In the mid-1930s, British attitudes toward gambling were complex, diverse, and confused, with cash betting still largely illegal, and social reformers and nonconformist religious groups generally strongly opposed to betting in all its forms. Yet horse race betting was a newspaper staple, and throughout Britain, legal credit “football pool” betting involving small stakes was hugely popular. Put briefly, the famed 1936 “pools war,” as the press dubbed it, was an attempt by the Football League Management Committee, the regulatory body for the three divisions of the English Football League, to put the “football pools” companies (organizations that made their money from punters betting on League games) out of business or diminish their impact. As Dave Russell succinctly explains, the League was “fiercely opposed to the game’s association with any form of mass gambling” and attempted “a form of sabotage by refusing to announce the fixture list until two days before games were due to be played,” but was soon forced to back down and “chose once again to adopt a legislative route.” Study of the “pools war” therefore sheds light on critical connections between football and gambling during this period.

Pool betting on what the English sometimes called soccer first surfaced in more effective commercial form in the early 1920s. The pool coupons, weekly distributed in newspapers and by agents, listed the various matches to be played that Saturday. Bets were credit bets, very limited in amount, and paid the following week. Punters filled in their coupon, predicting the results of various numbers of matches, depending on the competition. Money was then “pooled” by the company and the proportion left, after profits and expenses, was shared out between the punters who had achieved the top result for a particular competition. So for a small “investment,” lucky punters could win huge “dividends.” Entries, which had to be proved to be sent before kickoff time, were usually made by post or less often via agents who walked a local route, collecting coupons and taking a percentage as a fee.

People took quickly and easily to the pools, which combined possible use of soccer knowledge and expertise with the belief in luck and fate common in working-class culture. By the mid-1930s the activity was hugely popular, with millions of coupons filled in weekly, and an estimated £20,000,000 spent each year. The pools companies directly employed at least 25,000 people. They had become a staple form

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of weekly entertainment during the football season, a potential means of escape from poverty and the effects of the Depression. They were democratic and egalitarian, and were the common culture of mass-circulation English newspapers such as the *Daily Mirror* or *Daily Express*, which printed coupons and provided journalistic forecasts of results. Even if punters did not win, there was the slow and considered filling in of the coupon, sending it off, the anticipatory dreams of a “jackpot” win, and the wait for the results in the Saturday evening football press or on the radio.2

But the Football League was opposed to football betting, and, supported by a large number of its clubs, it had decided to stop this by keeping the League fixture list of matches secret until it would be too late for the pools coupons to be printed. They did this by cancelling fixtures for Saturday 29th February 1936 and only announcing a list with relocated opponents on Friday 28th. The pools companies were able to circumvent this through contacts with clubs, so coupons were available in newspapers on Friday night, and could still be sent in time. But because home and away supporters did not know opponents till late on Fridays, there was a major impact on crowd numbers and consequent League club revenue streams. The League’s action caused massive public resentment. The writer George Orwell ironically noted that though Hitler’s invasion of the Rhineland caused “hardly a flicker of interest” the “attempt to quell the Football Pools . . . flung all Yorkshire into a storm of fury.”3 The League tried again on Saturday 7 March, meeting even more opposition. But the League’s clubs, themselves under public and financial pressure, then brought pressure to bear for the Management Committee to reconsider and abandon the scheme, which they did on March 9th.

Academic soccer historiography has given the episode scant attention, and failed to recognize its broader cultural significance in the relationship between gambling legislation and the history of leisure. Studies of the interwar period often ignore it,4 sum it up briefly as a “controversy surrounding fixture lists,”5 and see the pools merely as helping “to confirm football’s status in English society.”6 More-detailed treatments have interpreted the events as a battle only involving the Football League, its clubs, and the pools companies, and noted lack of support for the action by football fans, clubs, and the press.7 The chronology of events has often been inexact, and the reasons for the League’s action unclear. In the years afterward, League officials such as Sutcliffe tended either to avoid discussion of the debacle, or presented self-serving interpretations of events calculated to explain or excuse their actions, material sometimes later used uncritically.8

This current account exploits a far wider range of sources, including much material in Home Office and other files, as well as FA and Football League minutes, in particular drawing on “private” and “rough” minutes recently made available. It makes clear the hitherto ignored yet central importance of the secret role played by the English Football Association (henceforth, FA) in shaping the League’s action, and the importance of their intervention. The FA was regarded as “the supreme football authority in the country,” and authorized all competitions, including the Football League, something that the League’s officials always acknowledged.9 It was the FA’s tacit intervention that clearly explains and accounts for the policy shift by the Football League Management Committee from initially giving thought to negotiating with the pools companies to attempting to destroy them.

While it remains difficult to estimate its extent, contemporaries and historians are in agreement that expenditure on and participation in betting increased between