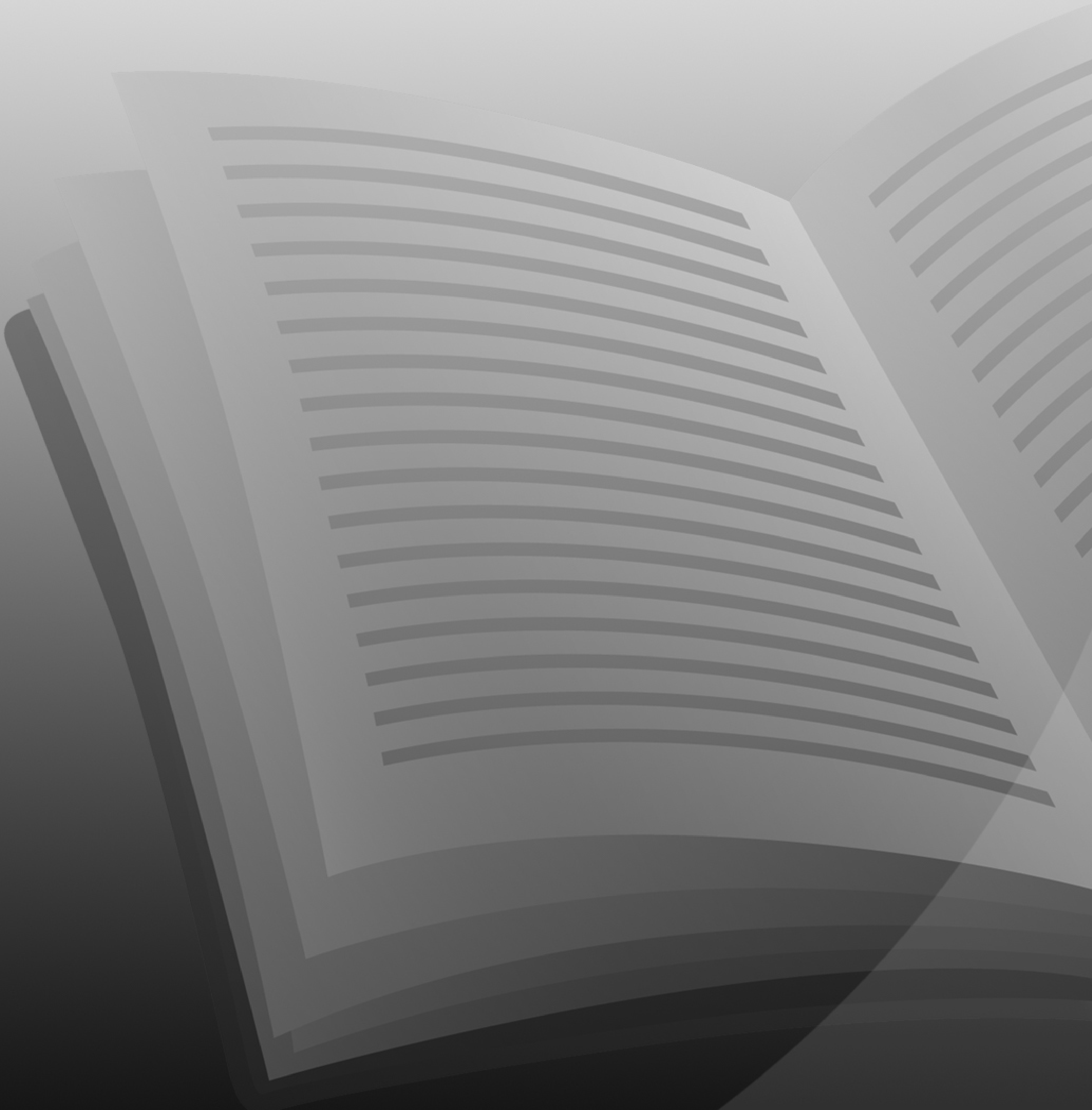
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



Free Money

Declan Lynch

About the Book

'*In a hostile, unstable world, we need reassurance that the force is with us, that we are in good standing with the gods, that we are lucky*.

This is where gambling comes in.'

Gambling is becoming the addiction of the age, with the internet adding a lethal new dimension to the ancient compulsion. In a year in which gambling on a grand scale would catastrophically change the world, Declan Lynch opened an internet betting account to see how nine months of incessant punting would change his life.

Braving the Premier League, the mysterious allure of women's golf, and Belgian tennis on Eurosport, Lynch enters the strange and treacherous world of the punter, constantly seeking the ecstasy of being proved right, and the reward of free money.

Is he becoming addicted? And if he is becoming addicted … so what? In an intimate diary style filled with dark humour, and flashbacks to a lost world of pre-internet betting, Lynch explores the terrible power of gambling in all its madness and badness, its hilarity and joy.

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FREE MONEY
The Gambler’s Quest

Declan Lynch

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss …

… you'll be a man, my son!

From 'If', Rudyard Kipling

Prologue

Two things got me going on this gambling craze.

It started with the opening of a branch of Paddy Power in Rathfarnham village, close to where I lived. A mundane event, you would think, in a country that was becoming rich. Except it was only a few doors away from a branch of Ladbrokes, which had been there for many years.

It seemed that there would be a fight to the finish between the two of them, that the villagers would have to choose between Ladbrokes and Paddy Power, that only one betting office could survive on this suburban street.

Sure enough, there was soon a decisive move – another betting office opened, a branch of Boylesports.

And then we moved from Rathfarnham to County Wicklow, about a mile outside Avoca, which was far enough from the one betting office in the village to persuade me that I needed to open an internet betting account.

Not that I had been making daily visits to the bookies when I lived in Dublin, or even weekly visits, but I guess the idea of internet betting helped me to adjust to the idea of country living – how could anyone feel isolated from his fellow man when he could get hooked up to the international leisure industry in this way?

I had been doing some internet betting by proxy, getting a friend who was already hooked up to throw the odd tenner on a televised football match for me. To have 'an interest'. But you need to do it yourself to fully appreciate the sublime beauty of it, the fatal beauty of it. Even now, three years after I opened my account, I have not lost my sense of wonder that something so brilliant and so potentially catastrophic can be available in his own home to every man who can get himself an internet connection and a credit card.

They’re sucking in the women too, and we’ll be looking at that.

They’re sucking in the kids who already have an instinctive attachment to the internet, and who would quickly understand how well it works, how the net might have been made for gambling, with everything else thrown in just for luck.

They’re sucking in everyone, because as the German-born Arabic scholar Franz Rosenthal put it, ‘the subject of gambling is all-encompassing. It combines man’s natural play instinct with his desire to know about his fate and his future.’

It is all-encompassing, although sports betting, which mainly concerns us here, is largely a male pursuit. And though the vast majority of gamblers fail to make any money at it, I have found that they tend to be men of above average intelligence – indeed it is often their very smartness which keeps them going, keeps them believing in their ability to make it pay.

But there may be no such thing as a typical gambler, because the instinct is so fundamental it is possessed by everyone to some degree.

There is a reality-challenging dissidence in most of us, a desire to turn life in our favour, rather than merely let things happen to us. Then there are the aficionados who make this the main purpose of their lives rather than an occasional indulgence. Every day they want to play God.

Which may help to explain why the great religions are so trenchantly opposed to gambling, especially Islam, which, perhaps uniquely among the world’s major belief-systems, is still taken seriously by its adherents – in Ireland, Catholic priests can be heard giving tips for Cheltenham from the altar, which they shouldn’t be doing. In theory.

So it was the sweet science of internet betting, allied to the general gambling boom that was filling the main street of Rathfarnham and every other town in Ireland with betting offices, which got me going on this.

I look at the modern betting offices with their banks of screens, like a stock exchange for people with no money; I look at the symbiotic relationship between internet betting and televised sport, and part of me rejoices, and part of me feels like old John Reith, founding father of the BBC, as he contemplated the masses indulging in the easy pleasures of television, ‘a potential social menace of the first magnitude’.

With internet betting, perhaps not since those early days of television itself has the addictive personality been fed so seductively.

All forms of betting have become socially acceptable in this generation, but the sort you can do in the middle of the night on the laptop in your bedroom has a special kick.

Even without the new technology, gambling may well be the strongest of all the addictions, because the ‘drug’ is self-generated, it is not something you drink or smoke or snort. With the technology, an addiction that is already immensely powerful has been cranked up again, so that the addicted gambler sitting up late with the American football, betting on the Indianapolis Colts on the internet, is like the alcoholic who finds that he can drink at home while somehow replicating exactly the atmosphere of a great old pub. With a band playing.

You are alone, but you are not alone. As an internet punter you are part of something much bigger than yourself.

It is banned in America, France, Germany and Holland, but it is rampant all across this sporting world, and I believe that these days of unrestricted online betting may eventually be viewed the way we now view those wild years of promiscuity which were ended by Aids. In this analysis, online betting is the gambling equivalent of unprotected sex. There will be a lot of fun, and there will be a lot of destruction. And like that mental image that we still have of free-form romping in the LA bathhouses of the 1970s, it seems almost absurdly easy.

You google the website of any major betting organization you can think of, and there it is, a page full of possibilities. They are offering you markets on the traditional earners such as horse racing and the dogs, and if there is not enough horse racing and dog racing going on for you, there is now Virtual horse racing and Virtual dog racing too.

But there is also a long list of other sports to get your attention – in alphabetical order, depending on what is in season, you could be looking at Aussie Rules, American football, baseball, basketball, boxing, cricket, cycling, darts, football, Gaelic sports, golf, handball, hurling, motor racing, politics, rugby league, rugby union, snooker, tennis, volleyball – indeed, anything you have ever heard of that could vaguely be called sport, and some things you have probably never heard of, such as Futsal.

What is Futsal? Apparently it's a form of indoor football but that's not important. The important thing is that from time to time it's on TV, on Eurosport in the afternoon, and that there's usually a winner and a loser and therefore there is money to be made, or not as the case may be.

And in the ultimate manifestation of this marriage between betting and television, there is the Red Button on Sky, which connects you to the action in every sense. You could be watching a match between Manchester City and Aston Villa, and listening to the Skybet commentators analysing the match entirely in betting terms – City look a good bet at Evens to get the next corner kick … Villa have five players on yellow cards and the game is getting a bit tasty, that 3/1 on Villa to have a man sent off looks like the value … the possibilities are infinite, and once you are signed up to Skybet – it is not hard – you can use your remote control to bet on any of these exciting propositions, and they put whatever happens next on to your Sky bill.

And if for a few moments there is no competitive sport going on anywhere in the world, you can invest online in politics or in showbusiness – you may have noted that in the list of sports above, I put ‘politics’ between motor racing and rugby league. This was not a wry intervention on my part, it is a direct transcription of the menu on my betting website.

For the punter a general election or a series of *Strictly Come Dancing* or the last race at Ballinrobe ultimately amounts to the same thing: you win some, you lose some.

You could be under the duvet in Shinrone, County Offaly, having a bet on Barack Obama to win the great state of Florida, and then you could watch the results coming in on Sky News and CNN and Fox, staying up all night for the boxes to be opened in Tallahassee.

Yes, the world is the best that it has ever been.

They are offering you markets on events which are currently in progress, and events which are happening next week, and next year. They are offering you odds on what colour hat the Queen will be wearing at Royal Ascot, and who will be the next manager of Plymouth Argyle.

And while card games and casino-style gambling do not concern us here, they are also part of the service.

If you have even the smallest urge to gamble, in any way, in any place, at any time, you are, as they say, made up.

And maybe a lot of folks can pick it up and leave it down again, regarding it as no more than an amusement, like buying a lottery ticket once every few months; but I strongly suspect – and the record backs this up – that an increasing number of folks are finding it hard to leave it down, hard to take themselves away from something which, in these tough times, to quote George Bernard Shaw in

Man and Superman, 'promises the poor what property performs for the rich, something for nothing'.

If you do this right, you might never have to work again.

You follow the instructions on how to open an account. It is not difficult. You type in the amount you want to deposit, and your password, and the last three numbers on the security strip of your credit card, and there it is, gone.

'Deposit Successful', it says. Straight away, the money is credited to your account and you can start betting.

'Bet Now', it says, beside every market you peruse. Or maybe 'Submit', which betimes feels more chillingly appropriate.

Entering these transactions, you can feel a bit like a stockbroker, the guys you see on the news when the Dow collapses, concentrating fiercely on their computer screens, apparently directing the affairs of the world. Those guys are gambling too, in fact the whole of the human race seems to be gambling in some shape or form, as we embark on this journey.

On the way, I believe that we will learn something about the nature of gambling in general and why it has such a powerful hold on us, particularly on men, millions of whom now relate to the world almost entirely through this link between gambling, TV and the internet, this devastatingly powerful three-way combination.

I figure the best way to do this is through a personal betting journal and various biographical reminiscences which naturally raise all these matters, which move from contemplation of the state of my internet account, to moments of sober reflection on the state of the world, in this the Age of Addiction.

I believe this is the only way I can do it, because I'm not good enough at gambling to write one of those 'how to' books which have served the public so well until now – *How to Win at Canasta*, and so on.

I also believe that two of the most challenging phenomena of our time are radical Islam and internet gambling.

And I know which side I'm on.

Of course I am not like the others.

My main purpose here is to write about gambling, which is not the same thing as gambling and then writing about it. I haven't made or lost a fortune, like the celebrity gambler writing his autobiography, telling the talk-show host that he was blind and now he can see.

But then I guess that even the Arsenal and England footballer Paul Merson, old 'Merse' himself, when he started going down, thought that he was not like the others, with their unexamined gambling lives. In fact a lot of men go down precisely because they think they are not like the others.

But they are.

25 January 2008

<u>Deposit: 100 euro</u>

I AM OPENING this account on the day after it was learned that a Frenchman called Jérôme Kerviel, an employee of Société Générale, lost approximately five billion euros gambling on the stock exchange. It was five billion euros of other people's money, but it was still five billion euros.

Which is a lot for one man to lose.

So on this day of all days, as I place 100 euros in my internet betting account, to keep us going, I feel like a sober and responsible citizen. I feel like some guy putting a few bob into the Credit Union for his daughter's education.

Indeed, as I start this quest I feel like that mythical character who lands in New York with 100 dollars, aiming to make his fortune.

I think all gamblers are in love with the idea that mighty oaks from little acorns grow. Even if a lot of little acorns have already been planted, from which no oak has grown.

We know it can be done, and that is all that matters.

Yet there is always a frisson of self-doubt when you make any sort of deposit in your internet account, which in my case is with Blue Square, who say they are based in Alderney.

And it's only 100, after all, it's no more than that poor unfortunate character would have in his fist, as he landed in the New World with a head full of crazy dreams.

But for me, there's a bit of 'previous' to consider. About twelve years ago I gave up drinking, 'while it was still my idea', to quote Billy Connolly.

And I can honestly say that I have no desire to start drinking again.

At least not today.

And probably not tomorrow either.

But it provides, shall we say, a context. And in that context there are some watchful souls who would advise me in the strongest possible terms that I should not be venturing into other areas of addiction, under any circumstances.

Because it is such things that make men mad …

So while the layman might indeed regard this deposit of 100 as a sporting wager with no implications of a sinister kind for the state of my soul, or anyone else’s soul, this 100 is still a number which would get them going in the great houses of addiction-treatment.

In there they insist that with gambling, as with drinking, the problem is not necessarily one of quantity, that you don’t need to drink as much as Errol Flynn or gamble as much as Jérôme Kerviel to be called an addict. In fact they’re lowering the bar all the time, in a way that seems to me not entirely devoid of self-interest.

So while it is twelve years since I stopped drinking, and nine since I stopped smoking, even after all that time you wouldn’t want to be telling them in a group therapy room that you’re embarking on a ‘quest’, that you’re following the money wherever it takes you, in order to illuminate various aspects of the global gambling phenomenon.

‘How do you feel about that?’ they would say in the darkest tone, before telling you what they feel about it, in the strongest possible terms.

How do I feel about it?

I’ll tell you in the autumn, when this punter’s journey ends at the Ryder Cup, at Valhalla. And life being what it is, if that 100 has grown significantly, I will probably be happy, and if it goes the other way, I will probably be sad.

But at the outset I can say that I am quietly confident. You always feel that surge of hope at the start of a new betting campaign, even if every previous campaign has ultimately ended in defeat. With each fresh start, each successful deposit, you feel that you have accumulated so much wisdom, you are bound to get ahead this time, and stay ahead.

Sceptics will argue that you weren't accumulating wisdom, you were just accumulating losses, and the only wisdom to be gleaned is that you will lose again and again and again, until you stop.

But I don't want to stop. I enjoy this thing, and anyway my losses, such as they are, have never amounted to much. And I think that over the course of last year I may actually have broken even. And in the light of Damon Runyon's dictum that all of life is 6 to 4 against, that's as good as winning.

But there's a feeling of fear too, which never leaves you if you have done some work in the area of addiction.

And yet I believe it is a healthy fear. In fact I believe that this healthy fear makes me a better punter, a deeply conservative punter indeed, who will spurn almost anything bigger than Evens, in order to take the profit regardless of how small it may be, just to get ahead and stay ahead.

Not that this is all about me.

To begin, I'll break into the perfect 100 and have 70 at 2/7 on South Africa to win the One Day International against the West Indies, which is live on Sky Sports.

Let us go, then, on this journey that will end in Valhalla.

And may God help us all.

29 January 2008

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70 on South Africa to beat West Indies @ 2/7 – **Win**[1]
20 on Chelsea to beat Wigan @ 1/2 – **Win**
70 on Djokovic to beat Tsonga @ 4/11 – **Win**
15 on Cink to be 2nd to Woods – **Lose**
55 on Hartfield to beat Zabaleta @ 5/6 – **Win**

… +85[2]

I SHOULD STATE here that I do not intend to provide an intimate description of what happened in every sporting contest in which I have an interest between now and September, but in these early days it feels appropriate to go into some detail.[3] To get a feel for ‘how it works’, as they say in AA.

And I’m ahead already, so there is deep pleasure in the recollection. There will be times when it will not feel appropriate, when I’ll simply want to forget. But this is not one of them.

Because after a weekend of good, honest, workmanlike punting, I am 85 euros ahead. That opening bet on the South African cricketers encapsulated certain aspects of my philosophy.

Clearly by staking 70 of the 100, I was risking the lion’s share of my wad in the first skirmish of the campaign. But as the odds of 2/7 suggested, there was good reason to be confident in the result. So there was a certain level of risk here, but there was also a high probability of success. And at the core of my philosophy is this idea that a short-priced winner is always better than a big-priced loser. A gain of 20 on an outlay of 70 is more enjoyable in the end than a deficit of 20 on an outlay of 10. Just try it, and you'll see that I speak the truth.

But while this was a relatively relaxed encounter, with South Africa getting ahead and staying ahead, I would chide myself for having any bet on the basis that the event is being televised, and therefore the experience will be more enjoyable. The fact that something is on television is entirely irrelevant to the question of who wins and who loses. So if you are influenced in any way by your base desire for TV entertainment, you are giving a vital edge to the bookie. Unlike him, you are not devoting all your powers of concentration to the bottom line, because you are surrendering to the synergy between live TV sport and internet gambling, this wondrous development in the ascent of Man, on which I will muse much in the days and weeks to come.

So it is no accident that the bookies feverishly promote events that are shown live on TV, because they know that this automatically impairs the punter's judgement – or at least it causes him to consider things which should have no part in his calculations – again, no one ever won a bet 'because it was on the telly'.

Anyway, with my profit of 20, I made an in-depth study of the markets on the FA Cup fourth round, and I reasoned that Chelsea at 1/2 to beat Wigan had the distinct smell of free money about it. And I reasoned right, adding a tenner to my account. And as a bonus, the match was on live TV, though I hadn't known this when I made my investment – a happy accident which became happier still when I saw that Blue Square was offering a free bet of £20 sterling or 28 euros if you had a bet on any market in the Cup, and if Havant & Waterlooville scored against Liverpool at Anfield – and I fancied that Havant & Waterlooville might just score against Liverpool at Anfield. Lo and behold, H&W scored – twice – so I looked forward to my first free bet since the day I opened my first Blue Square account, which was the day of the Eurovision Song Contest of 2006 as I recall.

The reason I recall it is that I had my free bet of £25 on Brian Kennedy winning the Contest for Ireland, at odds of 33/1. Oh, how I laugh when I think about it now, when I contemplate my foolishness in the face of this powerful new magic I had found.

Yes, it is a form of magic that a punter such as I, who had been punting in the old-fashioned way since I was a child, had suddenly discovered that there was a better way, a much, much better way. A way that didn't involve you leaving the house, or even leaving your bed if you didn't fancy it. A way that didn't require you to stand shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of men in a state of high anxiety in a horrible betting office, handing real cash money across the counter, and not getting it back.

The day is gone when a move to a remote location could take a man away from his recreations, as Jeffrey Bernard discovered when he moved with his then wife to rural England, partly, it was thought, to stop him drinking – the nearest pub was in the village, six miles away. Undaunted, Bernard would post a letter to himself, and wait for the postman's van to deliver the letter. He would then get a lift back to the village in the van, go to the pub, and start drinking.

Even today, you might still need to do this if you really insist on doing your drinking in a pub. But if you just want to bet, you need never leave the house again.

High on the improbability of it all, using my Visa card I followed the simple instructions and lodged 50 euros with Blue Square, noting for the first time of many that my deposit was successful.

'Deposit Successful', it said, giving me the impression that I was already a winner, and I hadn't even started betting.

Then, still high on the improbability of it all, I had the ‘value’ bet on Brian Kennedy. Hell, I thought, it’s free money anyway, this free bet of £20 or £25 with which all internet betting providers inveigle their clients into the realm of endless possibility.

Though I didn’t choose Blue Square over Paddy Power because Blue Square was offering a slightly bigger free bet. I chose Blue Square because I prefer the colour blue to the colour green of Paddy Power. It seems easier on the eye.

Anyway, I threw away that first free bet on a load of nonsense. So on this occasion I steeled myself to take full advantage of a bookie’s moment of weakness. We punters are forever being caught in moments of weakness, but bookies are made of different stuff. Clearly the wizards didn’t imagine for a moment that Havant would score, and rightly so. But they did, and over the next forty-eight hours the wizards would take the hit.

In passing, I assume there’s a reason why it takes up to forty-eight hours for the free bet to arrive in your account, a thought which struck me as I placed 70 of my own money on Novak Djokovic to beat Jo Wilfried Tsonga in the final of the Australian Open at odds of 4/11. ‘Djoko’, I felt, was ‘a good thing’ here. And after dropping the first set, he recovered like a man to fulfil his destiny, to take his first Grand Slam title, garnering another few millions for himself, and a handy 25 for me.

Still using my own money (we are perhaps now understanding why the free money takes forty-eight hours to kick in) I made the mistake of having 15 on Stewart Cink at 10/11 to finish second to Tiger Woods in the Buick, live on Setanta. A schoolboy error here, a bet placed out of boredom. Bookies don’t price up these events out of boredom, so we shouldn’t be showing our human weakness in this way.

But we do, especially when we’re ahead, and feeling a bit gung-ho. Indeed I say I was betting with my own money but when you're ahead you feel like you're betting with the bookies' money, and this too leads to a certain level of irrational exuberance, which leads to errors of judgement.

Ah we are weak, we are so weak, and they are strong.

They know that it's a long day, that punters get bored, and that boredom will usually lead us astray. In fact, amid all the psychobabble, I believe that the role of boredom in every area of addiction is greatly underestimated – especially for men, who have little interest in going for long walks, who seem to need something with a shot of adrenalin to get them through the empty hours. The internet has clarified our thinking on the subject of boredom, by demonstrating that if they have the option, humans will often reject the robust attractions of 'real life', choosing instead to google away the time.

It can look worse than it actually is.

I might visit my Blue Square account several times a day, but most of the time I'm only passing through. I tend to be welded to the laptop anyway, with my writing, so in vacant or in pensive mood I might find myself checking out the Blue Square racing results service, for no good reason. Or maybe just to confirm that another 33/1 shot has won at Southwell, and to thank God that it's nothing to do with me.

Or maybe just to visit my money.

Now just 40 ahead, the free bet finally arrived and I studied the markets with a terrible intensity. I was most tempted by a tennis match in Chile between Zabaleta and Hartfield, both priced at 5/6. On paper, you'd fancy Zabaleta, because he's called Zabaleta, after all, and in the game of life, in Chile a Zabaleta will tend to beat a Hartfield. But drawing on my hard-won knowledge of the international tennis circuit, I was aware that Hartfield was no dozer. He had been slaughtered by Federer at the Australian Open recently, but unlike Zabaleta at least he was good enough to be there to get slaughtered.

Then I had a bit of luck. In attempting to have the free bet on Hartfield, I found the instructions too confusing, as I was probably meant to do, and ended up using my own money. Taking this as an omen, I put the free money on Hartfield too, who won in straight sets, resulting in a combined profit of roughly 45 euros.

So I am 85 ahead as I embark on this quest, and while this mightn't mean much in a world which contains men like Jérôme Kerviel, it represents a profit of 85 per cent on the initial investment, which at current interest rates is a hell of a lot more than you'll be getting from the Bradford & Bingley.

Now I must forge ahead. And with my deep knowledge of African football I would be tempted by Ivory Coast v Mali in the Africa Cup of Nations this evening, except there's been a lot of dark talk of match-fixing in relation to this tournament, and that, along with the involvement of the usual witch doctors and ju-ju merchants, is making me nervous. Clearly there are men who are not prepared to rely simply on their judgement in order to turn a profit. And I've got enough ju-ju of my own going on here.

I'll leave them to it, as I seek to consolidate with 70 on the Arsenal at 2/7 to beat Newcastle at home.

A MOMENT OF SOBER REFLECTION
UNUSUAL BETTING PATTERNS

IN AUGUST 2007, in the second round of the Orange Prokom Open in Sopot, a seaside resort in Poland, there was a tennis match.

And in the course of this tennis match, Betfair noted what appeared to be unusual betting patterns. So unusual, in fact, that initially Betfair refused to pay out on the winner. A full independent investigation was mounted by the tennis authorities which cleared the players of any wrongdoing.

It was reported that Betfair took about $7 million on the result of this match, but that does not concern us here.

For us, the one outstanding, almost overwhelming insight to be gleaned here came from the news that $7 million is reportedly ten times the usual volume of business on such an event.

Which means that Betfair would not be at all surprised to see $700,000 being wagered on the result of a tennis match in the second round of a small tournament in Poland.

That’s 700 grand on one match, on one website.

Let us pause …

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1 All stakes are rounded to the nearest 5 euros.
2 All these figures represent overall (accumulated) profit or loss.
3 You’ll also find a glossary on page 241 for an explanation of any unfamiliar terminology

4 February 2008

- 70 on Arsenal to beat Newcastle @ 2/7 – **Win**
- 75 on Man Utd to beat Portsmouth @ 1/4 – **Win**
- 30 on Howell III in three-ball @ 5/4 – **Lose**
- 60 on Mickelson in three-ball @ 4/6 – **Win**
- 70 on Woods to win Dubai Desert Classic @ 2/7 in-running – **Win**
- 45 on Ivory Coast to beat Guinea @ 4/9 – **Win**

… +170

WITH THE ARSENAL duly obliging and Man Utd adding another 20 to my account by beating Portsmouth at home, I have had six winners so far, and just one loser. This neatly illustrates one of my core beliefs.

It seems to me that picking winners is not necessarily the problem in betting. Indeed the average punter might well be astonished to discover that in a lifetime of punting, he might pick nearly as many winners as your JP McManus. Unfortunately, he just doesn't have the right amount of money on them.

A statement of the bleeding obvious, perhaps? No, I think it falls into another category, of things that are so obvious we don't notice them at all.

In these early exchanges, despite an almost unblemished record in terms of winners and losers, I have already displayed my weakness in this department. Yes, I now have a profit margin of 170 per cent. But somehow, unlike the professionals, I have not yet honed my instincts in such a way that I can reap the most extravagant rewards from my success.