

# OPINION

MY TAKE | Personal essays

## Therapeutic courts and diversion work. I'm proof

By JOE BARSANA  
Special to The Seattle Times

When I walked into a felony drug diversion courtroom in 2018, I was not coming from any kind of stability. I was coming straight off the streets.

For years, I had been trapped in a cycle I could not escape: using substances, running out, committing crimes to get more, getting arrested, getting booked into jail, getting released and starting the cycle all over again. My life was defined by chaos and survival. I had burned every bridge I had, and each day was about making it to the next one. I did not enter that courtroom with hope. I expected another system that would process me, hand me a consequence and move on.

Instead, I walked into a room full of people who genuinely cared. There was a judge who knew my name and a team that expected more from me than I expected from myself. It was a system built on accountability, compassion and empowerment, supported by people who meant it. That changed everything.

Therapeutic court did not help me by going easy on me. It helped me by holding me accountable. I had to show up, do the work, stop using and take responsibility for my decisions. At first, I resisted it. Then I adapted to it. Eventually, I grew because of it. That accountability did not break me. It built me. It gave

### 'My take'

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me structure when I had none and taught me discipline I had never learned. It forced me to take ownership of a life I had completely lost control of. Through that process, something new emerged: real empowerment. Not the kind you talk about, but the kind you earn.

One of the biggest misconceptions today is that compassion and accountability are opposites. They are not. In therapeutic courts, they work together. Compassion does not mean lowering expectations. It means recognizing that people grow through support, not fear. It means understanding that relapse, setbacks, and mistakes are part of the process, not signs of failure. In therapeutic courts, people are supported even when they struggle, even when they slip, even when they are still learning how to stand on their own.

That support is not the absence of accountability. It is the foundation of it. Accountability, compassion, structure and love are all tools used together to help people rebuild



NICK WAGNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The felony drug diversion court where the author was referred was a system built on accountability, compassion and empowerment, he writes. Shown here are King County Drug Diversion Court graduates in March with Superior Court Judge Michael Scott in Seattle.

their lives.

Somewhere along the way, the word "diversion" became misunderstood. Diversion is not a free pass or a way to avoid consequences. Diversion only works when you divert someone away from harm while also expecting something meaningful from them. And at the heart of diversion is a simple truth: We meet people where they are, but we do not leave them there. Therapeutic courts understand that people enter the system in crisis, but with the right expectations, support, and structure, they can leave with stability, dignity, and purpose.

Recovery itself is often misunderstood in the same way. Accountability in recovery is not just about

stopping a behavior. It is about growing into a healthier version of yourself. Recovery looks different for everyone, and if someone is moving their life forward, no matter what that looks like, I will always support that. Therapeutic courts recognize that progress is not linear. What matters is that people are moving toward a life they can sustain.

Today, I do not just talk about therapeutic courts. I work in them. I advocate for them. And I have watched thousands of people walk the same path I did: entering the system broken and leaving with purpose. I have seen people gain jobs, rebuild families, find stability and step into leadership roles in

their communities. That is not theory. That is real. Diversion through therapeutic courts work because they expect more from people and then provide the structure and support needed to rise to that expectation.

I am not an exception. I am the result of what happens when accountability turns into empowerment and someone finally gets the chance to rebuild their life. Therapeutic courts work. I am living proof.

Joe Barsana is a Certified Peer Specialist, recovery coach, and Drug Court graduate who now works at the same drug court and serves on multiple boards. He is co-founder of the WA Therapeutic Court Alumni Association.

MY TAKE | Personal essays

## What is modern-day sports betting doing to sports?

By MICHAEL RIZZO  
Special to The Seattle Times

Pity the 1919 Chicago White Sox. They had to work with a group of real people to perpetrate the greatest sporting scandal in American history, deliberately losing the World Series to the Cincinnati Reds for money.

If only they had lived in 2026. Nothing so risky would be required. Sports betting apps provide thousands of opportunities to game the system, down to the outcome of an individual pitch or field goal. Moreover, this can be done pseudonymously, if not entirely legally, using cryptocurrency on some platforms.

We inhabit a veritable golden age of monetizing insider information (and not just in sports). Next time you are at T-Mobile Park watching a Mariners game, remember the real action is online.

Gambling, frequently operating

under the euphemism "fan engagement," has become so fundamental to professional sports the two can hardly be disentangled. Indeed, one wonders who is sponsoring whom. FanDuel and BetMGM are listed as official sponsors on Major League Baseball's website, and individual teams have further betting sponsorships. An entire section of the NBA Bet website lists its many gaming partners.

So-called prediction market companies like Kalshi and Polymarket are big players in sports betting. They have unlocked a lucrative new segment — residents in states where online sports betting is illegal (like Washington). They structure themselves as commodity exchanges, making their money through transactional fees rather than acting as the "house" in traditional gambling. However, if you were to look at a Mariners game on DraftKings vs. one on Polymarket,

there is little difference aside from the fact that the latter structures bets in the form of a question, as on "Jeopardy!"

To tap into this huge new market — California and Texas, the two biggest states, also ban online sports betting — the companies are regulated by the federal Commodities Futures Trading Commission, purportedly giving them access nationwide. The CFTC, no doubt helped by the fact that the Trump family is involved with both Kalshi and Polymarket via Donald Trump Jr., has gone along with it, though states continue to litigate this.

Professional sports are jumping on this "prediction market" bandwagon. MLB announced an exclusive agreement with Polymarket in March. Interestingly, MLB also revealed a memorandum of understanding with the CFTC to reassure the public that this deal comes with "comprehensive integrity commitments," with integrity evidently meaning no insider gambling/cheating.

Speaking of integrity, MLB issued a stunning news release last November under the headline, "MLB in collaboration with major



GABBY JONES / BLOOMBERG

Gambling has become so fundamental to professional sports the two can hardly be disentangled, the author writes. Pictured is the FanDuel website.

sportsbook partners announces new limits on pitch-level markets." In essence, these are live bets, done with an app, on whether the next pitch will be a ball or strike. These are pitcher props; player props let you bet on how many hits, RBIs, home runs or stolen bases a specific player will have.

Moving forward there will be a \$200 cap on these "pitch-level markets" and they will be excluded from parlays (bets made in combination with others, a very popular product with high payouts). This is "intended to mitigate integrity risks." The language here, which is

not exclusive to MLB, is highly Orwellian. On one hand, MLB encourages you to bet constantly across multiple platforms. On the other hand, it is monklike in its adherence to the "integrity" of the game. How monklike can one be when total sports betting hit \$167 billion in 2025, generating estimated sportsbook revenues of \$17 billion, a 22.8% annual increase?

Washington has sued Kalshi, alleging it is operating an illegal betting scheme. State Attorney General Nick Brown cited one of its ads that claimed someone living in Washington "found a way to bet on the NFL." Other states are also suing. Meanwhile, the betting goes on. That it may all end in January 2029 with a new administration suggests this is short-term profit maximization.

Professional sports leaders are playing a high-risk game; one might assume, given so many opportunities to make money, that scandals are lurking. These might replicate the damage done to baseball back in 1919. Is it worth it?

Michael Rizzo is an independent writer and a healthcare marketing consultant in Bremerton.

## Northwest Voices

From our readers

### E-bikes, scooters

#### 'Simple solution'

The Seattle Times May 13 editorial, "It's past time for Seattle to make E-bikes, scooters safer rides," failed to address the most important issue: pedestrian safety. As a senior who lives downtown, walking is my method of micromobility. Since rental scooter riders refuse to ride in the streets, near-accidents involving pedestrians happen daily. Existing rules are not enforced, and the scooter riders face no consequences for their erratic behavior. Seattle taxpayers will be at risk for any legal settlements when (not if) pedestrians are injured.

Good behavior cannot be forced, but a simple solution exists that will improve safety for both pedestrians and riders. Any street adjacent to a street with a protected bike lane could be designated a scooter-free zone, with signage and removal of scooter corrals. Geo-fencing technology is accurate enough to disable operation of rental scooters on these streets and their sidewalks. For example, Second Avenue has a protected two-way bike lane, so First and Third avenues could be scooter-free.

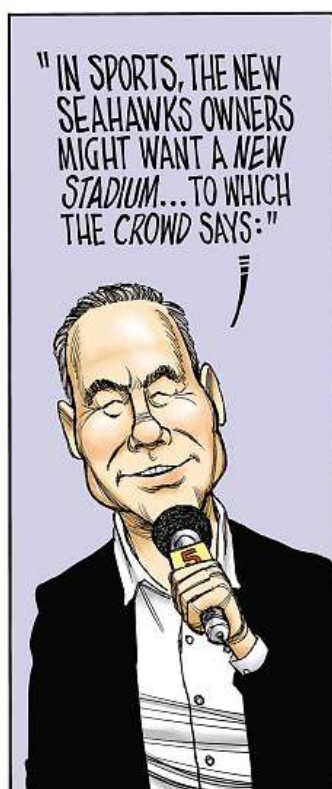
This is a win-win solution that could be implemented immediately. Walkers would be safer and riders will be channeled to the safety of bike lanes with little deviation from their original routes.

— Karen Gielen, Seattle

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