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FATHERS OF DEAD SONS URGE NATION TO STAY SAFE DURING MARCH MADNESS

“March Madness” Coincides with National Problem Gambling Awareness Week, March 7-13, 2010

In light of recent events among Washington Wizards pro basketball players, when teammates brandished guns over a gambling dispute, Bill Swanson and Robert McGuigan remind the nation that sports betting can turn deadly.

“Before this happened to our sons, we didn’t know that gambling can be addictive,” says Bill Swanson. His son, Dan, was in the wrong place at the wrong time in June 2003 when a 19-year-old snuck into the apartment where Dan was staying and shot and killed him and another guest as they slept. The killer—Meng-Ju “Mark” Wu, a college student who’d lost thousands of dollars to sports bets—waited for his young bookie, Jason McGuigan, to return home. Wu later shot and killed McGuigan, too. In his cell the day before his trial was to begin, Wu committed suicide.

Today, Robert McGuigan, Jason’s father, visits high school and college classrooms to caution teens and young adults that gambling can be addictive. “Problem gambling changes people. It takes them down an unhealthy road,” says McGuigan, cautioning that gambling addiction can progress over time. As a boy, Jason had been gentle and caring. By his late teens, he was obsessed with gambling. Rather than attend college, Jason became a bookmaker and con artist to support his own gambling addiction.

Documented in an ESPN special called “Outside the Lines,” the tragedy united Jason and Dan’s fathers against gambling addiction and put the dads in poor humor when the locker room skirmish involving guns erupted among Washington Wizards basketball players.

Although the triple homicide that killed their sons is extreme, problem gambling devastates thousands of individuals and families in many other ways in every American state, including states where gambling is prohibited. Internet gambling—generally illegal throughout the U.S.—makes it possible to gamble anywhere. Common symptoms and consequences of gambling addiction include extreme debt, lying, borrowing and/or stealing, agitation when not gambling, stress, aggression, broken relationships, depression, and suicide.

“Gambling can be as addictive as any drug,” Bill Swanson cautions. “Everyone in America needs to know.”

National Problem Gambling Awareness Week is March 7-13. For more information, visit www.npgaw.org. For help with a gambling problem, call 1.800.522.4700.