or kernel of information that may provide them with an edge against the house. Experienced bet takers know not to treat heavy activity on an obscure game, such as East Carolina versus Wake Forest, as casually as they might deal with increased wagering interest on a marquee NFL game such as a Redskins–Cowboys confrontation. For that reason, bookmakers usually move college football betting lines quickly, often one full point at a time. In general, it takes more money to move an NFL betting line and, when it is moved, usually it is by only half a point.

Largely because of a lack of proficiency in the kicking game, key numbers such as 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 13 and 14 are not nearly as sacrosanct in college football betting as they are in the NFL. College football games just do not fall on those numbers as often as they do in NFL contests.

We may never again see a three–touchdown favorite in the NFL but lines of –30, –40, or even –50 are not that uncommon in the college gridiron game. Oddsmakers and bookmakers also find college totals more difficult to gauge because some coaches try to impress those who have a vote in the polls by running up the score. Others, such as Penn State's Joe Paterno, feel that a third–string player's reward for practicing all week is to get to play in a blowout. It's just these types of unique uncertainties that compel bookmakers to shift college "over/under" numbers more quickly than they move NFL totals.

It's also the nature of college football that personnel change every year. This makes early season evaluation more difficult and leads bet takers to move lines and totals more quickly, especially in September and early October when the season is still young. There is personnel movement in the NFL too, of course, but mostly it involves players of established ability moving from team to team. In college football, you're always dealing with fresh faces.

By collective bargaining agreement, each week, the NFL publishes a comprehensive list of injured players and their status. Sure, there are mistakes and abuses and players who have been listed as "doubtful" have played while those regarded as "probable" have not but overall, the list is accurate. On the other hand, colleges are under no obligation to announce the status of injured or disciplined football players. This vagueness over availability sometimes can create opportunities in college football betting. Consequently, bookmakers are wary if too much wagering attention is paid to one team.

When it comes to parlay card numbers, you are much more apt to see a slight gap between those prices printed on cards and those posted on the board in the NFL than you are in college football. The key element is that bookmakers can more accurately predict the public inclination for an NFL game than they can for a college football game. It's not unusual then for traditionally popular team such as Dallas or a "hot" team such as Cincinnati, to be listed as a 7 1/2–point favorite on a parlay card but just a 6 1/2 or 7–point choice on the board. Through experience, bookmakers know that "public" teams such as the Cowboys, as well as "now" teams such as the Bengals, will be more aggressively played on parlay cards than they are straight up.

Clearly, understanding the differences between college football betting and NFL betting is essential to winning.

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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COLLEGE AND PRO FOOTBALL

College Football: `Wiseguys' frequently supply the action College football betting lines often are moved by a full point at a time Key numbers are not as important Personnel changes can make early season analysis difficult Information on injuries is not always accessible There's usually not a disparity between parlay card and board numbers

NFL: Money from public is prevalent Betting lines are usually moved by a half–point at a time Key numbers are VERY important Personnel changes are less volatile and easier to evaluate Information on injuries usually is accessible Parlay card numbers sometimes are intentionally different than prices on the board.

By Luken Karel for

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