

Wayne Rooney's Derby signing raises eyebrows amid the UK's growing gambling epidemic

The betting industry now makes more than £14bn a year



A Derby County wearing a Wayne Rooney number 32 kit at Pride Park, Derby, earlier this month (Image: PA)

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On Monday, the [BBC's Panorama programme aired](#) Addicted to Gambling during which reporter Bronagh Munro highlighted the huge problems society faces with gambling

compulsion. Featured on the programme were a number of people whose lives had been ruined by addiction.

The betting companies - Ladbrokes and the like - came in for particular criticism and for them there is a clear issue: problem gamblers bring in the greatest revenue with just 4% of punters bringing in 78% of profits.

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And we are talking huge sums. In 2017 it was [reported that](#) the betting industry now rakes in more £14bn a year. As a nation we are gambling more than ever and, according to Panorama, the UK now has the largest online gambling market in the world.

Which brings us Wayne Rooney. Days before Panorama was broadcast, it was announced that former England football captain was to make a shock return to the British game in January with Skybet Championship side Derby County.

Many eyebrows were raised at the news. Why would Rooney return from a lucrative late career flourish in the US and how on earth could Derby afford to pay his wages? Well, the latter question was maybe partially answered by Derby County themselves, who stated, [according to the BBC](#), that “on the back of” the former England captain joining, they have secured “a record-breaking sponsorship” deal with their shirt sponsor, online casino 32Red.

Perhaps entirely coincidentally, Rooney’s shirt number will be number 32. Which, according to Birmingham University’s professor of psychology [Jim Orford](#) enables Derby and 32Red to exploit a loophole in the law which is meant to protect children from the advertising of betting companies. This is because whilst 32Red legally cannot appear on any replica children’s shirts, they can have Rooney’s name and number 32 printed on the back of their kit.

Prof Orford said: “A lot of children won’t understand it to start with but advertising is like that. A lot of people will understand it, while for others it will just be in the back of their minds and be subliminal.”

Since the deal was announced the debates around football’s links to gambling have resurfaced.

[Sports Minister Nigel Adams expressed](#) his surprise at the shirt number and acknowledged problem gambling. He warned that “we have to be very careful about the message that football is sending”, while [the Bishop of St Albans](#), who is a peer and member of the parliamentary select committee inquiry into gambling-related harm, said: “Football needs to wake-up to the fact their shirt sponsorship deals will have a negative impact on the welfare of many of their fans, particularly children.”

It's [a fact that](#) a record 10 (half the total number) Premier League clubs have shirt sponsors that are gambling companies and that Derby are one of 16 Championship clubs out of 24 whose main sponsor is a betting outfit.

The “negative impact” of gambling on children is already being keenly felt. Last month that the first NHS betting clinic for children was opened in the UK. And, [as the Guardian reported](#), there are [55,000 children classed as having a gambling problem in Britain](#), according to the [Gambling Commission](#), which also found that 450,000 children are gambling habitually – more than those who had taken drugs, drunk alcohol or smoked.

Two men go fishing

The BBC is currently broadcasting the second series of [Mortimer and Whitehouse: Gone Fishing](#).

Series one was a resounding success. Critics praised [its “naturalness”](#) and called it “warm and funny human and healthy” while audience reaction was unanimously positive.

Despite being scheduled late at night during the football World Cup, more than 1.8 million viewers saw the first ever episode and [RadioTimes.com readers voted it](#) their 2018 “TV Champion”.

The premise of the show is terrifically simple. In a sort of televisual travelogue, comedians and long-time friends Bob Mortimer and Paul Whitehouse (as themselves, it's not fiction) travel the rivers (and sometimes the coasts) of the UK, fishing, chatting, eating and drinking. The action, in so far as there is any, is decidedly low key – it's the relationship between the two protagonists which charms above all else. We are made aware early on that the two men have undergone life-changing heart surgery and that Paul is the consummate fisherman, Bob is the willing, if mischievous, pupil.

It's perhaps not so surprising that audiences are drawn to this gentle, good-hearted affair. It's understated pace and intimacy is many ways the antidote to the 24/7

hyperspeed culture we live in. Perhaps viewers are attracted to, and can identify with, the simple displays of uncomplicated friendship and repartee on display. It's certainly true that in times of austerity or national crises we are drawn to the recognisable and tangible.

Mortimer and Whitehouse are, I would guess, how many middle-aged men would see themselves – their seemingly effortless witty banter and comfortability something we're invited to believe any two mates could replicate if given the opportunity to escape the rat race.

But that's the illusion – in the end these two are consummate performers and the direction, editing and choice of accompanying music is quite superb. So, the show is also expertly constructed. Come for the jokes, stay for the scenery. [Episode 1 of series two](#) was set on the river Usk and showcased the breath-taking beauty of natural Wales.

One minute we're laughing at Bob's criticisms of Paul's family photos, the next we're moved by his recollections of his mother and Paul's scattering of his father's ashes in the Usk as a choir sings Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau. This was done in such a way to accentuate the personal nature of Paul's gesture without dwelling on how emotional it might have been for him. You very quickly begin to understand that *Gone Fishing* is really about men coming to terms with growing older.

Mortimer and Whitehouse: *Gone Fishing* has inevitably been compared to the Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon vehicle, [The Trip](#) and while there are obvious structural similarities (food and different locations are a major part of each show) the Trip, brilliant as it is, is far more about showcasing the comedic talents of the “fictional” Brydon and Coogan.

I understand that the programme will not be to everyone's taste – the idea of two white middle aged men, with hardly a woman in sight, just fishing and chatting will strike many as reactionary tripe – but that's OK, isn't it? We can like different things and still get along.

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