

England's footballers warned not to bet on World Cup games

England footballers were yesterday warned by the sports minister, Richard Caborn, against betting on matches at the World Cup this summer amid growing concern about the gambling habits of the game's top stars.

Mr Caborn endorsed a move by Sepp Blatter, president of world football's governing body Fifa, to outlaw betting by players on the tournament, which starts in Germany in June. He said clubs should do more to protect highly paid young players from gambling.

England's preparations for the World Cup have been disrupted by stories about striker Wayne Rooney's reported £700,000 gambling debts and reports, which have been officially denied, of a rift over the issue with team-mate Michael Owen.

Goldchip, the betting company run by Owen's friend Stephen Smith, said at the weekend that its dispute with Rooney had been settled. In a statement, it said: „Following recent press stories Goldchip is pleased to state that outstanding issues between the company and Wayne Rooney have been fully resolved as a result of talks between Stephen Smith and Paul Stretford of Proactive Sports Management. The matter is now closed and there will be no further comment.“

Mr Caborn, speaking on BBC Radio 5 Live's Sportsweek, said: „I think clubs have got to look at how they deal with young players who have a lot of time on their hands and are incredibly well paid.“

Responding to a report in the Sunday Mirror that 60 Premiership players are addicted to gambling and eight top-flight players are having treatment for their addiction, Mr Caborn said: „It is sad if that is happening.“

He supported Fifa's initiative, whereby every player and official will have to sign a contract banning bets on results or incidents in any game in the World Cup. Those who break the rules will face fines or a ban, said Mr Blatter.

A spokesman for the Football Association said all England representatives would sign up. He said similar rules existed for players, managers, directors and officials for games under the auspices of the FA.

England's players will be able to play card games and bet on other sports, such as horse racing. The FA said: „Sven-Goran Eriksson [England's coach] will speak to the players about the need to keep some sensible proportion and establish some kind of limit. His philosophy is to treat the players as adults and not to impose needless bans.“

There have been suggestions that a £200 limit will be imposed on the pot for card games, and it is likely that England players will be told to stay away from the casino in Baden-Baden, the spa town where England will be based in Germany.

The FA is backing a code of practice on betting, which Mr Caborn will launch at a sports betting summit at Twickenham on Wednesday. Representatives from the governing bodies of cricket, tennis, speedway, snooker and darts are expected to sign up. The code is designed to protect the integrity of sports and eradicate betting cheats. „People have got to be reassured that we have taken every step that we can so that cheats will be found out,“ Mr Caborn said.

With the rapid expansion of sports betting and the growth of international on-line gambling, Mr Caborn is planning a meeting this year of ministers responsible for gambling around the world. He said there was a need for international regulations on betting because the internet had „changed the face of gambling forever“.