

Equal pay touted to tackle sports graft

Cops urged to ramp up betting crackdowns

TAAM YINGCHAROEN

Players' wages should be more equal while stiffer legal penalties and new technology should be introduced if corruption in football is to be stamped out, a seminar was told yesterday.

The recent match-fixing scandal reflects Thailand's problems with gambling addiction and rampant corruption in the sports industry, university lecturers and anti-gambling activists attending the seminar were told.

Under discussion was Thailand's failure to curb illegal gambling and corruption, after a dozen people including top flight players, referees and a club director were recently charged with match fixing.

Nuttakorn Witidanond, a researcher at Mae Fah Luang University, said a significant wage gap exists between teams and officials in Thailand's football leagues.

Muang Thong players average 400,000 baht a month, 10 times more than those playing in the league bellow. Referees, on the other hand, receive around 30,000 baht a month.

"The differences in wage coupled with the reluctance of some teams to pay their players on time has created a grey area in

which speculators can bribe officials and players," Mr Nuttakorn added.

He also said that owners of football clubs and various stakeholders have political ties, which has also affected football results. "There are occasions where two teams meet but the executives of those teams are friends. So they put out teams in a way that would create a favourable outcome for both sides, though this is not directly linked to gambling," Mr Nuttakorn said.

Sports anchor Paitoon Chutima-kornkul said match-fixing has plagued Thai football for decades, and it all started with the national team prior to the development of the Thai League. "Players are well aware of which teammates are rigging games.

They play together for hundreds of hours a year, it's obvious when someone suddenly plays significantly below-par," he said.

"Those wanting to expose match-fixing never had sufficient evidence to present to authorities. In that regard the recent crackdown must be looked at as a success; we finally have hard evidence of match-fixing," Paitoon added.

Sport and gambling activities have a long track record in Thailand. In the past, sports bets were all placed physically, with middlemen meeting punters in person to clear debts. Now that gambling has moved online, preventative measures have become more difficult as these activities

exist underground and unseen.

Players and officials who violate the Sports Act should be banned for life, and law enforcers should make crackdowns on gambling sites ongoing, the seminar was told. Match-fixing is not restricted to Thailand and other domestic football leagues within Asean countries, such as those in Malaysia and even Singapore, have also experienced their own corruption scandals.

Sports associations around the world such as the National Basketball Association (NBA), Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) and the Premier League all have a code of conduct which prohibits players or direct stakeholders in the sport they are active in from gambling on that sport.