



Betting Game

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Reading level: 2.0

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Book Summary

Jack's a star player on an elite soccer team along with his brother, Alex. The Lancers are on top of the league, even favored to win the National Championship. But the game's about to change. A slick bookie wins Jack's friendship and introduces him to illegal betting. Before long, Jack is hooked on the adrenaline rush, and early wins convince him that gambling could make him rich. Meanwhile, an ever-widening rift is forming between the two brothers. Suddenly, Jack's "system" fails and his luck runs out. How could a few losses pile up to a gut-kicking ten grand? When he can't pay, the bookie gives Jack one way out—throw the National Championship. But can he betray his brother, his team and himself?

Prereading Ideas

- Match fixing has been very much in the news lately, specifically with FIFA. Investigate the allegations and fall out from professional matches being manipulated.
- Jealousy plays a large role in the novel. Where does jealousy come from?
- How do we know who to trust? What leads you to trust one person and not another?
- Why when we're in trouble do we often try to hide the fact from those who are most likely to be able to help us?
- Superstition is often connected to gambling. Examine sports based superstitions.

Connecting to the Text

Plot

Consider plotting in novels. Tolstoy once said that all great stories are either “a stranger comes to town” or “the protagonist goes on a journey.” Which kind of novel is this? Re-read chapter 4 and examine how Luka is introduced as a traditional “stranger.”

Character

- Jack believes he has a strategy for winning at fantasy soccer (ch. 3). How does his behavior here effect what happens in the remainder of the text? Is his need to win, to prove his intelligence here, his downfall?
- The boys' mother refers to Alex as “Mr. Responsible.” Ask your students if their parents have any names for them and how that makes them feel. Very often, these names help form our identities. What identities have been formed in this book for Jack if Alex is “Mr. Responsible”?
- Jack and Alex are very different people. These differences are shown at the very beginning of the text. Look at chapter 1 and see how the brothers respond to a difficult situation (a missed call). It is important to set up very distinct characters from the beginning of a novel. How else does the author distinguish characters? Focus on the supporting cast of soccer players.

Connecting to the Curriculum

English

- In storytelling readers need to understand that what they are reading is the beginning of one of the most interesting (either good, bad, or both) times of the protagonist's life. The basic layout for this is as follows: Set-up (where we see the protagonist's normal life), an Inciting Incident (where something happens to the protagonist which will change her or his life forever), a reaction (where the protagonist reacts and considers the inciting incident) an Action (where the protagonist does something to make his or her situation better) and, finally, a Resolution (where the effects of the inciting incident are seen). In groups, have your class go through the text and try to find an example of each section. Where do we see Jack's normal life? What is the inciting incident? How does Jack react to it? What does he do about it? And how is the situation resolved? Pool the groups after. Make certain that each group comes up with not only an example of each section, but a reason for their choice.
- Lies are a large part of storytelling. Have your students examine the text for any lies they can find. Lies Luka tells to Jack. Or lies Jack tells to his brother.
- Another important aspect of storytelling is letting the reader in on secrets the rest of the characters don't know. What secrets does Jack keep, and how do they effect the plot and theme of the novel?
- Being led: A large part of the plot revolves around Jack's relationship with Luka. Examine how Luka manages to find his way into Jack's life starting in chapter 4 with the following:

A young guy in khakis and mirrored shades comes over. Very GQ. The kind of guy who gets top marks from girls and their parents.

“Just the man I wanted to see.”

“Rick. Good to see you. I thought you’d be here.”

There’s something European about his voice.

“I have interesting news for you. Sit with us. We have an extra seat.”

“Maybe until the game starts. You know me—I like to watch from the rail.” He glances over at me. “This must be one of your hotshot soccer players.”

Dad sticks out his chest. “That’s right. Pride of the Lancers.” I get a warm feeling inside.

Discuss how Jack’s Dad being “proud” of him opens the door for Luka’s eventual manipulation.

Biology

- There is a lot of discussion in *Betting Game* of Jack’s co-op with the physio staff. Have students research what injuries are most prevalent in different sports.
- Examine different physio treatments available for basic injuries. Which techniques are used on different parts of the body? What can athletes do to try and prevent injury? Use the web links in **Resources** below.

Social Studies

Gambling is an addiction (see link in **Resources** below). There are ups and downs to it, but those who win once or twice believe this will always be the way. Examine the pains Jack goes through in chapter 25 when he needs his team to win in order to win his bet.

Math

Compounded interest is brought into the equation as well. Initially, Jack isn’t bothered by the fact that he will be charged interest. Examine this section from chapter 17:

“You pay interest. Ten percent. Like juice.”

That’s a relief.

He must’ve heard me thinking. “Ten percent. Daily. You don’t want to get behind. It adds up. Very fast.”

“Don’t worry. It’s just \$75. I’ll have it by Thursday. I’ve got a good feeling about the LA game. I bet \$200.”

Jack is eventually surprised by how much he owes (\$8,180). Have students calculate basic interest in order to see how quickly adding interest to principal adds up. See the video link in **Resources** below for a visual explanation of compound vs. regular interest.

Physical Education

In chapter 13, Jack discusses adjusting his training routine with Kim, the physiotherapist. Examine training and over training. How do we know when we have trained enough? Who do we listen to? What signals might our bodies give us when we have trained too much?

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. How do we see Jack at the beginning of the novel? How does he change? A good three dimensional character must always have growth.
2. In Jack we see a character who grows more sure of himself until his inevitable downfall. What elements come together to cause Jack to believe he can, first of all, make money at betting and, secondly, get out of debt with more of the same?
3. What characters in popular media are like Jack—cocky, brash, ready to believe they have been wronged? Have your students name as many characters as possible in film, TV, books and video games. To further this comparison, have students look at sports figures who have made wild claims about their abilities and the sense that they will absolutely win a tournament, even making promises. Is this level of belief in one's self a necessary quality in a sports figure, or would we like to see more humble athletes?
4. At the beginning of chapter 26, Jack's "stomach is still in knots." We all experience this from time to time. Discuss with your students what causes them anxiety. Is it performing in sports? Public speaking? Social interactions? Examine ways that they can help alleviate anxiety.
5. There is a lot of talk of money in this book. Different numbers from \$100 right up to \$10,000 are mentioned. What constitutes a lot of money? This would be a good time to investigate the ways in which items, attractions and events artificially heighten the cost of items. For instance, a jersey in a store might cost \$100. At a game, however, it will be much more. Signed it will be even more. What do your students feel are good and poor uses of their money?
6. The relationship between Jack and Gil is a difficult one. Gil, the new kid, comes off as acting better than everyone. But Alex quickly takes to him. Gil does not want to admit his weaknesses at first. Eventually Jack and Gil talk about how they can work together. Have your students discuss, in group, the ways in which Jack first alienated Gil, and the bridges that they managed to eventually form—and how.
7. Jack has a lot of difficulties with gambling. Have your students chart the steps which led to his owing \$10,000. Could they ever imagine this happening in real life?
8. In the end, Jack has to rely on his brother and friends to get him out of the difficulties he has found himself in. In chapter 36, Jack is concerned that Luka will come after him. It is explained that hurting Jack in any way would land Luka serious jail time. Does this seem realistic? Are criminals such as Luka really

afraid of law enforcement? Do you feel Jack would be looking over his shoulder for a long time after, waiting for Luka and his thugs to seek revenge?

9. Luka is, at his core, a bully. How have people dealt with bullies in the past and have they been frightened that the bullying will never be over?

Author's note

Dear Reader,

I learned to play soccer ten years ago. It taught me a lot about teams.

Winning teams depend on loyalty. So do friendships. Knowing someone's got your back makes you braver, stronger, faster. But without that support, you lose on and off the field.

In *Betting Game*, Jack is driven by loyalty—to his team, to his club, to his brother. But when Jack turns his loyalty into a weapon, he hurts everyone. Including himself.

As I wrote the story, I was surprised to discover that Jack and Gil are strangely alike: stubborn, talented and afraid to show weakness. They can call the plays, but they can't ask for support. Just goes to show you that even the strongest people have secret fears and insecurities.

Enjoy the book, and remember to count on your team.

Heather

Resources

Addiction Test

www.jeu-aidereference.qc.ca/www/gambling_addiction_test_en.asp?cmpt=2

Physiotherapy

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_body/medical_care/pt.html#cat20120

<http://physicaltherapy.about.com/od/typesofphysicaltherapy/a/PTBasics.htm>

Plot Guide

www.ipl.org/div/farq/plotFARQ.html

Compound Interest

www.investopedia.com/video/play/what-is-compound-interest

Controlling Anxiety

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/stress_center.html#cat20122

Match Fixing in Soccer Leagues

www.uefa.org/news/newsid=1967585.html

www.uefa.com/uefayouthleague/news/newsid=2183837.html

www.thestar.com/sports/2014/01/22/sports_fix_whistleblower_declan_hill_offers_guidebook_to_fighting_soccer_corruption.html

www.thestar.com/sports/soccer/2015/10/15/canadian-soccer-league-rife-with-match-fixing-according-to-report.html

Life in a Soccer Academy in Great Britain

www.nike.com/gb/en_gb/c/football/nike-academy

Author Biography

Heather M. O'Connor knows all about warming up a keeper. Three of her kids played keep for rep teams. In 2006, after fifteen years on the sidelines, the devoted soccer mom bought some cleats and joined a team. Heather is a freelance writer, editor, author and mother of five (and grandmother of two). She lives in Whitby, Ontario, with her family and her yellow Lab, Lady. Her biggest thrill while writing this book was touring the Toronto FC Training Ground. Go, Reds!