

# WHEN **THE SILENCE** OF SPORT WAS BROKEN

**Sports politics in the times of Play the Game**



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When the silence of sport was broken  
*Sports politics in the times of Play the Game*

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# ABOUT THIS BOOK

In 2022, we could celebrate the 25th anniversary of Play the Game's first conference in 1997, and we thought it was worth marking the event with a book. After some deliberation, we decided not to make a self-congratulatory portrait of our own activities and instead focus on how international sports politics has developed from the late 1990s until today.

We asked journalist Lars Jørgensen, the author of several books in the field of sports and politics, to make a journalistic account of international sports politics during the times of Play the Game. Since it was clear to us that one of the main characteristics of that period is that the sports debate has expanded dramatically both in quantity and quality and it would be impossible to embrace it all, Lars and we selected two handfuls of themes that have been at the centre of attention both at Play the Game and in the world that surrounds us.

Play the Game would like to thank Lars for his in-depth research into how the events unfolded. My more modest role has been to edit and complement Lars' account with facts, quotes, pictures, text, and anecdotes from Play the Game's conferences and other activities wherever that made sense.

We hope this book will serve as an inspiration for diverse audiences. Those who have been around sports politics for as many years as Play the Game may be reminded of events they had forgotten or motivated to share the stories that we have left out. Newcomers will hopefully find a richness of information that helps explain why sports politics has become what it is today.

Because of our choice to focus less on our own world and more on what happened around us, we could not secure representation in the book of the hundreds of wonderfully committed people who have left indelible marks on the collective memory of Play the Game and have been essential for its success.

Nevertheless, we remain deeply thankful for every helping hand and every bit of shared commitment we have received over more than 25 years and look forward to continuing the engagement for democracy, transparency and freedom of expression in sport with new and old allies for many years to come.

December 2023

*Jens Sejer Andersen, international director, Play the Game*

# CONTENTS

<b>Foreword</b>	
<b>BUILDING A HOME FOR THE HOMELESS QUESTIONS IN SPORT</b> . . . . .	9
Football, myth and reality . . . . .	28
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>TROUBLE IN THE TOY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN LIFE</b> . . . . .	33
Sport, lies and Stasi-files – a golden opportunity for the press . . . . .	42
The sports media: The world’s best advertising agency. . . . .	45
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>DOPING: FROM OMERTÁ TO PUBLIC AWAKENING</b> . . . . .	49
I put my life in their hands . . . . .	64
A life-long fighter for integrity . . . . .	66
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>THE LOVE AFFAIR THAT EXPOSED A DOPING CRIME</b> . . . . .	69
Fighting doping from the inside. . . . .	88
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
<b>A MAFIA-LIKE SYSTEM – OR A VICTIM OF GREEDY INDIVIDUALS?</b> . . . . .	91
ISL: The (once) biggest corruption scheme in sport. . . . .	116
Sport needs a watchdog with teeth. . . . .	120
<b>Chapter 5</b>	
<b>THE SPORTING SIDE OF ORGANISED CRIME: GAMBLING AND FIXING</b> . . . . .	127
Why I became a match-fixer . . . . .	144
Chasing the perpetrators of a trillion-dollar crime. . . . .	146
<b>Chapter 6</b>	
<b>SPORT IS FAILING VICTIMS OF ABUSE</b> . . . . .	149
A Coubertobin tax against muscle drain . . . . .	170
When sport is more than a play. . . . .	174

<b>Chapter 7</b>	
<b>HARD RULERS PURSUING SOFT POWER</b> .....	177
The political power of the Olympic opening ceremony: Lessons from Beijing and Sochi. ....	202
Opening a difficult dialogue. ....	204
Hunting white elephants. ....	208
<b>Chapter 8</b>	
<b>THE SECRET WAYS OF GOVERNANCE IN SPORT</b> .....	211
World handball hi-jacked by its president .....	232
Sports Governance Observer: A set of tools to minimise corruption and maximise legitimacy .....	236
<b>Chapter 9</b>	
<b>TRAITORS OR TRUTH-TELLERS?</b> .....	245
Whistleblowing – the fifth pillar of democracy .....	268
<b>Chapter 10</b>	
<b>ATHLETES BECOMING ACTIVISTS</b> .....	273
Athletes should not be gagged in exchange for Olympic dream .....	292
SAPIS: Empowering the athlete voice in sport. ....	295
<b>Chapter 11</b>	
<b>PLAYING WITH DICTATORS IN A GAME OF WAR AND PEACE</b> .....	299
An appeal from a sports sphere under destruction .....	324
Mapping the Saudi sports power players .....	326
<b>THE PLAY THE GAME AWARD</b> .....	330
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	333
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	334





*The mood was enthusiastic when 109 participants from 34 countries turned up for the first event in 1997 that would later be known as Play the Game. Photo: Niels Nyholm*

## Foreword

# BUILDING A HOME FOR THE HOMELESS QUESTIONS IN SPORT

*By Jens Sejer Andersen, international director, Play the Game*

In January 2009, 12 years after Play the Game's initial conference, I was invited for the first time to a meeting at the headquarters of the International Olympic Committee at Château de Vidy in Lausanne. The purpose was to explore if there was a basis for regular dialogue and for giving Play the Game accreditation to the IOC Congress later that year in Copenhagen.

I was received by a polite, stern, and serious political adviser from the very top of the IOC hierarchy who opened the conversation by telling me in no uncertain terms how the Olympic family regarded Play the Game: As a group of negative people who – by means of exaggeration – tried to make themselves a career by damaging the good sport.

In other words, Play the Game was good for nothing.

The same year, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, a small group of people began studying Play the Game's website and the outcome of our first six conferences in the utmost secrecy. They were detectives from the FBI and the IRS tax service who had been inspired by one of Play the Game's trusted journalist friends, the late Andrew Jennings,

and now were looking for angles and evidence in a case, they had just started building against the governing body of world football, FIFA.

“Your website was our entry to understand how international sports politics was working,” one of them told me many years later.

In other words, even if unknowingly, Play the Game was good for something.

After more than 25 years, 12 international conferences, numerous international research projects, and endless interventions at meetings, seminars, and conferences worldwide, the question is still open for discussion:

What is Play the Game good for?

The answer will probably still depend on whom you are asking. We are not entitled to define the answer on behalf of anyone else, but let me try to explain why we started and what we strive to be good for.

### **Local start, global relevance**

Like all things global, the seeds for Play the Game were sown at a genuinely local level, at a regional radio station of the National Danish Broadcasting Cooperation 100 kilometres outside Copenhagen. A colleague threw a book on my desk with research on one of the most popular TV programmes, the Saturday afternoon broadcasting of English football garnered with sports news.

The author, the late Jørn Møller from the nearby Idrætsforsk Sports Research Institute, suggested that by focusing less on results and events and more on background and features, the programme could attract new and more diverse audiences. Women, for instance.

The way colleagues at the corporation’s sports desk reacted to this study of their work taught me a lesson I would be reminded of for decades to come. As I was led to understand, sports journalism had reached the apex of its development, it was untouchable and, by definition, it could not be improved.

The attitude was very different when Jørn Møller welcomed me to Idrætsforsk and its home base at Gerlev Sports Academy where I spent some years as a freelance consultant. There, the teachers and students worked intensely with a diversity of aspects of sport that you would rarely hear about in the media – in particular, the historical, political, and cultural aspects of sports.



*What is Play the Game good for? That is the question the founder and international director Jens Sejer Andersen has asked himself for many years and attempts to answer in this foreword. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

For me, fresh out of the Danish School of Journalism, the perspectives offered by Gerlev Sports Academy looked like a goldmine of journalistic opportunities.

Young and hopeful, I decided to share the potential exploits of this goldmine by organising mid-career training courses for journalists in cooperation with the folks at Gerlev.

I was convinced my colleagues would rush to this haven for journalistic development. They did not. We could barely gather the minimum number of 12 participants per course, and the sports journalists attending the course were much more on the defensive than more generally oriented journalists when they were confronted with issues they knew little about.

Was it interesting news that more people in the 1990s chose the fitness gym over the handball court? Not really. Could it be discussed how Danish elite sport and grassroots sport was financed? Not my job. Would reintroducing traditional games and modern lifestyle activities help sports associations reach new target groups? Who cares? Was the inefficient fight against doping a topic journalists should deal with? Maybe one day.

After three attempts to energise sports journalism, I gave up and decided to focus on my new position as editor-in-chief of the Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations (DGI).



*The democratic association tradition connected to gymnastics is still alive in Denmark and manifests itself for instance at DGI's Landsstævne sports festivals every four years. Photo: Lars Horn/DGI*

This was not a typical editorial position as guardian of the publisher's public reputation (although I know a few people who thought I did exactly that). One of the duties of the weekly magazine 'Ungdom & idræt' ('Youth & Sport') was to challenge not only the outside sports environment but also to hold DGI itself and its leaders accountable to the values of the organisation.

### **Sport and nation-building**

DGI builds on a tradition of mixing sport and politics. Or to put it another way, integrating body culture into nation-building.

This mix was not a particularly Danish feature. In many other European countries, private associations offering sports based on nationalistic, religious, or educational goals once flourished. But in most cases, these organisations lost out as society was urbanised, either because they became irrelevant or merged with the rising Olympic movement – voluntarily or by force.

So, in most countries today, sport speaks with only one voice, to the detriment of a lively debate. As for DGI in its changing historic configurations, it maintained a powerful position and was by the 1990s a national umbrella for grassroots sports and was just as well-financed as the Danish national Olympic system of sports federations.

The roots of DGI date back to the late 19th century when the nation-state of Denmark had shrunk following a lost war to the Prussian neighbour, and team gymnastics and rifle shooting became an integral element of a nationwide movement in the countryside.

This movement sought not only to restore a diminished nation but also to strengthen democracy and the rights of the small farmers at a time when the Danish parliament was suspended by a conservative government representing big landowners and industrialists.

The remedies were, among other things, hundreds of small local cooperative enterprises like butcheries and dairies, independent folk high schools (folkehøjskoler), and a political party called 'The Left'.

Rifle shooting and gymnastics gave a bodily expression to the ideals and aspirations of the people's enlightenment movement. Shooting served to give ordinary people an essential capability to defend the country, and team gymnastics reflected the same balance between the individual and the collective that could be found in the cooperations.

For a democratic movement, freedom of expression was a cherished quality, and for DGI's weekly magazine this translated into editorial freedom.

All freedoms, however, come with a responsibility. For me, this meant maintaining and developing sport as an asset for democracy – with a view to the activity itself and the association life that forms the organisational framework.

## Architecture and sport

To that end, I could continue to build on the inspiration I had found at Idrætsforsk and Gerlev Sports Academy. Most fundamentally, I was inspired by the then headmaster of Gerlev, now professor emeritus, Ove Korsgaard, who described the interaction between sport and society by comparing it to architecture.

Every epoch in human history has created buildings for housing, industry, culture, and other activities linked to human existence, but the shape and symbols of the buildings vary over the centuries. We express our ideals and norms in clay, bricks, concrete, steel and glass, so to speak.

Likewise, our movement cultures change with the times. The only constant is that we are born with a body and an impulse to move it. How we shape the movement varies from century to century, from culture to culture, from person to person.

Modern sport is a relatively new phenomenon in human history, dating back only some 150 years. Earlier societal forms gave rise to other body cultures such as the traditional games of the peasants or the nobility's dances and equestrian vaulting. Sport arose with the industrialisation in Europe and spread globally via commerce and colonialisation.

We organise our movements in ways that produce images of the norms and ideals that characterise our time. And our choices in turn influence the times we live in.



*The ideals expressed in body culture vary over time. Here young noblemen attend fencing school at the University of Leiden in 1610. Source: British Museum*

From a democratic viewpoint, this implies that every sports participant, every athlete, should be empowered to decide about their own sporting life and enjoy the fullest possible freedom to unfold the values that they believe in, on their own, in a team or communities. With due consideration for the freedom of other athletes, of course.

The fact that sport is not static or God-given, makes sport and movement culture an intense, never-ending battlefield about the values and norms that we want to guide our individual and collective lives.

### The Bermuda Triangle of sport

This battle was not very visible in the sports landscape of the 1990s, neither at home in Denmark nor abroad. The Danish journalist Poul Albret called out the ‘Bermuda Triangle of Sport’ – the alliance between the sports organisations, the sponsors, and the media in which all critical stories seemed to mysteriously disappear.

The British journalists Andrew Jennings and Vyv Simson received a five-day suspended jail sentence in Switzerland “for defaming the IOC” after revealing widespread corruption in the Olympic family. When the Norwegian skier Vegard Ulvang expressed discontent with the fascist past of the then IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch, the latter warned him “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” The explosive commercialisation of football was rarely questioned, because it was “good for football”.

Doping was regarded as an individual sin committed by people with loose morals. Although more and more cases of doping in cycling appeared, my country’s leading anti-doping official waved me off: “Yes, but cycling is an exception.”



*Play the Game was originally conceived to celebrate 100 years of editorial freedom for the gymnastics movement’s magazine ‘Youth & Sport’.*



In a counterattack that particularly provoked me, the Danish NOC president Kai Holm suggested doping control among the 40,000 participants at DGI's grassroots sports festival.

In this atmosphere, DGI's weekly magazine 'Ungdom & Idræt' ('Youth & Sport') was about to celebrate its first 100 years of editorial freedom in 1997. As it was evident to me that sport and journalism shared the same prerequisite – freedom of expression – and that both suffered from the lack of it, I proposed that we tried to gather a group of like-minded sports journalists from Europe to see if we could repair the situation together.



*Reporter Rosalind Amoh from Ghana was one of the many journalists who energised this first event where academics, journalists, and sports leaders from five continents gathered for open and fact-based debates on sensitive issues in sport. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

Sharing an ambition to break Olympic dominance over the public debate, the board of DGI accepted this quite considerable investment as a birthday present to the magazine.

With the help of, among others, a few understanding journalists in Denmark, including the president of the International Federation of Journalists, Jens Linde, the president of the Association of Danish Sports Journalists, Steen Ankerdal, and the headmaster of the Danish School of Journalism, Kim Minke, we started issuing invitations to speakers and launched an international seminar entitled ‘Sport, media and civil society’.

### **An outlandish idea**

We did not understand how outlandish this idea was. Nobody had tried it before. How would we reach potential participants? At DGI we had only recently gotten our first email addresses. Although we did put a Word file on a new thing called the World Wide Web, would there be anyone at the other end to pick it up? We spent days and nights packing envelopes and sending telefax copies through unstable transcontinental phone lines.

But even if somebody would read our messages, how would they make it to Denmark? If they were not mainstream sports journalists, how would they get support to travel and participate in the conference? We did manage to get some resources from the Danish government to invite participants from developing countries and Eastern Europe, but what about the rest?

Today, I am unable to explain how it happened but in June 1997, 109 people from 34 countries gathered at the Vingsted Sports Centre next to DGI’s headquarters for what turned out to be the first international event ever where journalists, academics, sports leaders, government officials and other stakeholders would have open, independent, and fact-based discussions on the relationship between sport and society.

Although the atmosphere throughout the four days was ecstatic, I remember our own thoughts when the lights went out: 1) Never again! The stress of organising such an event was something I would never go through again. 2) Fortunately, it would not be necessary to do it again, because now that issues like Olympic corruption, widespread doping, homophobia, and spiralling broadcasting prices were out in the open, they would be taken care of.



*When the Danish minister of culture, Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen, opened Play the Game 2000 with a warning to sport against unethical practices, she soon received a letter from president Sepp Blatter defending FIFA.*

*Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

Neither of the two predictions were particularly precise.

In the end, we decided to give the event another try, not only because the participants enthusiastically called for it. Two tiny events showed us that our little event in the Danish province had hit a nerve among the power brokers of international sport.

The day before the opening, I received a call from the International Sports Press Association (AIPS). They wanted to make sure we would *not* credit the AIPS for anything. An interesting request from an organisation that was supposed to support quality journalism.

There was also a response, even if not direct, to a young, recently retired athletics president from Norway, Lars Martin Kaupang, who had entertained the audience with stories about how the World Athletics president, Primo Nebiolo from Italy, practised his very personal version of democracy. A few weeks later, the IAAF found a pretext to threaten to ban Norwegian athletes from the upcoming World Championships – a ban that was fortunately not carried out in practice.

### **Should Sepp Blatter decide?**

But there were also positive motivation factors. Sports editor Ip Ting Wah Shan from Mauritius invited me to a sports journalists' seminar in his home country where I could bring an expert of my own choice, and Sandro Donati from Italy made sure the Mauritians got an unforgettable experience.

And thanks to an energetic, talented sports marketing expert from Cape Town, Ravi Naidoo, we could start preparing a new, full-scale conference in South Africa in February 2000 with the approval of the sports minister and ANC veteran Steve Tshwete and a long list of confirmed international expert speakers. All looked promising until Ravi Naidoo in early 1999 was hired by the South African Football Association to be part of the marketing arm for South Africa's bid for the FIFA World Cup.

At that moment, it became clear to me we would not go to South Africa, because the South African authorities would not politically be able to host a gathering of FIFA's sharpest critics one month and receive FIFA president Sepp Blatter with pomp and circumstance the next. As expected, the interest from Cape Town dried out, allegedly because of a lack of sponsors, and we had to cancel the venue and the speakers.

This situation provoked a question to ourselves: Would we in fact let FIFA and Sepp Blatter decide if we should have a free forum for international public sports debate?

That was more than I could accept, and fortunately, DGI gave its backing to get the shipwreck afloat. After another round of fundraising in and around DGI, and with backing from a deeply committed minister of culture, Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen, we could open the first conference named 'Play the Game' at the new sports centre 'DGI-byen' in Copenhagen in November 2000.

A few weeks later, the minister received a long Christmas letter explaining that sport could not be exempt from the vices of society in general. The sender was.... Sepp Blatter.

### **An arena for the battle**

Since then, Play the Game has taken on the role of a convener for those who wish to join the battle over the values sport should embody in its practice and its governance. The term 'play the game' stems from the childhood of modern sport, from a time when sport was meant to build noble characters and healthy communities. It means to play by the rules, to play fairly.

Three key values – democracy, transparency, and freedom of expression – have guided our work. You would believe these values were embraced by national and international sports organisations who all build on a democratic structure. In theory, there is a direct chain of democratic command between the individual athlete in the local association via regional and national federations up to the very top of the international governing body.

However, reality has proved very different. As hundreds of testimonies at our conferences have shown, and as carefully constructed benchmarking tools – like the Sports Governance Observer tools which we have had the privilege of developing in collaboration with some of the best experts in the world – have further documented, the chain of democratic legitimacy is broken and seems beyond repair.

We do not pass such judgements without trying at every conference to attract international sports leaders and ask them how they intend to promote their proclaimed ideals of fair play, democracy, equality, non-discrimination, public health, human rights, and world peace. At every conference, we invite those powerful men and women to confront and contest what their critics say in a direct dialogue that we can all learn from.

But with a few remarkable and encouraging exceptions, international sports officials have largely turned their back on the kind of debate Play the Game puts on stage, where the outcome is not managed in advance by highly paid public affairs consultants. The motto is ‘may the best argument win’ and the outcome is just as unpredictable as any other properly arranged game in the field of sports.

Time has taught us to focus on those who engage in the open and public debate rather than those who stay away. It was impossible not to. The hundreds of deeply committed, knowledgeable, and forward-looking people who have come to share their stories, at times overwhelmed us with their presence.

When Andrew Jennings set the audience on fire with stories of Olympic corruption and called for networking among journalists. When the Italian doping detective Sandro Donati unveiled international conspiracies to dope with resources paid by the state. When Laura Robinson shared appalling stories of sexual abuse in Canadian sport. When Mario Goijman documented the unbelievably corrupt styles of the world volleyball president. When the bike racer Jörg Jaksche confronted UCI president Pat McQuaid with the organisation’s lack of anti-doping efforts.

When the former gangster Michael Franzese told how boxing games were fixed and the violent means that secured it. When Russian whistleblowing couple Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov appeared on a live stream from their hiding in who-knows-where. When Khalida Popal and Friba Rezayee shared their heart-breaking stories on how Afghan women are deprived from playing sports. When the international operations of illegal gambling companies were laid bare by a collective of investigative journalists ...



*The former gangster Michael Franzese is one of the many speakers who have shaken the audience at Play the Game conferences. In 2009, he talked about fixing games in the underworld of New York. Photo: Jens Astrup/Play the Game*

These and numerous other testimonies at Play the Game conferences have left the audience – and the hosts – in a mix of disbelief and amazement. As this book also shows, reality at times surpasses what the imagination can produce, and when the facts and the truth come to light, they do not always support an optimistic view of the sports world we live in.

But even when the most depressing stories have been shared, there has been a human being behind the story whose insistence on telling the truth inspired hope.

## Winning or losing

The battle has not been in vain, but are we winning or losing it?

The international sports debate has undergone dramatic changes in the times of Play the Game. At our first conference in 1997, the systemic nature of doping abuse had not yet been revealed, and international coordination of anti-doping was almost non-existent. Match-fixing was not even a word in the sports political vocabulary.

The combination of the doping scandal at the Tour de France in 1998 and the simultaneous corruption scandal at the IOC triggered a vivid international debate, but following a moderate reform of the IOC and the creation of the World Anti-Doping Agency in a partnership between the Olympic movement and governments worldwide, things went back to normal.



*In the 2010s, state prosecutors raised their interest in sports crime. Here, former IOC ExCo member Patrick Hickey is guided out of the hospital by the police, following illness after a surprise arrest during the Rio 2016 Olympics. Photo: Brendan Moran/Sportsfiles/Getty Images*

Although evidence of systemic fraud and abuse was brought forward again and again by courageous whistleblowers and investigative journalists for more than a decade, the Olympic family could successfully answer all the issues Play the Game raised with one simple gesture:

Silence.

Against this backdrop, Play the Game could rightly call itself a ‘home for the homeless questions in sport’.

But a turning point came in late 2010 when the media uncovered corruption in FIFA’s process for selecting the World Cup hosts for 2018 and 2022, and FIFA subsequently selected the least transparent and technically prepared bids from Russia and Qatar, respectively.

This decision happened to disappoint the media, football leaders, politicians, and business interests in three other applicant countries with a dominant position in setting the international agenda: England, the United States of America, and Australia.

In the months ahead, FIFA continued to produce new scandals. At the same time, a growing awareness of match-fixing was spreading over most parts of the world. The already contested image of international sport as a force for the good was further shaken, and this time the connection between sport and corruption would not go away from the public perception.

If someone had told you by the end of 2010 that the following decade would:

- show at least one million Brazilians taking to the streets, combining their outrage over government policies with protests against the FIFA World Cup, and sending shock waves through the Olympic movement
- have 15 cities around the world withdraw their bid for hosting the Olympic Games after referendums, or out of fear of how taxpayers and voters would react
- reveal a long-term, systemic doping programme orchestrated by one of the world’s most powerful nations in sport and politics, the Russian Federation, forcing prominent whistleblowers to seek asylum elsewhere and causing deep divisions in international anti-doping
- see the US federal police raid a FIFA congress in Switzerland, exposing unknown corruption scandals worth hundreds of millions of US dollars, eventually imposing huge fines and long jail sentences on numerous football officials



- see an Executive Board member of the IOC arrested during the Olympic Games with cameras rolling, and a handful of other members of the inner Olympic power circles retire due to criminal investigations across the world
- hear over 250 women testify about the massive scale of sexual abuse they were exposed to over two decades by a physician of the USA Gymnastics team and Michigan State University, adding their stories to dozens of similar cases affecting the lives of boys and girls in the UK, France, Norway, Nigeria, Mali, the Netherlands ...

... would you have believed it?



*The relations between IOC president Bach and Russia's president Putin may have become frosty, but the IOC did much to minimise the consequences for Russia after the doping scandal.*

*Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game. Photo on screen: Ian Walton/Getty Images*

## **Too early to celebrate**

These deplorable events can of course not be used as a benchmark of success. But bringing the shady sides of sport into the public domain so they can be discussed and hopefully dealt with, does represent a positive and much-needed evolution of international sport and sports journalism.

By assisting in breaking the silence and talking about the taboos in sport, Play the Game has played on the winning side, thanks to the wonderful and courageous people who dared to speak up even at the risk of their health, reputation, or career.

It is, however, much too early to celebrate. There are still homeless questions that need a home, and opening the debate has not automatically led to efficient solutions.

While the public commitment to better governance and human rights in sport has grown and the sports debate today is unfolding in all corners of the world, the international organisations responsible for sport seem to take another direction. Much of this is documented in this book, but just a few examples:

The IOC has made great efforts to minimise the sanctions against Russia in the Russian international doping scandal. During three consecutive Olympic Games in 2018, 2021, and 2022, Russian athletes have been allowed to display all kinds of national symbols despite the official IOC decision that they should appear as neutrals.

As this book goes to print, we wait in excitement to see if this neutrality charade will be repeated when Russian and Belarusian athletes are allowed to compete as neutrals at the Paris 2024 Olympics.

Although top officials of numerous Olympic federations have been exposed in corruption scandals, far too little is done by the IOC to efficiently fulfil its self-declared role as guardians of Olympic principles and good governance.

FIFA has not delivered on its promises to secure effective improvement of working conditions for the migrant workers involved in stadium construction before its 2022 World Cup in Qatar, nor has FIFA taken steps to compensate migrant workers and their families for disease and deaths related to their working conditions.

## **Disproportionate volume of money**

Perhaps the biggest challenge to international sport in modern times is now coming from the Middle East where state leaders in the Arabian Peninsula have invested billions of

dollars in international sport, buying events, clubs, players, tournaments, and even sports federations.

We have probably only seen the beginning of these investments that seem to come from an otherworldly ocean of resources.

It is nothing new that sport is attractive to wealthy investors. Billionaires from the Western Hemisphere have been around for a while. Nor is the close affiliation between international sport and autocratic regimes something that came yesterday.

What is new, is the disproportionate volume of money offered to sport by authoritarian states with ambitions of geopolitical influence.

This development is set to undermine everything that democratic forces have tried to achieve in this century. It will eliminate the very same humanistic ideals that sports leaders claim to represent.

The governance reforms, the human rights commitment, the environmental responsibility – all these promises given over the past few years may not have been convincingly fulfilled, but now they may be completely ignored.

Moreover, in the darkest corners of society, far from the public limelight, organised crime groups are using international sport to build what international experts regard as the world's biggest crime scene. Illegal gambling companies are infiltrating professional sport like never before, using match-fixing, cryptocurrencies, front companies, and human trafficking to an extent we have only started to understand.

### **Democratic alliances needed**

If we don't want these years to become a new turning point that rolls back the course of history, we must continue to strengthen those forces who have increasingly pushed for democratic change and the rule of law.

Elite athletes have raised their voices with increasing strength in recent years, calling for social and political change in and outside sport, using their celebrity status to leverage their message or organising collectively in unions and activist groups.

Fan groups have engaged in pressuring clubs and national teams to respect human rights and exert social responsibility.

Experts in fighting corruption and crime are voicing their impatience more often than

before, like in Play the Game's ClearingSport survey, and state prosecutors have formed a new network to strengthen international cooperation against sports crime.

Journalists have become more aware of the crucial role they play in defining the sports political agenda, and although the media industry is still woven into the fabric of entertainment sports, many investigative journalists prioritise a quest for facts and truth over a comfortable career as sports fans with press accreditation.

But these groups cannot make the difference alone. Democratic governments need to up their game and put resources and action behind the good intentions expressed in countless declarations, resolutions, charters, policy papers, press releases, and public statements.

Relying on international sports organisations to police themselves according to the principle of autonomy has proved to be a failing strategy. No major sports governing body has ever reformed itself without pressure from the outside, be it in the form of criminal investigations, public outrage, new legislation, or other threats to their daily business.

If democratic governments do not act with much more determination through organisations like the European Union, the Council of Europe, OECD, and other ways of collective action, sport will continue to lose its relevance as an asset for democracy, and the potential of sport to lift individuals and communities to new levels of life quality will be further eroded.

The battle over the values of sport is a battle over the values of life. Play the Game will continue to engage in promoting democracy, transparency, and freedom of expression by setting an independent stage for an open, unrestricted, and fact-based debate. That is what we wish to be good for.

May the best argument win. Let's Play the Game.



*Sports stars are increasingly using their fame to push for social change and human rights, like former US soccer captain Megan Rapinoe. Photo: Lexie Moreland/WWD/Penske Media/Getty Images*



## Football, myth and reality

*As the first Play the Game conference – called ‘Sport, Media and Civil Society’ came to a close in June 1997, a famous Latin American author read his speech in Spanish while the conference host, Jens Sejer Andersen, was running sheets with the translation into English on an overhead projector. The author was Eduardo Galeano (1940-2015), author of several books on Latin American history as well as ‘Football in Sun and Shadow’. Galeano’s low-key, warm and melodic voice kept the audience spellbound in a silence that was only disturbed by the cracking sound when the transparent plastic sheets were shifted on the projector.*

*Here is the first part of Galeano’s speech.*



*The silence in the room was intense as the Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano closed the first edition of the conference with a riveting account of football’s societal importance. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

In April 1997, when commandos broke into the Japanese ambassador's residence in the city of Lima and carried out their spectacular lightning butchery of the occupying guerrillas, the rebels were playing football. The leader, Néstor Cerpa Cartolini, died wearing the colours of Alianza, the club he loved.

At the same time in Montevideo, the city announced it would hire 150 garbage collectors. Exactly 26,748 young people applied. The only way to handle such a crowd was to hold a lottery in the city's largest football stadium, Centenario, where in 1930, Uruguay won the first-ever World Cup. The site of that joyful event of long ago was besieged by unemployed youths. Instead of goals, the electronic scoreboard displayed the numbers of the lucky few who got hired.

Not much occurs in Latin America that doesn't bear directly or indirectly on football. It occupies an important place – at times the most important of places – despite the denials of ideologues who love humanity but can't stand people. For intellectuals of the right, football simply proves that the people think with their feet; and for intellectuals of the left, it's the reason why the people don't think at all.

But such contempt holds no sway with flesh-and-blood reality. When collective emotions take root in the earth and bear fruit in the human body, they become a shared celebration or a shared disaster, and they exist without self-justification or apology. Like it or not, for better or worse, in these days of doubt and desperation, football-club colours are for many Latin Americans the only certainty worthy of absolute faith,

the true source of the greatest jubilation and deepest sadness. "Racing, an inexplicable passion", I read on a wall in Buenos Aires. And on a wall in Rio de Janeiro, a fan of Fluminense had scrawled: "My beloved poison".

Some anonymous hand, in a paroxysm of fervour, left its testimony on a wall in Montevideo: "Peñarol, you're like AIDS. I carry you in my blood." I read that and I wondered. Is love for a shirt as dangerous as love for a woman? Tangos don't shed any light on this.

### **A serious pact of love**

In any case, it seems a fan's pact of love is more serious than any nuptial agreement because vows of fidelity to the club rule out even the shadow of a suspicion of a potential wrong move. And not only in Latin America.

A friend of mine, Angel Vásquez de la Cruz, wrote me from Galicia: "I have always been with Celta de Vigo. Now I've gone over to their worst enemy, Deportivo de la Coruña. Everybody knows you can change cities, women, jobs or political affiliation, perhaps even you ought to ... but never, ever can you change teams. I'm a traitor, I know. I beg of you, believe me: I did it for my children. My children convinced me. I may be a traitor, but I'm a great father."

For fanatics, those fans who live perpetually on the edge of a nervous breakdown, love is experienced through hatred of the adversary. When the Argentine footballer Ruggieri abandoned his team Boca Juniors and joined the ranks of their traditional rival River Plate, fanatics set fire to his home. His parents, who happened to be at home, were saved by a miracle.

Last March in peaceful Holland, four hundred fanatics of the clubs Ajax and Feyenoord met in an empty lot near Amsterdam. The bloody ritual left one dead and many wounded. “They set it up on the internet,” commented Argentine reporter Ezequiel Fernández Moores, “but the battle took place like in the Middle Ages, with sticks.”

Violence stains football the way it stains everything else in this world where, in the words of historian Eric Hobsbawm, “killing, torture and mass exile have become daily experiences which no longer surprise anyone.”

The mass media tend to voice alarm at the evil influences of football. Does the game cause a flock of tame sheep to turn into a pack of bloodthirsty wolves? The answer lies in plain view for those who don’t refuse to see it: Stadium crowds sometimes do turn ugly from the accumulation of desperation and solitude which characterises this end-of-century in the North and the South, the East and the West. And such tensions overflow in the stadiums no more and no less than in any other arena of the violent lives we lead.

In Greece, in the time of Pericles, there were three courts, one of which judged things: it punished the knife, for example, that was the weapon in a crime by breaking it into pieces or throwing it into the sea. Today, would it be fair to condemn the ball? Is football guilty of the crimes committed in its name?

Those who demonise football and confuse it with Jack the Ripper’s father can be just as irrationally fana-

tic as football fanatics. And they make the same mistake as those who believe football is no more than the opiate of the people and good business for merchants and politicians: They all imagine stadiums as islands and fail to recognise that they are mirrors of the world to which they belong. Can you name a single human passion that is not used and manipulated by the powers that rule the world?

Respect for reality obliges us to recognise that, despite everything, the football pitch is much more than a scene of violence or a source of money, political prestige, and collective Valium. The playing field also provides a space for displaying skill and, on occasion, beauty, a locus of encounter and communication, and a spot – one of the few – where, if only for a moment, the invisible can make themselves seen, a feat nearly impossible now for poor people and weak countries.

### **Collective cultural identity**

As long as we’re paying tribute to the prestige of Hellenic culture, let’s recall the Olympics 2,500 years before the era of Juan Antonio Samaranch. Back then, when athletes competed in the nude and without a single commercial tattoo on their bodies, Greek civilization formed a mosaic of a thousand cities, each with its own laws and its own armies. The games celebrated in the stadiums of Olympia were religious ceremonies that reaffirmed national identity as an amalgam that linked diverse peoples and subsumed their conflicts: a way of saying, “We are Greek” that made playing sports

akin to reciting the verses of the Iliad or the Odyssey, the poems on which the nation was founded.

Perhaps football fulfils a similar function in our days, to a greater degree than any other sport. The industrialisation of football, which television has turned into the most successful of mass spectacles, tends to impose a uniform style of play and to erase its many profiles. But diversity stubbornly and miraculously continues to survive and to astonish. Like it or not, believe it or not, football remains one of the most important expressions of collective cultural identity, something which in this era of obligatory globalisation reminds us that the best of the world lies in the quantity of worlds that the world contains.

Certainly, there is no abundance of places where the countries of the south can affirm their identity, condemned as they are to imitate lifestyles of obligatory consumption imposed on a universal scale. With national industry having disappeared, plans for autonomous development all but forgotten, the state virtually dismantled, symbols of sovereignty abolished, the countries which make up the vast shantytowns of the world have few opportunities to affirm their pride of existence and their right to be. And their right to be tends to stand in frank opposition to the role of servitude they have been assigned by the international division of labour, and to the pitiful part the mass media obliges them to play [...]

If football were limited to the countries that pay the most for it, there would be no reason for the fervour

it generates around the world. South America, which pays little and is condemned to ply Europe with players, has won and continues to win more world championships of both national teams and clubs than Europe, no matter how much Europe pays. And African football, the poorest in the world, is coming on the scene in the most humbling and joyous way imaginable, and no one can stop it. Professional football – that lucrative industry of spectacles, that implacable machinery – is set up so that money rules, but it remains a universal passion because by some miracle it continues to possess the capacity to surprise us.

*Read the full text at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*



*Football “reminds us that the best of the world lies in the quantity of worlds that the world contains”. Logo-photo from Play the Game 2011: Tine Harden*





## Chapter 1

# TROUBLE IN THE TOY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN LIFE

In democratic societies, news media often take pride in framing journalism as the ‘fourth estate’: An independent power that critically investigates and informs the public about decisions and wrongdoings made by the legislative, executive, and judicial powers. However, as the American reporting legend Howard Cosell (1918-1995) pointed out, sports journalism is an exception. It’s part of what he called ‘the toy department of human life’.

Howard Cosell was a leading voice of corporate America’s early radio and television broadcasting of sports. He was also one of the first gentlemen of the press who tried to change sports journalism.

In the 1950s, when most sports journalists preferred to please athletes, coaches, and sports managers with flattery and admiration, Howard Cosell introduced a new critical approach which he presented in a self-confident style that earned him a reputation for being an arrogant, obnoxious, and cruel personality.

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*One of the first to report critically on sport, Howard Cosell, stirred controversy by defending the American boxer Muhammad Ali’s right to choose a Muslim name and refuse to join the US troops in Vietnam.*

*Photo: Focus on Sport/Getty Images*

But Howard Cosell's weekly radio show 'Speaking of Sports' on ABC Radio was popular because he combined analytical enlightenment of his audience with an entertaining aggressive style of journalism that made sports journalism look like news journalism.

In 1961, his talent led him to one of the most influential positions in the growing American media industry, as a sports anchor at ABC TV.

During the following decade that was marked by social and racial unrest in the US, Howard Cosell was a strong supporter of athletes' rights and freedom of speech. When American heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay declared that he had converted to Islam and faced criticism for adopting a Muslim name, Howard Cosell was one of the first sports reporters to call the outspoken black boxer by his new name, Muhammad Ali, and defend his right to follow any religion he pleased.

### **An advocate of athletes' rights**

The relation between the white Jewish sports reporter and the black Muslim athlete grew stronger when Muhammad Ali in 1967 refused to serve as a soldier in the US Army during the Vietnam War, and Howard Cosell defended the boxer's right to keep his titles at a time when the public opinion of him was divided.

Being a lawyer by education, Howard Cosell was also a strong advocate of the rights of the Olympic sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, when most American sports journalists condemned the two US athletes for raising their black-gloved fists in a Black Power salute during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City as a protest against social and racial injustice.

To Howard Cosell, though, his greatest contribution to sports journalism came in 1981 when he introduced 'ABC SportsBeat', a weekly magazine that until 1985 dealt with corruption, doping, and other dark sides of sports that traditional news media didn't cover in depth. Over time, the magazine received three Emmy Awards.

Nevertheless, when Cosell passed away in 1995 at the age of 77, many of his critics argued that he had destroyed his legacy ten years earlier when he left ABC Sports and wrote 'I Never Played the Game'.

In the book, Howard Cosell accused old media colleagues, athletes, coaches, managers, and club owners of being a closed shop of insiders who primarily protected their own popularity and financial interests instead of informing the public about all relevant aspects of sport.

The story of Howard Cosell is an example of the opposition many investigative sports journalists have met when they tried to keep a critical distance from sports and act as ‘the fourth estate’.

But the hostility towards the ‘killjoys’ of sports journalism did not scare all of them. Three years before Howard Cosell’s death, two British journalists began to investigate the dark sides of sport and changed the way a new generation of sports journalists dealt with what Cosell called ‘the toy department of human life’.

### **The Lords of the Rings**

On 1 January 1992, Andrew Jennings and Vyv Simson published the first edition of their now-famous book ‘The Lords of the Rings’ which deals with power, money, and drugs in the modern Olympics, led by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) from its headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland.

The British journalists were not coming out of the sports department of the news media. They were investigative crime reporters, who were awarded for their exposure of a corrupt cocaine connection at Scotland Yard in London. They used investigative methods from crime reporting to research the Olympic Games as a playground for political and corporate corruption on a scale most people at the time found hard to believe.

On the eve of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, ‘The Lords of the Rings’ documented in detail how the Olympic movement under the discreet guidance of Horst Dassler, owner of the German shoe factory Adidas and the Swiss marketing company International Sport and Leisure (ISL), had turned into a global business network led by a club of powerful sports leaders, sponsored by multinational corporations such as McDonald’s and Coca-Cola, and earning fortunes in a growing market of broadcasting rights.

According to Jennings and Simson, Horst Dassler created the structure of the business-oriented modern world of sport that we know today by exchanging favours and money with international sports leaders in return for getting marketing and broadcasting rights.

Key persons in the network of sports leaders were IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch, FIFA president João Havelange, the president of the International Amateur Athletics Association (IAAF) Primo Nebiolo, and the Mexican president of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC), Mario Vásquez Raña.

Horst Dassler was accused of securing international sports leaders' votes to stay in power, by making murky Adidas and ISL deals with national sports leaders in Third World and East Bloc countries.

But these accusations did not cause as much public debate then as the book's documentation of the IOC president's past. Since his youth, Juan Antonio Samaranch had been involved in the fascist Spanish *falangista* movement while building a career in sports leadership. His loyalty to the Spanish dictator, generalissimo Francisco Franco, led to Samaranch's appointment as head of Spain's governing body for sport from 1967 to 1977.



*Vyv Simson and Andrew Jennings received a five-day suspended jail sentence in Lausanne for writing about the IOC president's fascist past. Samaranch denied, but in 2009 a photo appeared showing him giving a fascist salute as late as 1974. Photo: Archive photo with permission from Jaume Reixach Riba*

The documentation in the book included photos of Juan Antonio Samaranch wearing a fascist uniform and kneeling in the presence of Franco. But in spite of the evidence, the most powerful man in Olympic sport insisted that he had never been an active fascist and started a legal battle with the two British reporters.

The legal case was investigated by the Swiss state attorney in Lausanne with assistance from Scotland Yard in London. Two years later, the investigation resulted in a court case in Switzerland where Andrew Jennings and Vyv Simson in absentia were given a suspended sentence of five days in prison with a probation of three years for having broken an old Swiss defamation law.

The sentence did not stop the British journalists from asking questions about the Spaniard's rule over Olympic sport since 1980. In 1996, two years after his Swiss prison sentence, Andrew Jennings published 'The New Lords of the Rings', an edited version of his and Vyv Simson's book. The new version documented more details of how corruption, but also prostitution and drugs, had become a challenge to the Olympic movement at the highest level inside the IOC.

In those days, it was unusual for investigative crime reporters to cover sports. But as Andrew Jennings once wrote of his investigative journalism in the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*:

"Sports organisations are in the public sphere. They are backed by public money. They wield power. Why should they escape scrutiny?"

### **The joint financial interests**

Andrew Jennings and Vyv Simson were among the first European journalists to challenge the tradition that sport and sports journalism are indelibly woven together.

In the 1980s, the cooperation between sports organisations and sports journalism took an additional economic dimension when sport discovered that both commercial and public media companies were willing to pay huge amounts of money for the rights to sponsor and broadcast sports events.

The close relationship and joint financial interests with many news media and broadcasting companies made it easier for powerful sports organisations such as the IOC and FIFA to escape public scrutiny in spite of their rapidly growing turnovers. To Andrew

Jennings, these sports organisations had become perfect applications of mafia structures and principles.

“They appealed to me because they were global organisations, were at the sharp end of the big brands’ penetration of new markets (we didn’t call it globalisation then) and were completely ignored by grownup reporters,” he wrote in *The Global Investigative Journalism Casebook*, a UNESCO Series on Journalism Education, in 2012.

“I saw every investigative reporter’s dream, a massive empty canvas to paint upon, with a soundtrack of empty mantras, never challenged by the beat reporters.”

Uncovering corruption among the Lords of the Rings led to IOC reforms as shown in chapter 4, which also details what happened when Jennings threw his love on FIFA.

### **A dangerous profession**

Confronting organised sport can be more than just unpleasant. Some reporters put their lives at risk. Based on her research of 78 incidents reported between 2010 and 2016, Kirsten Sparre, a former assistant professor at Aarhus University and now editor at *Play the Game*, concluded in 2017 that investigative sports journalism can be a dangerous profession. However, the 78 incidents of intimidation aimed at journalists working within the broad field of sport is probably only the tip of the iceberg.

The 78 incidents studied occurred in 35 countries across six continents. They ranged from 15 physical assaults to eight journalists being detained, two being kidnapped, and four being killed. The personal safety of sports journalists was compromised through arrests, detentions, physical and verbal assaults, abduction, attacks, threats of violence or death, legal actions, property damage, personal and digital sexual abuse, and even killings. Despite these dangers, Kirsten Sparre pointed out that the safety of sports journalists has never been of particular interest to academic researchers or media freedom organisations.

You may add that international sports organisations are also not putting democratic rights and journalistic safety at the top of their priorities when they choose illiberal or even authoritarian states as hosts for their major events.

In November 2021, Reporters Without Borders urged journalists and media to protect themselves against the Chinese regime’s surveillance when covering the Winter Olympics in Beijing in February 2022. Journalists were warned not to download applications that

could allow the Chinese authorities to monitor them and to denounce any editorial interference or pressure from the regime.

“The Olympic Games provide President Xi Jinping with a dream opportunity to restore his image and try to make people forget his catastrophic human rights records, including press freedom and the right to information,” Reporters Without Borders’ East Asia Bureau Head, Cedric Alviani, said of China’s attempts to use the Olympics to overshadow its bad human rights records.



*Journalists covering the Beijing Winter Olympics were tightly controlled by authorities in China which ranks 177 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index. But the Olympic media centre offered nice massage chairs where no danger lurked. Photo: Maja Hitić/Getty Images*



In 2021, China was the world's largest prison for journalists with at least 127 journalists detained, ranked as number 177 out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, and was accused of having a media culture worthy of the Maoist era, in which it is a crime to freely seek information.

The other host of a global mega-event in 2022, Qatar, also has a bad record for media freedom, being ranked as number 115 in the World Press Freedom Index. After Qatar in 2010 won the right to host the event, the autocratic rulers of the Middle East Emirate promised FIFA that foreign journalists were welcome to investigate the conditions of the millions of migrant workers who were hired to build the stadiums and the infrastructure for the World Cup. But since then, several foreign journalists have been detained when working in Qatar, and their movements are monitored and restricted.

Countries like China and Qatar can no longer expect only to be applauded when hosting mega-events. The days of the toy department are over.

### **Earthquakes in sport**

In 2019, the prize-winning investigative sports reporter Hajo Seppelt, owner of the production company EyeOpening Media, estimated that out of more than 200 people covering sport for his main customer, the public German broadcaster ARD, only 5-10 per cent of them were working on doping or other background stories in sport:

“So even if the size of our team may be large compared to other media outlets in sport, we are still just a small part of the sports journalists at ARD,” Hajo Seppelt said in an interview with Play the Game, referring to the eight employees of his own company.

Although the ARD sports coordinator Axel Balkausky told Play the Game that the German broadcaster's investigative sport documentaries are “worth the money they cost”, entertaining sports journalism was the main priority at ARD.

“More investigative journalists could cause earthquakes in sport,” Hajo Seppelt said: “There are two kinds of sports journalists: Those who mainly entertain and those who investigate. The first group is a large majority, but if the numbers were fifty-fifty, we could really leave no stone unturned, and I assume a lot of things in sport would change.”

It is a fact that journalists can't inform the public of what is wrong with sports if they are not given the time and the funding to investigate the matter. It is also a fact that no

matter how few they are and no matter how strong opposition and intimidation they face, investigative sports journalists have already caused quite a few earthquakes in sport.

The corruption in FIFA, the Russian-international doping and extortion scandal, Lance Armstrong's doping practices, and the sexual abuse scandal in US gymnastics are just a few examples of the crucial role journalists can play in sport by exposing wrongdoings.

As Jean-Yves Lourgouilloux put it at Play the Game 2017, when he was a public prosecutor at the Parquet National Financier, the French police department investigating financial crime:

“Journalists, anti-corruption associations, and whistleblowers from all over the world are decisive. Without them, we couldn't do anything. How many times have we all heard about journalists' work: ‘It is all rubbish, it is rumours’? And how many times have we discovered later that it was not? We couldn't have even started some of our major cases without the previous work of independent journalists. And I stress the word ‘independent.’”



*“Journalists, anti-corruption associations, and whistleblowers from all over the world are decisive. Without them, we couldn't do anything.” French public prosecutor Jean-Yves Lourgouilloux said at Play the Game 2017 in Eindhoven. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



*Andrew Jennings gave Play the Game an arousing start in 1997, calling for critical reporting and international networking among journalists.*

*Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*



## Sport, lies and Stasi-files – a golden opportunity for the press

*The first-ever keynote speech given at a Play the Game conference would anticipate what happened in the years to come, as British reporter Andrew Jennings (1943-2022) demanded much higher standards from sports journalists and led media attention in a new direction.*

I'm sorry to say that in most countries the standard of reporting about the reality of modern sport is usually appalling. Too much journalism has become the tame pet of the powerful interests who seek to profit from TV and sponsor-driven sport.

In Britain – as in most other countries – we have news reporters who sometimes publish untrue material, fail to check their facts and write dubious stories that will get them free trips, drink, food, clothing, cash and other benefits.

But the very worst manifestations are to be found in sports reporting. Of course, there are honest sports reporters; but we still have to ask: How reliable is their work? Can we trust journalists? Or don't we care? When I look at modern sports reporting I am saddened because too often I find:

- Reporters who don't tell the public what they really know. Many reporters are aware of endemic corruption in sport – but don't reveal it.
- Reporters who are too close to the international emperors of sport; the Samaranchs, Nebiolos and Havelanges.

- Almost criminally bad standards of reporting; laziness, reluctance to ask questions, a reliance on press releases.
- Too much accepting of hospitality from the people they are supposed to report on.

### **My own background in journalism**

I'd like to tell you a little about my background in journalism. I began in 1967, working with the investigation department of The London Sunday Times. I learned an immense amount not just about technique – but also about high standards of research and integrity in the production of a story.

One special lesson I learned then was this: When the pack of reporters go in one direction – go in the opposite direction. Avoid the crowd, stay away from the mob of quick turn-around, newsbite reporters and go away and dig until you think you are getting to some truths. Some independent truths are better than none. [...]

I've had the good luck to work with some wonderful journalists: Men and women who were honest, intelligent and talented. They taught me the basics of

journalism: High ethical standards, keep digging until you find out what the authorities do not want published – and then tell this to the people.

I've always been inspired by the words of that great reporter, Louis Heren, a Deputy Editor of the Times of London. He told his reporters, "Find out why the lying bastards are lying." You can hear what he was saying: Don't just expose corruption. Find out – and then tell your readers and viewers – why corruption flourishes in your own society.

So, I learned my trade writing and filming investigation stories.

The standards of accuracy and proof were very high. Again and again, editors and lawyers would send me back to get even more proof, more documents, until we had a watertight case. At the same time, I was working alongside ethical journalists covering domestic and foreign news, economics, the environment, cultural affairs – all of them delivering to the highest possible standards.

### **Sport is the soft end of journalism**

In newspapers these stories usually appear at the front end of the paper – the sharp end. Sport is usually printed at the back of the paper. When I started investigating sports politics and business, I was horrified to discover this was the soft end of the paper. It seems to me that many editors – who take great care about accuracy at the sharp end – don't care about the soft end as long as the sports reporters get the football scores correct.

The same editors encourage their reporters to investigate corruption in government, the police and business – but don't notice that many of the sports reporters do their best to avoid investigating corruption in sport.

This is serious. Every day we see more and more sponsorship money coming into sport; the TV payments grow tremendously; what I used to call sport is now known as the leisure industry. Too few reporters bother to ask simple questions about the effect of this money on the practice of sport.

The very worst effect has been the covering up of doping in sport. Now that sport is a valuable commodity for sports bosses and TV bosses, they don't want its clean image damaged by the truth – that doping is massive in nearly every sport where money can be earned. So, sports reporters – many of them parents – encourage children and teenagers to worship top athletes as role models although they know that these heroes and heroines are junkies.

And they are pressurised to suppress, to censor their reports – in the interests of the national team, their country's international image, and because the needs of Coca-Cola and other big sponsors are more important than providing a simple, truthful service to readers and viewers.

*Find the full speech 'Sport, Lies and Stasi-Files – A Golden Opportunity for the Press' at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*

# The sports media: The world's best advertising agency

In 2002, Play the Game engaged the Danish publishing house 'Monday Morning' to study the content of Scandinavian sports journalism. The project analysed 3,196 articles from nine national dailies in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, and the findings showed that the written Scandinavian sports press almost exclusively

dealt with promoting elite sport and had a strong focus on big-money televised sporting events – primarily football.

Eight out of ten sports articles were uncritical reports or news, and six out of ten articles had a national focus that made Scandinavian sports journalism look like a free space for unbridled nationalism.

Despite government subsidies for Scandinavian sport amounting to several billion euro, and the fact that both Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have popular traditions of female sports and community-based amateur sports, only 8 per cent of the articles focused on economics and politics. Only 8 per cent paid attention to female athletes, and community-based and amateur sports received less than 1 per cent of the attention.

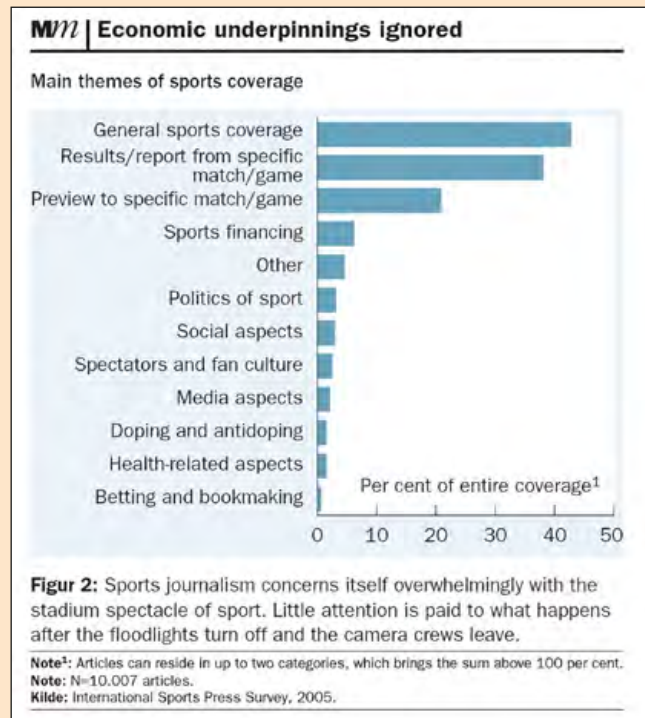
The results didn't come as a surprise to Bjarne Ibsen, the director of the Danish Research Institute for Sport, Culture and Civil Society:

“A kind of holy trinity exists between media, the professional sports clubs and money interests. Too much sports journalism serves the industry.”

But if the sports press in some of the world's most successful democracies was failing its duties, how did the press in other countries cover sport?

## The Nordic story repeated itself globally

In 2005, Play the Game again engaged Monday Morning to design a new and larger study of the international sports press. The international survey included 10,000

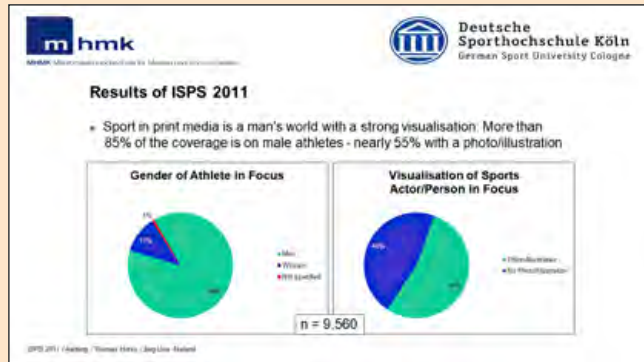


In 2005, the first International Sports Press Survey outside Scandinavia confirmed that the societal dimensions of sport were largely ignored by the media. Research by Søren Schultz Jørgensen



When Søren Schultz Jørgensen in 2002 presented the first sports press survey made for Play the Game and the weekly 'Mandag Morgen', the findings stirred up much debate, but twenty years later it is fair to say that very little has changed in the traditional sports press.

Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game



In 2011, sports journalism was still a territory completely dominated by men. Over a decade of research, there was no change in the gender imbalance. And the next decade did not bring any change either.

(Research by Thomas Horky/Jörg-Uwe Nieland)

articles from the sports pages in 37 newspapers in 10 countries and the findings confirmed the results of the Scandinavian Sports Press Survey.

The International Sports Press Survey 2005 concluded that sports journalism was a self-perpetuating male universe with hardly any room for female athletes, female sources, and female journalists. Only 5 per cent of the sports stories were written by a female journalist. Less than 5 per cent focused on the cultural and social aspects of sports.

And contrary to professional standards of journalism which generally require more than one source and perspective in a story, 40 per cent of the sports stories surveyed referred to only one source while 20 per cent of the articles did not refer to any sources at all.

In a summary of the International Sports Press Survey 2005, Søren Schultz Jørgensen, an editor at Monday Morning, labelled the sports press 'The World's Best Advertising Agency'.

He pointed out that even though the sports industry in the US was twice as big as the car industry, seven times the size of the film industry, and one of the fastest growing branches of industry at all, only 6 per cent of the articles about sport in daily newspapers dealt with the economic and financial aspects of sport. And only one article in 30 included the political aspects of the 'toy department of human life'.

### Little room for independence

In 2011, Play the Game published its second International Sports Press Survey, now designed by researchers Jörg-Uwe Nieland from the German Sports Universi-

ty in Cologne and Thomas Horky from the Macromedia University for Media and Communication in Hamburg.

The new and even larger survey included 17,777 articles about sport from 80 newspapers in 22 countries, and the findings once again confirmed the conclusions from the International Sports Press Survey 2005. The ongoing debate about the quality and scope of sports journalism seemed to leave no trace behind.

Although FIFA at the time had just awarded the hosting of its World Cups in 2018 and 2022 to Russia and Qatar and widespread corruption had been reported, sports politics and money in sport were still largely ignored. Only 2.7 per cent of the sports coverage dealt with sports politics, and sports finance and sports economy were the topics of just 3.1 per cent of the articles.

10 years later, in 2022, Horky and Nieland again confirmed very little development in sports journal-

ism – except a clear shift from news stories to longer features. Today, people get their sports news from the internet. The gender imbalance is still impressive: The number of female sports writers, for instance, had declined to be behind less than 5 per cent of the stories.

Overall, the three surveys of sports coverage in newspapers indicate that the structures and the priorities of the traditional news media make very little room for independent sports journalists. As this book illustrates, the most important scandals that have drawn worldwide attention and defined the international sports agenda in recent years can be credited to a small number of investigative journalists, many of them working as freelancers.

*Find more about the International Sports Press Surveys at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*



*Starting at Play the Game 2002, the International Sports Press Survey has run for almost twenty years. Thomas Horky (left) and Jörg-Uwe Nieland (next to Horky) presented the main findings of the 2021 survey during a debate at Play the Game 2022. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*





## Chapter 2

# DOPING: FROM OMERTÁ TO PUBLIC AWAKENING

At the first Play the Game event in 1997, the delegates heard one of the world's leading sports physiologists, the Swede Bengt Saltin (1935–2014), asking cautiously: Could there be a connection between the fact that on the one side blood values of Nordic skiers were on a dramatic, inexplicable rise and young cyclists were dying from massive blood clots in the heart, and on the other side the emergence of a new drug called 'erythropoietin'?

The question illustrates how the debate on doping has evolved over a quarter of a century. Bengt Saltin's assumptions have been more than confirmed. Every sports fan today has heard about the drug named by its abbreviation EPO, and she or he may suspect top athletes to use it widely.

Moreover, doping is no longer perceived as only a matter of individual cheating by athletes with a bad character. One year after Bengt Saltin raised his concerns, the Festina scandal in the Tour de France opened the doors for the wider public to understand that illegal drugs were taken on an industrial scale in elite sport.

Playing by the rules has been essential to modern sport since its inception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And the attempts to bend or break the rules are just as old.

Today, all sport governing bodies have signed up to the World Anti-Doping Code and a list of substances that are banned for at least two out of three reasons: They must be

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*Track star Marion Jones speaks to the media at Federal Court after pleading guilty to lying to a federal agent about her drug use. Jones was the most prominent athlete involved in the BALCO scandal in the US, and she was stripped of five Olympic medals, among others. Photo: Stephen Chermis/Getty Images*



*The Swedish physiologist Bengt Saltin hinted at Play the Game in 1997 that loose EPO rules might drive athletes to experiment and risk death. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

performance-enhancing, pose a health risk, or be against the spirit of sport.

It took more than a hundred years of modern sport to reach that agreement.

According to the research article ‘A Historical Timeline of Doping in the Olympics’, published by the Kawasaki Journal of Medical Welfare in 2006, athletes have been doping for more than a century, often with assistance from scientists and sports organisations.

The first documented case of doping in the modern Olympics occurred at the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis. At the 22-mile mark of the Olympic marathon race, the American marathoner Tom Hicks was given small bits of strychnine with brandy and a little egg-white “in order to stimulate him and help him finish the race”, his coach explained. But in those days, athletes who doped didn’t breach any fair play rules in sport and athletes’ health wasn’t an issue.

In the 1930s, the use of strychnine and alcohol to enhance performance was outdated by the invention of synthetic drugs such as amphetamine and testosterone. At the beginning of the Cold War in the 1950s, synthetic drugs were used as popular weapons in the sports power battle between the Soviet Union and the US, and ambitious athletes in other countries were doped too.

### **Doping and death**

In 1960, the Danish cyclist Knud Enemark Jensen died during the road race at the Olympic Games

in Rome, allegedly because he had taken Ronicol, a blood circulation stimulant, or amphetamine. One year later, American female athletes were accused of using male hormones and American strength athletes of using Dianabol, an anabolic steroid.

The IOC didn't begin to investigate the use and the dangers of doping until 1962 when the American IOC president Avery Brundage set up a Medical Committee and instructed the committee to make recommendations about what to do about doping. And doping wasn't a matter for public authorities until 1963 when the Council of Europe asked the IOC to establish an international commission on doping that should educate athletes and sports officials about the dangers of doping, study athletes' behaviour affected by doping, keep track of doping methods, and list proscribed drugs and activities.

The Council of Europe recommended drug testing too. And at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, the International Cycling Union (UCI) introduced the first Olympic doping control to test cyclists for amphetamine. But the IOC didn't adopt an anti-doping policy until May 1967, a few months before the death of British Tour de France rider Tom Simpson, who collapsed at Mont Ventoux with a cocktail of amphetamines in his body.

Ahead of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico, the IOC formed a Medical Commission and introduced a list of banned substances, while drug testing was to be implemented in time for the Olympics. The commission asked international sports federations to test their athletes for stimulants, narcotics, sympathomimetic amines, anti-depressants, and tranquillizers using gas chromatography, but no test for anabolic steroids was planned.

In 1969, West German discus thrower Brigitte Berendonk told *Die Zeit* that the use of anabolic steroids was common among decathletes, discus throwers, shot-putters, weightlifters, and half of the runners and jumpers. And the four-time US Olympics discus champion Alfred Oerter claimed that the use of anabolic steroids was so widespread in elite sport that young athletes were forced to use them if they wanted to stay on top.

### **A communist minister acts**

But in general, doping in sport wasn't a major public issue until three decades later. To many sport fans, it was an eye-opener that the Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson was stripped of his gold medal when he tested positive for anabolic steroids after having won the 100-meter race at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) in the early 1990s shed light on

systemic doping of East German athletes, children included. But it was only near the end of the decade that a new doping scandal made the public realise the true scale of doping in sport.

Three days ahead of the Tour de France start in 1998, Willy Voet, a Belgian masseur on the French cycling team Festina, was arrested at the Belgian–French border when customs agents searched his car and found huge quantities of doping substances such as growth hormones, testosterone, amphetamines, and erythropoietin (EPO).

Behind the police action was the then French Minister for Youth and Sport, Marie-George Buffet, who as a communist regarded the cyclists as workers who deserved protection from medical abuse.



*Tour de France riders sat down in protest in 1998 when the world's first systemic doping scandal was revealed. They did not protest the doping, but the police raids that were meant to reveal doping. Photo: Bongarts/Getty Images*

Thanks to the anti-doping laws in France, the arrest of Willy Voet kickstarted one of the largest investigations of the use of drugs in sport. The first stage of the race started as planned in Dublin, Ireland. But when the riders arrived in France, the police also arrested Festina's sports director Bruno Roussel and the team doctor Eric Rijckaert. When the police found files on the doctor's computer that documented a systematic doping programme, the entire Festina team was kicked out of the tour and the police began to investigate other teams.

The investigations made the remaining Tour de France riders arrange two sit-down protests during the race arguing they would no longer tolerate being treated like criminals. Five teams ultimately withdrew from the race in protest, and less than 100 of the 189 riders that started in the 1998 Tour de France finished the race in Paris.

Dozens of the riders who finished the race later admitted having taken performance-enhancing drugs or were found guilty of doping, including the overall 1998 winner Marco Pantani who died in a hotel room in 2004 under unclear circumstances.

Some of the helpers that supplied the riders with doping were sanctioned too. Willy Voet was given a suspended sentence of 10 months in prison and a fine of 30,000 francs while Bruno Roussel received a suspended sentence of one year in prison and a fine of 50,000 francs.

### **Anti-doping awakening**

The Festina affair marked the beginning of a new era in sport where public authorities tried to take more control over sport while more sports journalists began investigating doping.

As a result of pressure from the public and big North American sponsors, the IOC decided to arrange the first world conference on doping in sport. The conference was held in Lausanne in February 1999 and resulted in the creation of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) which was to be jointly financed and run by sports organisations and national governments. The conference was also the first step towards a global harmonisation of anti-doping rules across all sports.

It became clear that some sports leaders wouldn't give up control over national and international anti-doping without a fight. At the end of the Lausanne conference, most sports leaders and politicians agreed on a minimum sanction of two years' suspension for



*The Italian anti-doping expert Sandro Donati paved new ways at Play the Game 2005 when exposed how organised crime was running a giant global market for sports drugs. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

athlete violations of anti-doping rules across all sports. But two of the most prominent sports leaders, FIFA president Sepp Blatter and UCI president Hein Verbruggen, were in opposition. The two IOC members argued that a two-year sanction would destroy the career of a professional football player or a professional cyclist and could result in expensive legal battles that would harm the reputation of the entire Olympic movement.

On 4 February 1999, the conference signed the Lausanne Declaration which stated that “the minimum required sanction for major doping substances or prohibited methods shall be a suspension of the athlete from all competition for a period of two years, for a first offence.”

However, the declaration also stated that “based on specific, exceptional circumstances to be evaluated in the first instance by the competent International Federation’s bodies, there may be a provision for a possible modification of the two-year sanction.”

This was the first of many anti-doping compromises between the public authorities and the sports authorities that opened the door for legal battles over doping sanctions that are still present in anti-doping today.

### **Drawing a world map of illegal trade**

WADA and governments still had much to learn about the scale of sports drugs. In a ground-breaking presentation at Play the Game in Copenhagen in late 2005, Italian anti-doping expert Alessandro Donati pieced together information available on the internet, composing a jaw-dropping picture of a giant global market for sports drugs. The illegal trade routes across the globe were designed by organised crime networks, leading not only to elite sport, but also to private gym facilities, military, and police environments.

WADA’s then-general director David Howman was in the room and immediately initiated a research cooperation with Donati. A few months later, WADA president Richard W. Pound warned that the illegal market for sports drugs worldwide – including steroids, growth hormone and EPO – was larger than the markets of marijuana, cocaine, and heroin put together. Consequently, WADA started a cooperation with Interpol.

Sandro Donati’s work for WADA resulted in the 2007 report ‘World Traffic in Doping Substances’ in which the Italian estimated that 31 million people worldwide were involved in doping, including athletes of various levels, soldiers in the military, police officers, bodyguards, private surveillance agents, people in showbiz, and victims of improper administration of drugs.

The report noted that the market for sports doping grew big in the early 1970s when American mafia families Gambino, Lucchese, Colombo, Gotti, and others made anabolic steroids part of their illegal drug trade and produced films like ‘Pumping Iron’ that introduced famous bodybuilders as movie stars, most notably the Austrian-American actor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

According to Donati, the American mafia controlled the doping market in the US until the middle of the 1990s when the Russian mafia in cooperation with the Sicilian mafia



became a new player on the market by selling cheaper drugs of high quality produced by Russian factories built for the former Soviet Union's medical industry.

But many of the mafia-controlled drugs on the illegal American medical market were also produced at a factory in Mexico owned by the former Scottish athletics star David Jenkins and his partner Juan Javier Macklis and supported by Panama's General Manuel Antonio Noriega.

For Sandro Donati, the legal medical industry was partly responsible for the illegal market because the industry produced far more substances than needed in the treatment of sick people.

"For decades, the medical industry has systematically expanded its production, marketing, and distribution of drugs. But it is far more serious to ask people to risk their health by taking medicine they don't need than it is to convince people of their need to buy a new car even if their old car can last five more years," he said.

### **Pharma threat to society**

Donati's report documented that the global anti-doping movement faced serious challenges such as the absence of national anti-doping laws in many countries and the failure to enforce existing laws in others, as well as the dearth of reliable information to accurately describe the problem and develop solutions.

He also pointed out that the medical expenditure to cure pathologies caused by drugs and doping in 2007 was higher than the entire illegal business of these drugs. In the US, it was estimated that an annual medical expenditure of almost 100 billion US dollars was needed to treat the problems of drug addicts, whose drug expenditure amounted to 65 billion US dollars.

"This type of pharmaceutical industry poses a threat to society and for some time now it has been the ideal partner of organised crime. What better agreement could, indeed, be imagined than that established between this kind of pharmaceutical industry and organised crime? The former has the need, once an excess of drugs has been produced (in relation to the real treatment needs of sick people), to sell them, keeping itself as far from suspicion as possible, whilst organised crime networks can obtain unofficial drugs that can be managed with great ease and to great financial advantage," the Italian concluded.

Sandro Donati's research on the world trafficking of doping substances was disturbing news at a time when most anti-doping authorities and journalists were busy exposing individual athletes and doping doctors at a national level.

However, certain national doping cases such as the Operación Puerto in Spain, the Floyd Landis case and the BALCO case in the US helped the public understand the global scale of the doping problem.

### **BALCO set new legal standards**

To many American sports fans, the BALCO case was an eye-opener that documented how doping had become a major problem across many US sports and that many of the greatest national sports heroes in the US were breaking the rules.

The public became aware of the case in September 2003, when federal agents concluded an investigation of doping allegations against the Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative (BALCO) in California by raiding the lab owned by Victor Conte, a former musician who in 1984 started producing sports nutrition. One month later, Travis Tygart, the managing director of USA-DA, announced that the agency had uncovered a doping conspiracy involving previously undetectable steroids and high-profile athletes.

The BALCO case involved track and field athletes such as Marion Jones, Kelli White, Tim Montgomery, Regina Jacobs, Alvin Harrison, Michelle Collins, Dwain Chambers, and Melissa Price, baseball players Barry Bonds and Gary Sheffield, NFL star Bill Romanowski, boxer Shane Mosley, and many other athletes who were later sanctioned for trying to enhance their performances by taking the new designer steroid THG, EPO and other stimulants.



*Doping convict Kelli White in conversation with USA-DA director Travis Tygart at Play the Game 2005 where they exposed the details of the BALCO case together.*

*Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

The case became famous for its exposure of THG, but also for setting a new legal standard in US anti-doping. Victor Conte was sentenced to four months in prison for steroid distribution and money laundering. And several of the sanctioned athletes such as Marion Jones and Barry Bonds were sentenced to prison and house arrest for obstruction of justice.

For years, the BALCO case attracted more public attention than any other doping case in the US. But according to Wade Exum, a former anti-doping director at the US Olympic Committee (USOC), many other cases were hidden. In 2003, he accused the committee of a cover-up of more than 100 positive drug tests on US athletes who won 19 Olympic medals from 1988 to 2000, including Carl Lewis, the greatest star in US athletics at the time.

On the eve of the second world conference on doping, held in Copenhagen, Denmark in March 2003, Wade Exum told the Danish newspaper Ekstra Bladet: “Many people see the US Olympic family as a sick family. I agree. The family has a big problem with doping.”

### **A bad team-player**

Wade Exum was fired from his job in 2000 when USOC handed over its drug testing responsibilities to a new organisation, the US Anti-Doping Agency.

In a racial discrimination and wrongful termination suit against the USOC, Wade Exum claimed that he was fired because he was Afro-American. But in the lawsuit, he also accused the USOC of hiding the results of at least half of all positive tests of American athletes and argued that he was fired for trying to change the system.

“I tried to prevent US sports from turning into a sports system like in East Germany, but when I protested the USOC accused me of being a bad team player,” Wade Exum told Ekstra Bladet, and he was supported by Bengt Saltin, then chairman of Anti-Doping Denmark and a member of WADA’s medical committee.

“The world has only seen a small part of the US doping scandal. Wade Exum’s accusations are in line with the information I received from other anti-doping sources in the US. The US is the major doping problem in many sports, especially in athletics. And in many ways, the doping problems in the US are just as bad as they were in the former Soviet Union and East Germany,” Bengt Saltin said.

A few months earlier, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) decided that USA Track & Field was not obliged to publish the names of 13 US athletes who tested positive between 1996 and 2000 without being sanctioned. The decision upset Arne Ljungqvist, a Swedish IOC member and chairman of the International Athletics Federation's medical committee:

“The CAS decision is disgusting. The court decided that USA Track & Field was obliged to inform us of all positive tests, but only not in these cases. The CAS argued that the 13



*After Wade Exum was fired by the US Olympic Committee, he substantiated his allegations of doping cover-ups by outing athletics star Carl Lewis (pictured), among many others. Photo: Pool PERRIN/TARDY/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images*

cases were now history and that it wouldn't be fair to the athletes to open their cases. This really upsets me, because I sent a letter to the USA Track & Field back in 1998 and requested information about all the cases," Arne Ljungqvist told the Danish newspaper.

### **Positive cases, no names given**

In April 2003, a federal court in Denver, Colorado, dismissed Wade Exum's lawsuit against the USOC. But then the former US anti-doping director released more than 30,000 pages of confidential USOC documents to Sports Illustrated and The Orange County Register. The documents allegedly supported his accusations of a major cover-up of US athletes cheating with performance-enhancing drugs, and Wade Exum's release of the documents became a big news story in the US.

"It's what many people suspected about the US Olympic Committee, that it was being covered up. There were lots of rumours around," the founding president of WADA, the Canadian IOC member Richard W. Pound, told the Associated Press.

According to Wade Exum, US athletics superstar Carl Lewis tested positive three times for small amounts of stimulants at the 1988 Olympic trials. The USOC first disqualified him, then accepted his appeal, claiming 'inadvertent use'. Carl Lewis went on to win two gold medals at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul in the long jump and the 100 meters after the disqualification of Ben Johnson for using steroids.

### **A wave of confessions**

The US did not fix the doping problem. And neither did the rest of the world. In 2007, a few months after WADA released Sandro Donati's report on world traffic of doping substances, a new wave of doping confessions made by former Tour de France riders once again documented the global scale of the problem.

The new confessions were caused by doping accusations in the book 'Memoirs of a Soigneur' written by the former soigneur Jef d'Hont from the cycling teams La Française des Jeux and Telekom. According to the Belgian soigneur, doctors at the University in Freiburg for years supplied Telekom with EPO and a chemist in Freiburg was paid per prescription by team director Walter Godefroot and his assistant Rudy Pevenage.

But when Bjarne Riis, a former Telekom rider and winner of the 1996 Tour de France, admitted at a press conference in Copenhagen that he began using doping in the 1980s and used EPO, growth hormones, and corticosteroids until 1998, he didn't reveal details of his long-time co-operation with Italian doping doctors.

The Dane wasn't the only professional athlete who almost a decade after the Festina affair was still respecting the *omertá* – the law of silence in sport.

Lance Armstrong, the winner of seven consecutive Tour de France titles from 1999



*Two years after Lance Armstrong won his seventh and last Tour de France, Sunday Times journalist David Walsh shared his findings on Armstrong's medical practices at Play the Game 2007 in Reykjavik. It took another five years before Armstrong was sanctioned. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*



*When former Tour de France winner Greg Lemond shared his critical views on Lance Armstrong's success at Play the Game 2009 in Coventry, and Armstrong then tweeted about it, Play the Game's website crashed due to more than 20,000 unexpected visits. Photo: Jens Astrup/Play the Game*

to 2005, wasn't banned from cycling until 2012 when the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) released a 200-page report which included testimonies from 11 of Lance Armstrong's former teammates and 15 other witnesses. The report stated that Lance Armstrong as the captain of the US Postal team for years engaged in "the most sophisticated, professionalised and successful doping programme that sport has ever seen."

At first, Lance Armstrong denied all the accusations and portrayed himself as an innocent victim of USADA's 'witch hunt'. But months after the release of the report, he finally accepted that he had lost the battle when he met opposition from sponsors and the International Cycling Union (UCI) for the first time in his career.

In December 2012, USADA rejected Lance Armstrong's request to reduce his lifetime ban to one year in exchange for his cooperation. One month later, the former Tour de France winner accepted an invitation from Oprah Winfrey to confess his doping career as a guest on her television show. One and a half decade after the Festina affair, the former cancer patient then admitted that he doped during most of his career and that his million-dollar sports business was built on a lie.

Thanks to the doping history in the Tour de France, Lance Armstrong's confession didn't come as a big surprise. To many sports fans and anti-doping authorities, the question was why it took so long to finally catch the American. But recently highlighted doping cases in the US also

document that doping investigations may take years if the dopers investigated have strong financial and legal support.

### **Catching individuals, not states**

Overall, the European and American doping cases show that no matter how many anti-doping rules the sports authorities and the public authorities agree on, many stakeholders in sport seem to be more than willing to break the rules and take the risk of being caught and sanctioned. But the cases also document that although the global anti-doping system is still relatively new, many individual doping cheaters in sport have been caught and sanctioned.

Before the creation of WADA and the global harmonisation of anti-doping policies, dopers were at little risk of being caught. Now, at least some of the cheaters who destroy the fun of sport for clean athletes, fans, and sponsors are exposed. Often thanks to investigative journalists and whistleblowers, who put their careers in sport at stake by speaking out on what's wrong with sports.

But anti-doping is not about catching the bad guys only. It's also about catching the bad nations. The case of state-sponsored doping in Russia makes it fair to question how sports organisations and public authorities have handled their responsibilities when investigating and sanctioning the most powerful sports nations in the world for violating international anti-doping rules.



*Lance Armstrong wears the yellow jersey in 2000 while riding uphill towards his second out of seven Tour de France wins.*

*Photo: Mike Powell/Allsport/Getty Images*





## I put my life in their hands

*One of the top athletes who lost her career as a consequence of the BALCO scandal was the world-class sprinter Kelli White. At Play the Game 2005 in Copenhagen, she shared her story to an audience listening intently.*



*Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

In August of 2003 at the World Championships in Paris, I had captured both the 100 and 200-meter titles and I walked off the track after the 200 meters and I just felt extremely guilty because I knew that what I had achieved at that meet was not right, it wasn't fair and it wasn't real. Instead of being a high point of my career, it really turned out to be such a disappointment not only to myself but to my family and the sport that I love very, very much.

With the help of Mr. Conte, I was able to pass 17 drug tests both in and out of competition, not only in the United States but in different countries. In a relatively short period of time, I became the fastest woman in the world. And for me that was pretty scary – it was exciting, but scary also. I want to explain what it takes for the whole system to work. It not only took Mr. Conte's help, it took my coach making me believe it was okay, and I think that a lot of the time what happens to athletes is that people make you believe that what you are doing is OK because everyone else is doing it. And that is definitely not the truth because I have friends who compete now who are clean. And it takes away from their achievements when you are made to believe that everyone is doing the same thing.

While I was in Paris, I had my first failed drug test. It was actually for a stimulant called Modafonil, and once again with the help of Mr. Conte, I came up with a plan to tell the world that I had been using Modafonil for medical reasons and not the reasons we were actually using them for. A week after the World Championships,

the FBI raided the BALCO laboratories and I decided that for my sanity and for other reasons it would be best that I admitted my use of EPO, THG and the stimulants so that I could be clean and free in my mind.

I believe it is important that I get you to understand the reasons why I chose to do drugs. But first I want to say that those who do use drugs are not bad people, we just have made a bad mistake. And the relationship one has with your coach also extends to the person who is the distributor.

I had a very close relationship with Mr. Conte, I never would have believed that he would hurt me in any kind of way, but now I can see that the disregard for the lives and the health of the athletes was compromised. I am also disappointed in how the punishments have played out for the people who were involved. I think that the athletes are severely punished, but those around them and those who encourage the activity, the behaviour, they are not punished as harshly as we are. I think that four months in prison is in no way equal to two years of not being able to compete.

I trusted the opinion of my coach and he led me to believe that everyone was doing it and that it was okay and that the only way to ever be good was to use drugs. I put my life in their hands and after reading many documents that were seized from the raid, I can see that they really took advantage of me and many, many other athletes.

*Read Kelli White's full speech at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*

## A life-long fighter for integrity

It would take a book of its own to account for the life-long fight for integrity that the Italian Alessandro Donati has led against national and international sports authorities. His own motivation stems from feeling betrayed in the early 1980s when he learned that the Finnish middle- and long-distance runners whom Donati admired as an athletics trainer, in reality could thank blood doping for their achievements.

In 1991, Donati became head of research for the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI), and because he never compromised when evidence pointed to doping and fraud, CONI raised 11 court cases against their own employee – and lost them all.

Donati's achievements are documented in articles available at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org), and only a few headlines can be mentioned here. He has:

- Documented that the long jump contest at the IAAF World Championships in Rome 1987 was forged in order to secure an Italian bronze medal.
- Revealed that Italian football players were not subject to the same rigorous doping tests as other athletes in the 1990s.
- Exposed how the IOC member leading Italy's Olympic Committee (CONI), Mario Pescante, was suppressing reports on EPO research carried out by professor Conconi at the University of Ferrara, where numerous international skiers, cyclists, and other endurance athletes received drug therapy.

- Uncovered the use of growth hormone among Italian Olympians in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics in 2000.
- Mapped the sales of sports drugs from pharmacies in Northern Italy.
- Painted the first world map of illegal doping trade, leading WADA and Interpol into cooperation.

When handing him the Play the Game Award in 2007, the former award winner Laura Robinson said:

"Sandro Donati pioneered a quest for integrity and truth in sport. First, he spent decades working as a coach, and from that vantage point he saw what was happening in his sport in terms of doping, and commenced an incredibly courageous voyage through the dark deep waters of organised crime and drug dealing."

"He became an international expert, not only on the trafficking of drugs, which led him to investigate organised crime and put his career and life in danger. At the same time, he continued to publish articles on methodologies in training and the philosophy of sport and the active body. Sandro Donati is the definition of a renaissance man—one of balance and a graceful but active intelligence," Robinson said.

Sandro Donati has continued to fight against the system of world sport. In 2015, he decided to coach the Italian racewalker Alex Schwazer whose previous doping case Donati had been a key person in documenting.

Donati wanted to restore the prestige of training



*Sandro Donati is an athletics coach who became a self-taught, world-class doping detective. At Play the Game 2002, he unfolded several gigantic Excel sheets documenting illegal sales of sports drugs from one Italian pharmacy. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

methods by showing that Schwazer could reach the world top without doping. Schwazer effectively did become among the world's best, but on 1 January 2016 he delivered a doping sample that was first found clean, but in a re-test traces were found of synthetic testosterone.

Donati and Schwazer suspect a conspiracy and have pointed to numerous procedural flaws in the case,

which have been described by journalist Andy Brown in Play the Game's report 'Schwazer vs. Sport: A race walker's long and winding route towards doping rehabilitation', see [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org), and in the Netflix series 'Running for my truth'.

WADA, World Athletics, and CAS reject the conspiracy claims and maintain there is a doping violation.

# Play the Game

Athlete power on the

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## Chapter 3

# THE LOVE AFFAIR THAT EXPOSED A DOPING CRIME

History is packed with examples of how both democratic and authoritarian rulers mix sport and politics with the purpose of framing their nations as strong and successful. To that end, politicians have often resorted to doping as a shortcut to prevail in sport.

After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the East German Stasi ('State Security Service') archives exposed one of the largest known state-sponsored doping programmes. The archives show that thousands of East German athletes, some of them minors, were forced or coerced to take part in politically motivated doping experiments that intended to prove that East Germany was superior to the West during the Cold War.

Since then, state-run doping programmes didn't attract much public attention until a Russian love affair helped reveal a very close relationship between Russian sport and politics, in a close conspiracy with one of the most prestigious international federations.

When the Russian middle-distance runner Yuliya Rusanova married the Russian anti-doping officer Vitaly Stepanov in 2009, the talented athlete soon told her husband that she was part of a state-run doping programme involving many elite athletes in Russia.

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*Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov's testimony in 2014 was decisive in revealing the doping and corruption scandal organised by international and Russian sports leaders. After their revelations, they had to live abroad and could speak to Play the Game's audience for the first time in 2019 in Colorado Springs. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

# DRUGS, BRIBERY and the COVER-UP

## As Russia prepare to host the World Athletics Championships, a Mail on Sunday special investigation reveals...

**R**ussia's path to host the World Athletics Championships next month will take them through a series of hurdles. One of the most significant is the anti-doping scandal that has engulfed the country since the start of the year. It is a scandal that has led to the arrest of several athletes and the suspension of others. The scandal is the result of a cover-up by the Russian government and the Russian Athletics Federation. The cover-up has led to the arrest of several athletes and the suspension of others. The scandal is the result of a cover-up by the Russian government and the Russian Athletics Federation. The cover-up has led to the arrest of several athletes and the suspension of others.

**Athletes 'ordered to dope by coaches'**  
**Anti-doping chief arrested on drugs charges**  
**Officials 'demanded cash to mask positive tests'**

**SPECIAL REPORT**  
 By Martha Kellner and Nick Harris

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**Not only does an athlete have to take drugs, he also has to pay our anti-doping lab for substituting the samples.**

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**HOW SHARP WAS CHEATED OUT OF HER GOLDEN MOMENT**

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**THE BANNED ATHLETE**



When my team-mates asked me why I didn't pay as they did every year, I said: "No one told me. Maybe he had, it would have saved me."

—ATLANTA, GEORGIA, AUGUST 2009

**THE DRUGS LAB CHIEF**



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**44 Russian athletes are currently banned, the most in the world**

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Martha Kellner and Nick Harris from the UK paper Mail on Sunday were the first to reveal systemic cheating in Russian and international athletics in 2013, but reactions were scarce.

In the following years, Vitaly Stepanov sent hundreds of e-mails to WADA about the Russian doping programme. But it wasn't until 2013 when his wife was banned from athletics for two years, following abnormalities in her biological passport, that Jack Robertson, a chief investigative officer at WADA, told the couple to contact the German journalist Hajo Seppelt. Then Yuliya Stepanova herself started collecting evidence about the Russian doping programme.

Also in 2013, on the eve of Russia's hosting of the World Athletics Championships, British journalists Martha Kelner and Nick Harris wrote a special report for Mail on Sunday on 'Drugs, Bribery and the Cover-Up' in Russian athletics. Based on interviews with the Russian athletics coach Oleg Popov and other Russian sources, the report exposed that Russian athletes were ordered to dope by their coaches and that Russian officials were demanding money from athletes to mask positive tests.

Furthermore, the report stated that the head of the WADA-accredited anti-doping laboratory in Moscow, Grigory Rodchenkov, had been arrested on suspicion of being involved in a doping ring, but was later released to continue his work at the lab. Although the British journalists informed WADA, IOC, IAAF, RUSADA, and the Russian Ministry of Sport of their findings, they received no comments and the international sports authorities didn't react to the numerous doping allegations against Russia.

Finally, on 3 December 2014, things got moving when Yuliya Stepanova's secret recordings of audio and video footage of her conversations with Russian athletes, coaches, doctors, and sports officials, were broadcast on German public television station ARD in Hajo Seppelt's documentary 'The Secrets of Doping: How Russia makes its winners'.

"You must dope, that's how it works in Russia. You need aid to get medals, and doping is this aid," Yuliya Stepanova told ARD, and another Russian runner, Liliya Shobukhova, confessed to having paid the Russian Athletics Federation (RAF) 450,000 euro for covering up a positive doping test prior to the 2012 London Marathon.

Both the Russian Athletics Federation (RAF) and RUSADA denied the accusations. In Moscow Times, RAF president Valentin Balakhnichev, who was also a treasurer of the International Athletics Association (IAAF, now renamed World Athletics), described the accusations as "a pack of lies". RUSADA's managing director Nikita Kamaev told R-Sport Agency that "they do not have the facts or the documents, which support any offences carried out against the anti-doping principles."



Nevertheless, the IAAF and WADA said that steps were already taken: “Insofar as the particular allegations against Russian authorities and others are concerned, these will be carefully scrutinised,” WADA stated.

### **An attitude from the Cold War**

On 11 December 2014, WADA appointed an Independent Commission, headed by Canadian IOC member Richard W. Pound, a lawyer, former president of WADA, and winner of the Play the Game Award 2013, to investigate the allegations against Russia.

“I do believe, as many have said here, that sport has become so important that we in fact do face a crisis and that we should not wait until we hit the wall before we do something. Because once you hit the wall, you have no idea what sort of chaos will result and how long it takes to earn back a reputation that you’ve built up for many years,” Richard W. Pound had said when receiving the Play the Game Award.

This prediction came true only one year later when the global fight against doping in sport hit the wall. The Russian–international doping affair deeply compromised the credibility of anti-doping, and WADA had no idea of how long it would take to earn back its reputation.

Pound’s investigation included corrupt practices around sample collection, results management, and administration of anti-doping processes at the WADA-credited anti-doping laboratory in Moscow and the RUSADA.

But before the Independent Commission concluded the investigation, its role was extended by WADA in August 2015 following the release of another ARD documentary, ‘The Secrets of Doping: The Shadowy World of Athletics’, containing new allegations of widespread doping in world athletics.

### **Shocking and appalling report**

In late 2015, WADA released the Independent Commission’s first 325-page report on its investigation of the two whistleblowers’ allegations. The WADA president, Sir Craig Reedie, said that the report contained a series of findings that would “shock and appal athletes and sports fans worldwide” and highlighted current deficiencies with the anti-doping system in Russia.

“While the contents of the report are deeply disturbing, the investigation is hugely positive for the clean athletes as it contains significant recommendations for how WADA and its partners in the anti-doping community can, and must, take swift corrective action to ensure that anti-doping programmes of the highest order are in place across the board. WADA is fully committed in its role of leading the charge to protect the rights of clean athletes worldwide,” the WADA president said.

In Geneva, Richard W. Pound held a press conference stating that the allegations of widespread doping in Russia were substantiated by the investigation and that many of the findings were still current in Russian sport.

To him, the Independent Commission report uncovered a “deeply rooted culture of cheating”, and the findings were redolent of “an inherited attitude from the old Cold War days” and probably only “the tip of the iceberg.”

### **Russians in denial**

The report also said that the head of the Moscow lab, Grigory Rodchenkov, admitted to intentionally destroying 1,417 samples in December 2014, shortly before WADA officials were due to visit the lab. Furthermore, the report stated

- that the 2012 Olympics in London were “sabotaged” by the “widespread inaction” by the IAAF and the RAF against Russian athletes with suspicious doping profiles
- that RUSADA was under improper influence from the Russian sports ministry
- that the agency had given athletes advance notice of tests
- that its employees routinely took bribes from athletes to cover up doping.



*“Once you hit the wall, you have no idea what sort of chaos will result and how long it takes to earn back a reputation”, was IOC member Richard W. Pound’s warning to sport at Play the Game 2013. The warning proved relevant only one year later. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

Regarding the improper influence of the Russian government, the report stated that “it would be naïve in the extreme to conclude that activities on the scale discovered could have occurred without the explicit or tacit approval of Russian governmental authorities.”

At the press conference in Geneva, Richard W. Pound even said it was inconceivable that the Russian sports minister, Vitaly Mutko, was not aware of the scale of the problem: “It was impossible for him not to be aware of it. And if he’s aware of it, he’s complicit in it.”

But Vitaly Mutko denied the allegations. The Russian sports minister told the Interfax news agency that he would be happy to close the whole Russian anti-doping system because “we will only save money”, while other Russian officials tried to paint a picture of Russia as the victim of a political anti-Russia campaign in the US and Europe.

Based on the report, the Independent Commission made a series of recommendations, including the need for WADA to insist upon compliance by all its signatories, and to prioritise regulating compliance of anti-doping programmes. And there were specific recommendations for WADA to declare the Moscow lab and RUSADA non-compliant and for the IAAF to declare the RAF non-compliant, meaning that Russian athletes wouldn’t be allowed to compete internationally.

### **Athletics leaders arrested in France**

At the WADA press conference in Geneva, Richard W. Pound was holding back part of the report pending a French criminal investigation into IAAF officials, which was kick-started when the Independent Commission handed documents to Interpol. One week prior to the press conference, the French police arrested Lamine Diack, the IAAF president for 16 years, Habib Cissé, an IAAF legal adviser, and Gabriel Dolle, a former head of the IAAF anti-doping unit.

“When we release this information to the world, there will be a wow factor. People will say: How on earth could this happen? It’s a complete betrayal of what the people in charge of the sport should be doing,” Richard W. Pound told *The Independent*.

Lamine Diack was accused by the French police of accepting more than 1 million euro in exchange for covering up athletes’ positive tests. And when the second part of the Independent Commission report was published on 14 January 2016, the report also put pressure on the new IAAF president, Lord Sebastian Coe, who had served as a vice president

under the regime of Lamine Diack and now had become the president of the federation which has been renamed World Athletics.

### **IAAF Council could not have been unaware**

The report revealed that the IAAF council “could not have been unaware of the extent of doping in athletics and the non-enforcement of applicable anti-doping procedures. There was an evident lack of political appetite within the IAAF to confront Russia with the full extent of its known and suspected doping activities.”



*The late Lamine Diack, international athletics president from 1999-2015, combined corruption and doping in a way no one had seen before. He was convicted to four years in prison and fined 500,000 euro for blackmailing 23 Russian athletes to the tune of 3.2 million euro. Photo: Lintao Zhang/Getty Images for IAAF*

Furthermore, the report added that Lord Sebastian Coe's right-hand man Nick Davies, who only one month earlier stepped aside from his position as deputy general secretary, was "well aware of Russian skeletons in the cupboard." According to the report, a leaked email from Nick Davies to Lamine Diack's son, Papa Massata Diack, who worked for the IAAF as a marketing consultant, showed that the IAAF deputy general secretary discussed a plan to delay the announcement of positive tests by Russian athletes.

Although the report noted that "failure to have addressed such governance issues is an IAAF failure that cannot be blamed on a small group of miscreants", Richard W. Pound said at a press conference in Munich that it was now the responsibility of the IAAF to seize the opportunity to move forward and pointed to Lord Sebastian Coe as the right man for the job:



*Mourners pay tribute to Nikita Kamaev, one of two leading Russian anti-doping officers who died mysteriously in early 2016 when the Russian doping scandal was still not fully unravelled. Photo: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

“There is an enormous amount of reputational recovery that needs to occur here, and I can’t think of anyone better than Lord Coe to lead that.”

Lord Sebastian Coe denied any knowledge of the IAAF cover-up and followed up on Richard W. Pound’s appeal: “We can’t just sit here and say we deserve trust. We don’t, we have to win that back,” the IAAF president said, but the investigation of the Russian doping case was far from over.

## **Two mysterious deaths**

One month later, on 14 February 2016, the former managing director of RUSADA, Nikita Kamaev, died of a massive heart attack at the age of 52, two weeks after the death of Vyacheslav Sinev (58), the agency’s general director between 2008 and 2010. The surprising deaths of two Russian anti-doping officers, who knew all about how RUSADA was run, were so mysterious that some international news media indicated the two men were assassinated.

Regarding Nikita Kamaev, the media speculations only grew stronger when first *The Sunday Times*’ chief sportswriter David Walsh and then the Danish professor Verner Møller told the news media that Nikita Kamaev a few months prior to his death approached them separately because he was planning to reveal the Russian doping cover-ups and needed help to write a book in English.

A connection between Nikita Kamaev’s book and his death was never proven, but soon the investigation of the Russian doping affair took a new direction that further indicated the involvement of Russian authorities.

On 8 May 2016, Vitaly Stepanov appeared in an interview at *60 Minutes* on CBS stating that he had recorded conversations with Moscow lab director Grigory Rodchenkov claiming that Russian gold winners at the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi were doped and that positive tests were removed from the Moscow lab with the help from the FSB, Russia’s intelligence service.

Four days later, on 12 May 2016, Rodchenkov – who had left Russia in January 2016 to start a new life in the US – confirmed the allegations in an interview with *The New York Times*.

Rodchenkov said he created a doping cocktail of three anabolic steroids to help Russian athletes enhance their performances at the Sochi Games, and he switched positive doping

samples, when the lab – assisted by the FSB – discovered how to open and re-seal glass bottles with urine samples.

He also said that Russian athletes when tested, took photos of the serial numbers on their urine bottles and texted the numbers to the Russian sports ministry. At night during the Games, about 100 bottles with samples showing traces of steroid use were delivered through a small hole in the wall at the lab and later handed back with clean urine in the bottles.

### **“Beyond a reasonable doubt”**

To most sports fans, Grigory Rodchenkov’s story sounded like a James Bond movie. But it prompted WADA to launch a new investigation headed by Canadian law professor Richard H. McLaren.

On 18 July 2016, the first part of Richard H. McLaren’s report on the matter was released. The report confirmed the allegations and concluded that it was “beyond reasonable doubt” that Russia’s sports ministry, the FSB intelligence service, and the Moscow laboratory had operated to protect doped Russian athletes.

The report stated that a minimum of 643 positive samples disappeared in Russia between 2011 and 2015 and recommended to the IOC to ban Russia from the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Six days later, the IOC rejected the recommendation and announced that a decision would be made by each sports federation and that each positive decision should be approved by CAS.

On the eve of the Rio Olympics, the IOC announced that 278 out of 389 Russian athletes listed for the Games were cleared to compete. In clear contrast, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) decided to ban all paralympic athletes from Russia.

The IOC decision was met with resistance from WADA and strong criticism in the world press, and the committee was also criticised for not allowing Yuliya Stepanova to compete at the Olympics as a neutral athlete, on the grounds that she did not “satisfy the ethical requirements”.

To the Russian whistleblower, the IOC decision was a huge disappointment because she was free to compete after her two-year sanction was lifted in 2015.

At the beginning of the Rio Games, Yuliya Stepanova also experienced some of the consequences of being considered a national traitor in her home country as she was labelled ‘Judas’ by an official in Russian president Vladimir Putin’s government.



*The mastermind of Russian doping, Grigory Rodchenkov, inadvertently became the lead character of the Oscar-winning documentary 'Icarus'. At Play the Game 2019, the movie director Bryan Fogel (right) told how that happened and called for support for Rodchenkov, who had exiled himself in the USA. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

### **Attacked by Russian hackers**

On 11 August 2016, a hacker group called Anonymous Poland allegedly defaced the CAS website and leaked data stolen from WADA and CAS servers, including accounts belonging to Yuliya Stepanova. When WADA confirmed her ADAMS account, the agency's Anti-Doping Administration and Management System containing medical data of athletes, had been hacked, Yuliya Stepanova told a video press meeting:

“The only reason somebody would hack an ADAMS account is to find out your exact location. We decided it was safer to relocate. If something happens to us, you should know that it is not an accident.”



According to cyberespionage analysts, the Russian hacker group Fancy Bear did the hack and used Anonymous Poland as a proxy to leak the stolen data information. Fancy Bear is connected to GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency. A few weeks later the group leaked personal data of 29 athletes, including Yuliya Stepanova, tennis players Serena and Venus Williams, gymnast Simone Biles, and cyclist Chris Froome.

The leak focused on athletes who had been granted Therapeutic Use Exemption (TUE), which allows athletes to use otherwise banned substances in cases of illness or medical conditions. Fancy Bear claimed that these dispensations were "licenses for doping" and described WADA and the IOC Medical and Scientific Department as "corrupt and deceitful".

However, Fancy Bear couldn't prevent the Canadian investigator McLaren from publishing the second part of his WADA investigation into Russian doping. The report was released on 9 December 2016 and found that at least 1,000 Russian athletes across more than 30 sports benefitted from the state-sponsored doping programme between 2011 and 2015.

"It is impossible to know just how deep and how far back this conspiracy goes. For years, international sports competitions have unknowingly been hijacked by the Russians. Coaches and athletes have been playing on an uneven field. Sports fans and spectators have been deceived," Richard H. McLaren said, but the Canadian refused to comment on whether Russia should have taken the country's hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup away or be banned from the 2018 Olympic Winter Games:

"My function was to be an investigator and to investigate facts. It is up to the different parties, like the IOC, to make their decision."

## **Two IOC investigations**

Following Richard H. McLaren's report in July 2016, the IOC decided not to organise or give patronage to any sports event or meeting in Russia and not to grant any accreditation to officials of the Russian Ministry of Sport or any person implicated in the report for the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Furthermore, the IOC established two IOC Disciplinary Commissions to investigate "the alleged facts".

The first IOC Disciplinary Commission was chaired by Samuel Schmid, a member of the IOC Ethics Commission and former president of Switzerland. The objective of the

commission was to investigate “disciplinary actions related to the involvement of officials within the Russian Ministry of Sport and other persons mentioned in the report because of violations of the Olympic Charter and the World Anti-Doping Code.”

The second IOC Disciplinary Commission headed by Denis Oswald, a Swiss IOC member, was established to “initiate reanalysis, including forensic analysis, and a full inquiry into all Russian athletes who participated in the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi in 2014 and their coaches, officials, and support staff, and to take decisions regarding the individual athletes’ situations related to the possible violation of the WADA Code.”



*For years, international sports competitions have unknowingly been hijacked by the Russians, Richard H. McLaren said when launching his second report on the systemic cheating in Russian anti-doping. Here he speaks at Play the Game 2019. Foto: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



*In spite of so-called 'strict conditions' imposed on Russian sport in the wake of the doping scandal, the IOC allowed no less than 168 Russian athletes to take part in the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. Here some of them arrive at the opening ceremony in what was supposed to be a neutral outfit. Photo: Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images*

Just a few days after Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov together with Hajo Seppelt received the Play the Game Award 2017 for “pulling aside the curtains that were hiding the truth”, the IOC-led Schmid commission confirmed on 2 December 2017 “the existence of a Disappearing Positive Methodology as well as tampering methodology, in particular during the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi in 2014, as described in the final report by Professor Richard H. McLaren.”

The Schmid commission also confirmed “the seriousness of the facts, the unprecedented nature of the cheating scheme and, as a consequence, the exceptional damage to the integrity of the IOC, the Olympic Games, and the entire Olympic Movement.”

However, the Schmid commission said, Russian officials admitted wrongdoing by individuals within the Russian institutions, but never a “state doping support system”. And the commission did not find “any documented, independent, and impartial evidence confirming the support or the knowledge of this system by the highest State authority.”

### **‘Olympic athlete from Russia’**

Based on the Schmid commission’s recommendations, the IOC made a decision three days later to suspend the Russian Olympic Committee and to not accredit any official from the Russian Ministry of Sport for the Olympic Winter Games in Pyeongchang. Furthermore, the former Rus-

sian minister for sport, Vitaly Mutko, and the former deputy minister of sport, Yuriy Nagornykh, were excluded from any participation in all future Olympic Games.

The president of the Russian Olympic Committee, Alexander Zhukov, was suspended as an IOC member, and the Russian Olympic Committee was asked to reimburse the costs incurred by the IOC for the investigations and to contribute to the establishment of the Independent Testing Authority (ITA) for the total sum of 15 million US dollars.

Nevertheless, the IOC decided to invite individual Russian athletes “under strict conditions” to the Olympic Winter Games in Pyeongchang under the name ‘Olympic Athlete from Russia’. By December 2017, the Oswald Commission had banned 43 Russian athletes from the Olympics for life, but CAS overturned 28 of the bans. In the end, 168 Russian athletes were allowed to compete at the Pyeongchang Games in February 2018, and the IOC decided to reinstate the Russian Olympic Committee by the closure of the Games.

To many sports fans and anti-doping experts, the IOC decision was a huge disappointment. That sentiment grew stronger in September 2018 when WADA decided to reinstate RUSADA on two conditions: That Russian authorities accepted the reported outcomes of Richard H. McLaren’s investigation, and that the Russian government no later than 1 January 2019 provided access for appropriate entities to samples and electronic data at the former Moscow laboratory, which was sealed off due to a federal investigation of the case.

### **Manipulation of doping data**

Three weeks after the January 2019 deadline, WADA finally had access to the Russian data, including more than 2,000 samples. However, following an analysis of the data, WADA said on 9 September 2019 that the data were incomplete and contained inconsistencies and that RUSADA was to be declared non-compliant with the WADA Code for a period of four years for manipulation of the data.

“For too long, Russian doping has detracted from clean sport. The blatant breach by the Russian authorities of RUSADA’s reinstatement conditions, approved by the WADA Executive Committee in September 2018, demanded a robust response,” WADA president Craig Reedie said.

“That is exactly what has been delivered today. Russia was afforded every opportunity to get its house in order and rejoin the global anti-doping community for the good of the

athletes and the integrity of sport but chose instead to continue in its stance of deception and denial.”

The people who tampered with the Russian doping data have never been exposed. In December 2019, Russia was finally banned from international sports events for a period of four years for tampering with the data, but one year later the ban was reduced to two years following a Russian appeal to CAS.

The then newly elected WADA president, Witold Banka from Poland, was disappointed with the decision by CAS, but noted that “WADA is not the judge, but the prosecutor”, and that “these are still the strongest set of consequences ever imposed on any country for doping-related offences.”

Ten years after Vitaly Stepanov first approached WADA and six years after ARD’s exposure of Yulia Stepanova’s audio and video documentation of the greatest national doping programme in modern sports history, the Russian state was given the same two-year sanction as any individual athlete caught for doping.

The sanction was not for having established a state-run doping programme in Russia, but for tampering with the possible evidence of its existence. And the sanction did not include all Russian athletes. In 2021, the IOC allowed 335 Russian athletes to compete at the Olympic Games in Tokyo representing the ‘Russian Olympic Committee’ or ROC.

But the Russian case was not about doping only. It was also about bribery and corruption. And some of the men who made the Russian doping programme possible by protecting Russian athletes from being caught for doping and sanctioned for breaking the international anti-doping rules did not escape punishment.

### **A programme of ‘full protection’**

In 2015, when WADA’s Independent Commission handed over documents to Interpol, the French police began to investigate Liliya Shobukhova’s allegations of corruption involving officials at the Russian Athletics Federation and the IAAF. First, the police arrested Lamine Diack, the long-time IAAF president and IOC member from Senegal, in his room at the Sheraton Hotel near the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris.

In Lamine Diack’s computer, the police found much of the evidence that five years later led to the conviction of the former IAAF president and five other athletics officials for bribery and corruption. In September 2020, Lamine Diack was sentenced to four years

in prison and fined 500,000 euro for having collected 3.2 million euro from 23 Russian athletes in exchange for hiding their doping cases.

During the court case, it was revealed by the French prosecutors that Lamine Diack first suggested offering Russian athletes ‘full protection’ in doping cases at a meeting in November 2011 with the then-Russian sports minister Vitaly Mutko. According to the court, shortly after his meeting with the Russian sports minister, Lamine Diack was able to deliver what he had promised with the help from Valentin Balakhnichev, president of the Russian Athletics Federation and treasurer at the IAAF, the Russian coach Alexei Melnikov, Gabriel Dolle, head of the IAAF anti-doping unit, Habib Cissé, a lawyer and IAAF’s legal advisor, and the president’s own son, Papa Massata Diack, who worked for the IAAF as a marketing consultant.

The 23 Russian athletes each paid between 100,000 and 600,000 euro to avoid being sanctioned for doping, the chief judge Rose-Marie Hunualt said when detailing how Lamine Diack and his five helpers corrupted international athletics:

“The money was paid in exchange for a programme of ‘full protection’, purely and simply to escape sanctions. You violated the rules of the game,” the judge said to Lamine Diack. In 2021, before serving his full prison term, Lamine Diack died at the age of 88.

Valentin Balakhnichev was sentenced to three years in prison in absentia and Alexei Melnikov was also in absentia given two years in prison. Gabriel Dolle was given a two-year suspended prison sentence and fined 140,000 euro. Habib Cissé was given three years in prison, of which two were suspended. And Papa Massata Diack, who also was tried in absentia because Senegal refused to extradite him to France, was given a sentence of five years in prison, fined 1 million euro, and banned from sport for 10 years.

“I am appealing their stupid decision. My lawyers were not there because of COVID-19. This trial was a joke,” Papa Massata Diack told The Guardian.

## **A character assassination**

For those trying to fight doping in Russia, the case was no joke.

In 2017, Yuriy Ganus, a businessman from Skt. Petersburg, applied for the job as the Director General of RUSADA. He was hired to clean up anti-doping in Russia, and soon he became internationally respected for his outspoken criticism of the wide-spread doping culture in his home country.

Crossing the Atlantic to take part in Play the Game 2019 in Colorado Springs, Ganus gave a riveting account of how deeply entrenched doping is in the Russian sports system.

Carefully avoiding to criticise the Russian Head of State, Vladimir Putin, he pointed his finger at the sports movement:

“Instead of fighting for pure sport, it intensified the doping poisoning of Russia’s sports environment,” he said.

“Shadow forces among the decision-makers are playing a huge role in the Russian sports environment. The Russian sports area is unfortunately not in the proper priority of the highest level authorities. There is a low control of the tools to achieve goals in sport by the supreme authority. This provided an opportunity for the shadow forces to choose tools and approaches that go beyond common values and principles.”

His honest account was highly appreciated by Play the Game’s audience, but less so by his employers.

In Ganus’ own view, the turning point came in December 2019 when he did not agree with the decision of RUSADA’s board to challenge WADA’s four-year ban for data manipulation at the laboratory in Moscow. When Yuriy Ganus in his capacity as the director general of RUSADA signed the WADA challenge, he added a private note explaining his critical position towards the decision. For that note, he was never forgiven.

In early 2020, the governing body of RUSADA in secret hired the Russian auditor FinExpertiza to produce a confidential audit report on the agency. Without providing any facts of criminal actions or other wrongdoings, the audit report accused Ganus of “possible corruption” and “conflict of interests”.

Ganus stated that the audit report was “based on incomplete information” and conducted to “discredit a new independent RUSADA”. But in August 2020, he was fired based on the conclusions of the report. Six months later, Yuriy Ganus in detail explained his version of the story to Play the Game’s website claiming he was the victim of a character assassination ordered by the governing bodies of RUSADA:

“It was a deliberate report that was intended for the authorities to replace a RUSADA management that was inconvenient to them by using baseless accusations aimed at discrediting me. I invested myself in RUSADA. The agency was my life. After all this, I am still thinking about my future in anti-doping.”

In August 2020, Yuriy Ganus was fired from his job. All charges against him were later dropped.



*When the Russian anti-doping director Yuriy Ganus confessed to the failures of Russian sport to Play the Game 2019, many in the audience were sceptical. Was this another smart Russian intelligence operation? However, the firing of Ganus within a year after baseless accusations vouched for his credibility. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



## Fighting doping from the inside

One year before Richard W. Pound (below) was put on a mission by WADA to investigate the allegations of Russian doping brought forward by the German ARD TV broadcaster, he received the Play the Game Award 2013 for his efforts in cleaning the IOC of corruption during the Salt Lake City scandal and in establishing WADA as its first president from 1999-2007.

“He is ruthless and direct when it comes to pointing his fingers at all the critical points in the international fight against doping,” the vice-chair of Play the Game’s board, Søren Riiskjær, said when he presented Pound with the award.



Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game

“It is necessary to have these very direct but still constructive critics at the very centre of the sports movement – and it is necessary that people from the inside are also willing to and able to engage with the outside world. [Richard Pound] has always put himself at the disposal of the public debate – also in stormy waters and when the winds were not in his favour.”

The allegations against Russian and international athletics that Richard Pound was asked to investigate, were put on the international agenda by the Play the Game Award winners in 2017, the Russian couple Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov, in cooperation with German investigate reporter Hajo Seppelt. On the photo to the right, Seppelt is seen holding the award while the Stepanovs are on a Skype connection as they could not leave their current exile in the US.

In his speech, Play the Game’s international director Jens Sejer Andersen praised the Stepanovs for being symbols of the highest ethical practices in sport despite experiencing huge personal costs after becoming whistleblowers:

“You gathered, over a long period of time, convincing documentation through secret audio and video recordings, in spite of the obvious personal risks. And you decided to come forward and step out of anonymity with your eyewitness accounts on Western television, knowing well that this might lead to accusations of being renegades and national traitors, and provoke



Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game

negative reactions from the public, the authorities, colleagues, friends and family – as it has certainly also happened on an unprecedented scale.”

To Hajo Seppelt, Andersen said: “Your work was carried out while observing the highest standards of the journalistic profession. It is always a temptation for a

journalist to spice up the story with a little more drama than the documentation can necessarily bear, but you always let the documentation speak almost for itself, with a shortness and sharpness that matches the television format very well.”

THE TIMES  
 Thursday, July 28, 2015 (Printed in the UK)  
 Daily. 80p or price marked £5.00

# World Cup of fraud

Pressure grows on blatter as scandal engulfs football



**FIFA**



**Off stage as Middle East peace role founders**

...the 1970s, the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir were instrumental in the peace process. Sadat was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978 for his role in the 1978 peace accords. Meir was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her role in the 1978 peace accords.

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## Fifa Nostra

L'arrestation, mercredi en Suisse, de membres de la fédération internationale de football suscite le soupçon sur les méthodes employées, notamment dans l'attribution des Coupes du monde.

**Pages 2-3**

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# DER SPIEGEL



## KORRUPT

Das System Blatter

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Fillon veut laver son antisarkozysme en justice



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**Livres**  
 L'École des loisirs, jeune quinquagénaire de l'édition



Et toute l'actualité littéraire  
 CARNET CENTRAL

Un brin d'Espelette pour pimenter le couple  
 ...the 1970s, the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir were instrumental in the peace process. Sadat was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978 for his role in the 1978 peace accords. Meir was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her role in the 1978 peace accords.



**Poking fun at FIFA**  
 The FIFA scandal was the material for humorists of all kinds, including editorial cartoonists.

**Indicted and duped**  
 ...the 1970s, the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir were instrumental in the peace process. Sadat was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978 for his role in the 1978 peace accords. Meir was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her role in the 1978 peace accords.

## Chapter 4

# A MAFIA-LIKE SYSTEM – OR A VICTIM OF GREEDY INDIVIDUALS?

The air in the conference hall at the German Sport University Cologne was thick with tension. The audience at Play the Game 2011 had just heard the British investigative journalist Andrew Jennings explain how FIFA ticked all the boxes of an academic definition of organised crime – a mafia gang.

Then Walter de Gregorio raised his hand and asked for the microphone. As the newly appointed director of communications for FIFA, one of de Gregorio's first decisions was to register for Play the Game 2011 – the first FIFA employee to officially do so, while previous FIFA emissaries had appeared in disguise.

De Gregorio was not amused. Being of Italian descent, he knew what the real mafia was, he said. The mafia killed people, and it was disrespectful both to FIFA and the victims to make such a comparison.

Andrew Jennings was unimpressed: “Tell us how much you earn to defend the crooks at FIFA,” he fired back.

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*Shortly after FBI charged some FIFA-leaders with organised crime in 2015, The Mob Museum in Las Vegas put these media articles on display. Photo: Ethan Miller/Getty Images*

If FIFA had intended to reconcile with its antagonist No. 1, the mission failed. The loud discussion between Jennings and de Gregorio continued in the corridors, and there was no exchange of handshakes to seal any mutual respect.

The conflict mirrors a question that has been floating in the air for many years:

Is FIFA – or other similar sports federations – a corrupt system, a mafia? Or is it the complete opposite: A victim of corruption carried out by individual sports leaders?

Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”, and argues that corruption “erodes trust, weakens democracy, hampers economic development, and further exacerbates inequality, poverty, social division and the environmental crisis”. Transparency International adds that “exposing corruption and holding the corrupt to account can only happen if we understand the way corruption works and the systems that enable it.”

The abuse of entrusted power for private gain can happen, Transparency International points out, in “business, government, the courts, the media, and in civil society, as well as across all sectors from health and education to infrastructure and sport,” it can involve “politicians, government officials, public servants, businesspeople, and members of the public”, and it happens in the shadows “often with the help of professional enablers such as bankers, lawyers, accountants and real estate agents, opaque financial systems and anonymous shell companies that allow corruption schemes to flourish and the corrupt to launder and hide their illicit wealth.”

But to the British investigative journalist Andrew Jennings, who died in January 2022 at the age of 78 after having spent most of his life exposing corruption in many forms across different sectors, the definition of corruption was far less complex. When asked by his youngest children what he was doing for a living, Andrew Jennings simply told them: “I’m chasing the bad men.”

### **Mafia structures**

During his lifetime, Andrew Jennings chased more bad men in the world of sport than any other journalist. His work documented how sports leaders for decades have allowed corruption schemes of an enormous scale to flourish without holding the bad men to account. Often because some of the most powerful sports leaders were among the bad men themselves.

In the 1980s, Andrew Jennings was a crime reporter who investigated the Palermo mob in Italy and organised crime. Thanks to a tip from a contact who worked in sports marketing, the investigative journalist “stumbled across two perfect applications of mob structures”, as he liked to label the IOC and FIFA, and began to study the behaviour of the individuals and the companies that run world sport.



*Is the system corrupt or a victim of corruption? This question laid beneath a memorable clash in and outside the conference hall between reporter Andrew Jennings (left) and FIFA's communication director Walter de Gregorio at Play the Game 2011. Photo: Tine Harden/Play the Game*

In 1992, when Andrew Jennings and Vyv Simson published their book 'The Lords of the Rings' which dealt with abuse of entrusted power in the IOC, they weren't the first reporters to write about corruption in sport. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, fraudulent activities in the running of sports institutions and competitions have been documented from the times of the Ancient Olympic Games, just as match-fixing cases like the 1919 Black Sox scandal in US baseball and the 1980 Totonero scandal in Italian football have attracted considerable media attention and political scrutiny.

But the British bestseller was one of the first attempts to point out that Olympic corruption is a systemic problem at many levels of sport that needs international scrutiny because of the IOC's global power over Olympic sport.

Because, as Andrew Jennings said at a 1999 US Senate hearing on Olympic corruption, reports of corruption inside the IOC had circulated for decades, but no actions were taken. This hearing was arranged after US media exposure of the Olympic corruption scandal in Salt Lake City, Utah.

### **Family helps family**

In September 1997, The Salt Lake Weekly revealed that the Salt Lake City Organising Committee for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games helped finance scholarships at American universities for children of IOC members.

At first, the news story was met with silence from both the IOC and the public authorities. But one year later, in November 1998, the story became world news when the US TV station KTVX published a letter from Salt Lake City's Olympic boss Dave Johnson to Sonia Essomba, daughter of IOC member Rene Essomba of Cameroun.

The letter documented that Sonia Essomba's scholarship at the American University in Washington, representing a value of 108,000 US dollars, was paid by Salt Lake City's Olympic budget.

Although the organising committee admitted that other IOC members' children were also granted American university scholarships, Tom Welch, a former head of the committee, denied the allegations of corruption by saying "Family helps family" and "That is what the Olympic family is all about."

When the local radio reporter Howard Berkes at the National Public Radio heard Tom Welch's statement, he decided to investigate the matter.

On 9 December 1998, he called the Swiss Marc Hodler, the longest-serving IOC member, president of the International Skiing Federation (FIS) for 47 years, and co-author of the IOC code of conduct. Marc Hodler told the reporter that rumours of corruption had been circulating for years, especially in relation to African IOC members, but that until then he hadn't seen any evidence of the corruption.

Following the radio interview, the 80-year-old IOC member made newspaper headlines all over the world by estimating that 5 to 7 per cent of all IOC members would take bribes in exchange for their votes. The Swiss also declared that a certain amount of corruption had always been involved in IOC elections of Olympic host cities, especially for the Olympic Winter Games, adding that half of the IOC members were not really interested in winter sports, they just asked their wives where they wanted to spend the winter holidays every four years.



*The IOC was shaken in its foundation when the longest serving member, skiing president Marc Hodler, in 1998 confirmed media reports on Olympic corruption and estimated that 5 to 7 per cent of IOC members would take money for votes. Photo: Jay Ward/Allsport/Getty Images*



In the following months, several investigations of the ‘bad men’ inside the IOC were launched by an IOC commission led by IOC vice president Richard Pound, a US Olympic Committee panel led by the former US senator George Mitchell, the Board of Ethics of the Salt Lake City Organising Committee led by Gordon R. Hall, a former chief justice of the Utah Supreme Court, and the FBI. And the media launched its own investigations too.

### **Viagra and guns**

The media investigations documented that the Salt Lake City bribery of IOC members besides university scholarships included all kinds of lavish gifts from cash payments to medical care and Viagra pills. The media reports exposed that even the IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch had accepted expensive antique guns as gifts, but the Spaniard claimed that he had not kept the guns for himself. They were donated to the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.

In January 1999, when the preliminary findings of the Pound Commission were presented to the IOC Executive Board, the IOC president first tried to control the damage by admitting collective IOC responsibility. He also announced that a possible expulsion of corrupt IOC members was to take place at an extraordinary IOC session in March 1999 where an Olympic reform process would be introduced.

Prior to the session, suspected IOC members such as Pirjo Häggmann of Finland, Bashir Mohamed Attarabulsi of Libya, and Charles Mukora of Kenya, all retired voluntarily. When he opened the session, IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch described it as “the most important” in IOC history, adding that the IOC must root out “all forms of inappropriate or unethical behaviour among our membership” and take the necessary steps to be certain that “this very sad episode” never happens again.

“It is my firm conviction that, unless we act quickly, decisively, and unanimously, the damage which may be done to the Olympic movement and to the IOC as a result of recent disclosures will be very, very serious,” the Spaniard said.

At the session, the IOC then decided to expel six members based on the Pound Commission’s recommendations. Agustin Arroyo of Ecuador, Zein El Abdin Ahmed Abdel Gadir of Sudan, Jean-Claude Ganga of the Congo Republic, Lamine Keita of Mali, Sergio Santander of Chile, and Paul Wallwork of Samoa were the first ‘bad men’ to be kicked out of the IOC for corruption in 105 years.

Other IOC members had been investigated too but were given only warnings. These included Philip Coles of Australia, Louis Guirandou-N'Diaye of The Ivory Coast, Willi Kaltschmitt Lujan of Guatemala, Kim Un-Young of South Korea, Shagdarjav Magvan of Mongolia, Anani Matthia of Togo, Vitaly Smirnov of Russia, and Mohamed Zerguini of Algeria.

The Salt Lake City scandal shook the world and became an international media scandal. Only two years later, Tom Welch, a former Mormon bishop who led the American bid for the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City accused the IOC of turning a blind eye



*Not only the closing ceremony of the 2002 Winter Olympics was colourful. The bidding process provoked public outrage and political turmoil, when it was revealed that the host Salt Lake City had bribed IOC members to secure to secure the hosting of the games. Photo: Smiley N. Pool/Houston Chronicle/Getty Images.*

to Olympic corruption. In an exclusive interview with the Observer Sport Monthly in January 2002, Tom Welch alleged that as many as 100 out of 126 IOC members accepted lavish hospitality and gifts.

“If what those expelled members did was wrong and everyone else on the IOC was to be judged by the same standards, then probably 80 per cent should have been kicked

out,” Tom Welch said, stating that those were the people who were “imposing themselves on you, asking for things and pushing for lavish hospitality”, expecting to be treated “like lords”.

In the interview, both Tom Welch and David Johnson, his former colleague on the bid committee, said they were just doing what other cities in the Olympic bid process had been doing for years.

“There were 12 cities lobbying for the same hundred people. We found out that, within the window of just one year, a total of 100 million US dollars was spent on those people. Salt Lake City was not alone in what it did,” David Johnson said, while Tom Welch acknowledged that they broke the IOC rules:

“Sure, you violated the IOC guidelines, but otherwise it would be like playing a game of basketball when the other side is allowed to hand-check (foul) and you are out. That would be an unfair disadvantage.”

## 50 IOC reforms

And there were indeed questions raised in other countries. According to Japanese media reports, Nagano spent an average of 22,000 US dollars on 62 IOC members who visited the city prior to the



*Following his dismissal from FIFA, Michel Zen-Ruffinen shared experiences from a career in sports governance at Play the Game 2005 in Copenhagen. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

vote that secured its hosting of the 1998 Olympic Winter Games. But the Japanese bid committee claimed it had destroyed all records of the bid which prevented further investigations of the allegations.

An investigation of the Sydney bid for the 2000 Olympics produced by Tom Sheridan, a former auditor general for Australia, mentioned several breaches of guidelines related to gift giving to IOC members, including trips to European sporting events given to IOC member Niels Holst-Sørensen of Denmark and Kevin O’Flanagan of Ireland. But the Sheridan Report was accused by Australian media of being too soft on the bid committee.

Nevertheless, the numerous investigations of Olympic corruption indicated that the abuse by IOC members of their entrusted power for private gain had been a part of the Olympic culture at least since the 1980s when lucrative sponsor and television contracts rescued the IOC from bankruptcy and made the Olympic Games a profitable global business. The investigations resulted in two new IOC commissions: the Ethics Commission and the IOC 2000 Commission.

The Ethics Commission was given the task of overseeing the selection process of future host cities. The IOC 2000 Commission was responsible for reforming the structure of the Olympic Movement to prevent new ethical breaches. The Ethics Commission produced an IOC Code of Ethics, and the IOC 2000 Commission made 50 recommendations to reform the IOC which were approved at an IOC session in December 1999 and led to a major re-writing of the Olympic Charter.

However, the IOC Ethics Commission has never acquired operational independence and today still depends on decisions from the top of the IOC. And the reforms did not put an end to corruption in the Olympic family.

### **A whistleblower at FIFA’s top**

A few years later, in May 2002, FIFA general secretary Michel Zen-Ruffinen presented an explosive confidential report to the members of FIFA’s Executive Committee. The report made Michel Zen-Ruffinen one of the highest-ranking whistleblowers in sport.

On the eve of FIFA’s 2002 presidential election, the report alleged that Sepp Blatter, FIFA president since 1998 and an IOC member, ran the international football association like a dictator allowing widespread corruption and mismanagement of FIFA funds to flourish to ensure continued support from national football leaders around the world.

Michel Zen-Ruffinen highlighted in detail the relationship between Sepp Blatter and Jack Warner of Trinidad and Tobago, a FIFA vice president and president of 35 football nations in the North and Central American and Caribbean Football Association CONCACAF. According to Zen-Ruffinen, Sepp Blatter had “constantly taken decisions which are favourable to the economic interests of Jack Warner and some of his family members, and thus are contrary to the financial interests of FIFA.”



*The Brazilian football president Ricardo Teixeira was long known to be among the most greedy bribe takers at FIFA where he had a seat on the Executive Committee. Here he is nevertheless embraced by the then FIFA secretary general Jérôme Valcke during an inspection visit to Brazil in 2010. Photo: Buda Mendes/LatinContent/Getty Images*

Although 11 of FIFA's 24 Executive Committee members asked the Swiss police to investigate the allegations, the Swiss prosecutor Urs Hubmann dismissed the case in December 2002, saying that asking for an investigation of the allegations was certainly justified but that he couldn't justify bringing the case to court because of insufficient evidence against Sepp Blatter.

But by then, the Swiss FIFA president and IOC member was already involved in another Swiss court case. Even though the case didn't deal with corruption, because corruption was not a criminal offence in Switzerland at the time, the case turned out to reveal the largest corruption system ever seen in sport.

It started in May 2001 when the Swiss sports marketing company International Sport and Leisure (ISL), established in 1982 by former Adidas owner Horst Dassler, went into liquidation owing more than 450 million euro to creditors.

The collapse of the Lucerne-based company which for three decades had been the most important marketing partner for sport with multi-billion-dollar contracts from the IOC, FIFA, IAAF, and other federations, was enough to attract the attention of three particularly observant journalists.

### **Asking for black money back**

When FIFA shortly after the ISL collapse brought forward a criminal complaint against the executives of the company, Andrew Jennings began to investigate the case in cooperation with the two German journalists, Jens Weinreich and Thomas Kistner.

By then, the two Germans had already published exclusive documents illustrating how the ISL had been able to secure some of the largest TV and sponsor deals at the time for the FIFA World Cup 2002 and 2006. Six weeks after the ISL collapse, the three journalists knew they were heading in the right direction when Andrew Jennings at the first creditor's meeting in Zug asked the ISL liquidator Thomas Bauer if any evidence of black money was found.

"Yes, I have sent legal letters asking for it back," Bauer confirmed.

In 2002, Thomas Bauer wrote to several football officials and threatened to sue them if they didn't return the black money that ISL had paid them in exchange for television and marketing contracts.

And one year later, the ISL liquidator opened civil complaints against approximately 20 sports officials, only to withdraw them again in 2004 when 2,5 million Swiss francs were transferred to the liquidator's account.

Yet, it took years before the journalists were able to publish the real scale of the corruption. As bribery was not a crime at the time, the names involved in the case were kept secret by the court.

In order to put a lid on the case, FIFA tried in 2004 to withdraw its criminal complaint against the former ISL executives, but Thomas Hildebrand, the magistrate in charge, went on investigating the case for four more years.

When the Swiss journalist Jean Francois Tanda reported in 2005 that a judgement by the Swiss Federal Court mentioned bribes, FIFA, and Sepp Blatter's personal lawyer Peter Nobel, it became clear that the FIFA president somehow was involved in the case.

A turning point came in March 2008, when six former executives of ISL and its parent group ISMM went on trial in the Swiss canton of Zug.

Jennings, Kistner and Weinreich were among the few journalists in court and could hardly believe what they heard. The top leaders confirmed that ISL paid at least 138 million Swiss francs (later confirmed as at least 142 million Swiss francs, more than 100 million US dollars) between 1989 and 2001.

Although the six executives denied charges of fraud, embezzlement, fraudulent bankruptcy, damaging creditors, and falsification of documents, three of them were found guilty in some of the charges when the court verdict in the case was published in July 2008.

### **The bagman**

The most important of them all was Jean-Marie Weber, an assistant to Horst Dassler and a longtime friend of Sepp Blatter. He was often referred to as The Bagman because he carried cash for sports leaders around the world in his suitcase.

Weber was fined for embezzlement. A discreet and friendly nobleman also to his critics, Weber was later ostracized by the IOC. He never sought revenge and took his secrets about many top leaders in world sport with him to his grave in 2018.

The Swiss court also ordered FIFA to pay 118,000 Swiss francs in costs for lodging the criminal complaint that sparked the fraud inquiry in 2001. But except for Nicolás Leoz of Paraguay, the president of the South American football association CONMEBOL, the

court didn't reveal any names of the sports leaders who got rich from the corruption scheme.

In a presentation of the ISL bribery system that Jens Weinreich gave in 2009 at Play the Game's sixth conference in the British city of Coventry, the German journalist noted that ISL held long-time contracts worth billions of dollars with FIFA and the IOC as well as a long list of other sports organisations in charge of football, athletics, basketball, swimming, auto racing, and tennis and that the key for getting and holding these contracts was "a gigantic bribery system". But although Jens Weinreich had a list of some of the recipients of ISL payments, most of the involved sports leaders were still held secret.

"We can find individuals and companies. But it is only a small number of all recipients. We still don't know more than 80 per cent of the bribe takers," Jens Weinreich said and added that an investigation by his Swiss colleague Jean-François Tanda had revealed that a company named Renford Investments was among the recipients of ISL payments.

The company was owned by Ricardo Teixeira, president of the Brazilian Football Federation (CBF) and head of the organising committee for the World Cup 2014, and his former father-in-law João Havelange, FIFA president from 1974 to 1998 and an IOC member since 1963.

In 2010, Andrew Jennings also named IOC member and FIFA vice president Issa Hayatou of Cameroon among the ISL bribe takers in the BBC Panorama documentary 'FIFA's Dirty Secrets', which put more public pressure on FIFA to publish all names involved.

FIFA never gave in, but following legal action by Tanda, the federal court in Switzerland ordered the release of the documents in the ISL case. The documents confirmed that former FIFA president João Havelange and his former son-in-law Ricardo Teixeira together cashed in between 14 and 22 million Swiss francs in bribes from the ISL.

Even today, we do not know in which private pockets the majority of the ISL bribes ended up. And the media, in general, did not show much interest, neither before, during, or after the revelation of what many believed to be the greatest corruption scheme ever in sport.

Which turned out to be wrong.

### **The raid on the FIFA congress**

Most FIFA observers, even the most critical ones, were taken by surprise on 27 May 2015 when the FBI and the Swiss police raided the luxurious Baur au Lac Hotel in Zürich in the



early morning hours shortly before the FIFA congress. Seven FIFA officials were arrested and faced extradition to the US.

The raid was a result of FBI investigations that raised charges against more than 40 football and sports business leaders around the world and involved more than 150 million US dollars in bribes – an amount that would later be almost doubled.

Many of the football officials were later given prison sentences in court cases in the US.

The FBI investigation had begun in secret in 2009 when the numerous media reports, books, and documentaries on FIFA corruption led agents of the bureau to contact Andrew Jennings and ask for his help in documenting possible US-related football crimes.

The FBI and the IRS placed Chuck Blazer, executive vice president of US Soccer and secretary general of CONCACAF, the North American and Caribbean Football Confederation, at the centre of the investigation. The authorities had gathered so much evidence of Chuck Blazer's unpaid taxes and hidden incomes from football that they were able to persuade him to help investigate other football officials as an undercover informant.

In the hope of avoiding a serious charge of racketeering, which could put him in prison for decades, Chuck Blazer pleaded guilty to money laundering, wire fraud, and tax crimes. In exchange, he agreed to secretly record meetings with FIFA executives and hand over the recordings to the FBI. At the London 2012 Olympics for instance, Blazer placed a keyhanger with a built-in microphone on the table when meeting his peers.

While Chuck Blazer was working as an undercover informant for the FBI, the media reports of the bad men in world football escalated too, causing FIFA to launch several internal investigations. Ironically, one of them was kicked off by Chuck Blazer before he knew he himself was a target of an investigation.

In May 2011, Chuck Blazer initiated an investigation of corruption involving his long-standing collaborator and president in CONCACAF, FIFA vice president Jack Warner of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as Mohammed bin Hammam, a Qatari football administrator and president of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), who was running to replace the sitting FIFA president Sepp Blatter.

It was proven that Warner had arranged a meeting for Caribbean football presidents to which Mohammed bin Hammam had brought a suitcase with one million US dollars and distributed them generously. Both were suspended by FIFA and later given lifetime bans from football.



*At the FIFA Congress in 2011, Chuck Blazer was portrayed as a whistleblower revealing corruption among his peers. He was soon to face serious criminal charges himself by the FBI and IRS, and to reduce his penalty he decided to become an undercover informant. Photo: Julian Finney/Getty Images*

### **The kingmaker from Kuwait**

Although Sepp Blatter had been accused of corruption ever since he became FIFA president in 1998, the Swiss denied any wrongdoing and managed to avoid being arrested. Following the police raid in Zürich, he was re-elected FIFA president for a fourth time.

However, it took only a few days before Sepp Blatter on 2 June 2015 bowed to the pressure and announced he would resign and call an extraordinary FIFA congress to elect his successor.

But Blatter did not last that long. In September 2015, the Swiss attorney general launched a criminal investigation against him, and in December 2015, Sepp Blatter was banned from football for eight years by FIFA. The ban was later reduced to six years.

But there were more targets for the judiciary in the Olympic movement.

In 2017, following bribery allegations at the FIFA trials in the US, Sheikh Ahmad Al Fahad Al Sabah of Kuwait, a long-time member of both FIFA and the IOC, resigned from his football positions and later 'self-suspended' from his position in the IOC.



*A close relation that did not last – Sheikh Ahmad Al Sabah helped Thomas Bach become IOC president. The sheikh's shady manoeuvres were largely tolerated until July 2023. Photo: Mark Rummales/Getty Images*

The sheikh, known as ‘The Kingmaker’ thanks to his support for IOC president Thomas Bach’s election and that of many other influential sports leaders, was identified as a conspirator in the FIFA corruption case by Richard Lai, a FIFA official from Guam and a US citizen. Facing financial conspiracy charges in the US federal court, Richard Lai admitted to taking bribes from a Kuwaiti faction that wanted to buy influence and votes in Asian and world football.

In September 2021, the Associated Press revealed that the US embassy in Kuwait had made a formal request to local authorities to secure evidence of sports-related corruption against several Kuwaiti citizens, including Sheikh Al Sabah and Hussain al-Musallam, the president of swimming’s international governing body FINA and director general of the Olympic Council of Asia where the sheikh is president.

A few days later, the powerful sheikh, who was also the head of the Olympic Solidarity Foundation that distributes hundreds of million dollars, was found guilty of forgery by a Swiss court and sentenced to at least 13 months in prison in a spectacular case concerning the creation of fake videos to prove that two Kuwaiti government officials were guilty of coup-plotting and corruption.

Suspending himself from all important positions in sport did not stop the sheikh from peddling influence. He was active on the sideline of several important sports political events. After getting his brother, Sheikh Talal Fahad Al Ahmad Al-Sabah, elected OCA president in July 2023 in a narrow win over his former wingman Hussain Al-Mussalam, the IOC and Thomas Bach had enough and put a ban on the sheikh for three years.

This should prevent Al-Sabah from influencing the IOC’s own presidential election in 2025 when Thomas Bach’s last term is set to expire according to the Olympic Charter. However, Al-Sabah may not surrender. In his home country, he has made a comeback in 2023 as deputy prime minister and minister of defence.

From these positions, he has access to endless resources of the kind that has proved so effective in impacting international sport, where many remain loyal to a trusted Olympic partner for more than 30 years.



*It was a mystery to many how Qatar could win the right to host the FIFA World Cup, but since 2010 numerous corruption allegations have come up and paint a dubious picture of the process. Photo: Ulmer/vullstein bild/Getty Images*

### **The emir of Qatar**

So far, the Kuwaiti sheikh has denied any wrongdoing, and so has Qatar's Emir Tamim Bin-Hamad Al-Thani, an IOC member since 2002. Ever since the FIFA World Cup vote in December 2010, the Emir has been suspected of bribing members of FIFA's executive committee to secure Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup. But in April 2020, the US Department of Justice for the first time made formal allegations regarding both the 2022 World Cup and the 2018 World Cup hosted by Russia.

According to the US prosecutors, representatives working for Qatar and Russia bribed FIFA members who took part in the 2010 vote. The indictment stated that at least three South American members of FIFA's executive committee, including Ricardo Teixeira of Brazil and Nicolas Leoz of Paraguay, took bribes to vote for Qatar, and that former FIFA vice president Jack Warner of Trinidad and Tobago was paid 5 million US dollars through various shell companies to vote for Russia.

The whistleblower Phaedra Almajid, a former employee at the Qatar bid for the World Cup, alleged in 2011 that African FIFA officials were paid 1.5 million US dollars by Qatar in exchange for their votes, but later she withdrew her claims stating they were fabricated because she was fired from the bid team.

However, many suspected her withdrawal was made under pressure, and in a Netflix documentary 'FIFA Uncovered' from 2022, she repeated that she witnessed bribes being paid from Qatari officials to African football officials.

But in 2014, several media reports indicated that the Qatari Mohammed bin Hammam, then president of the Asian Football Federation, had paid more than 5 million US dollars to FIFA officials to secure Qatar's bid. In 2019, the Australian whistleblower Bonita Merisiades, a former employee at Australia's 2022 World Cup bid, claimed that Qatar's state-run media company Al Jazeera secretly agreed to pay FIFA an extra broadcasting bonus of 100 million US dollars if Qatar won the 2010 vote.

Leaked documents obtained by The Sunday Times confirmed the existence of such a contract, alleging that the total amount offered by Qatar to FIFA – including the bonus – was 880 million US dollars.

### **Qatar denied the allegations**

In June 2019, the former FIFA executive member and UEFA president Michel Platini, who voted for Qatar, was detained by the police in an ongoing French investigation and questioned about a lunch that he had on 23 October 2010, less than two weeks prior to the FIFA vote at the French Presidential Palace L'Elysée, with the then president Nicolas Sarkozy and Qatar's then Crown Prince (now Emir), Tamim Bin-Hamad Al-Thani.

When the lunch became public knowledge, Sepp Blatter stated that Michel Platini after the lunch told him that he would change his FIFA vote from the US to Qatar. But even



*Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy (left) secured the Qatari takeover of Paris Saint-Germain by convincing UEFA President Michel Platini to vote for Qatar. Here Sarkozy is on the home turf whispering to Paris Saint-Germain's Qatari president Nasser Al-Khelaifi who wields much power in European football.*

Photo: Mustafa Yalcin/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

though Michel Platini said he knew that Nicolas Sarkozy wanted the people from Qatar to buy his favourite football club, Paris Saint-Germain, because the club was in decline and had financial difficulties, the former French football star denied that he changed his mind because of the lunch.

“I understood that Sarkozy supported the candidature of Qatar. But he never asked me to vote for Russia. He knows my personality. I always vote for what is good for football. Not for myself, not for France,” Michael Platini told *The Guardian* in 2013.

Nevertheless, in 2011, one year after the controversial FIFA vote, Qatar bought Paris Saint-Germain and 50 French aeroplanes made by the Airbus factory in Toulouse. Al Jazeera spent hundreds of millions of euro on football rights deals in France. And one year later, Michel Platini's son, Laurent, joined the Qatar sportswear company Burda, owned by Qatar Sports Investments, as the chief executive.

Michel Platini and Sepp Blatter are banned from football by FIFA because of a case of corruption involving a FIFA payment of 2 million Swiss francs to Michel Platini in 2011, at a point in time when Platini was expected to challenge Blatter at the FIFA presidential elections. The two claim, however, that the payment concerns work that Michel Platini carried out for Sepp Blatter between 1998 and 2002 during Blatter's first period as FIFA president.

In July 2022, following a Swiss criminal investigation that was opened in 2015 after Sepp

Blatter stepped down as president of FIFA, both men were cleared of fraud in a Swiss court, but the decision was appealed by federal prosecutors and the case is still pending.

### **The KGB agents**

Russia, the 2018 FIFA World Cup host, has been accused of sports corruption ever since the country was a part of the Soviet Union. Many of the allegations are centred around Vitaly Smirnov, a Russian minister of sports from 1981 to 1990 and an IOC member from 1971 to 2015, who also has a past as president of the Russian Olympic Committee and head of the organising committee for the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980.

The Russian historian Yuri Felshtinsky and the former KGB agent Vladimir Popov published two books in 2008 and 2009, 'The Corporation: Russia and the KGB in the Age of President Putin' and 'The KGB Plays Chess', where they stated that the former IOC president Samaranch was recruited as a KGB agent in the late 1970s when serving as the Spanish ambassador to Russia. They also named Vitaly Smirnov as a KGB agent.

During the Salt Lake City scandal, Vitaly Smirnov was given a warning by the IOC following allegations that he arranged for a former Russian ice hockey player to receive free medical care at a Salt Lake City hospital, that he received a Browning rifle as a gift exceeding the allowed limit, and that he helped a Russian student to obtain a scholarship from the Salt Lake City Bid Committee to the University of Utah.

In 2007, when Russia won the right to host the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi in 2014, Vitaly Smirnov allegedly also played a role in the bid process that has been suspected of being corrupt ever since. For decades, the German investigative journalist Jens Weinreich has tried to interview Vitaly Smirnov about the allegations, but the Russian has denied answering questions about his more than 50 years in Russian sports politics.

When FIFA asked US lawyer Michael Garcia in 2012 to investigate the successful Russian World Cup bid, the Russians declared they would cooperate. However, all the computers used in the process had been externally leased and delivered back, and all data was erased.

When Russia was accused in 2020 by the US Department of Justice of being involved in the FIFA World Cup corruption case, Alexei Sorokin, the CEO of the organising committee for Russia's 2018 World Cup, stated:



“This is only an opinion of lawyers. We have repeatedly said that our bid was transparent. At the time we answered all questions, including from the investigation branch of FIFA and from the media, we handed over all needed documents. We have nothing to add to this and we will not respond to attempts to cast a shadow on our bid.”



*Carlos Nuzman (with sunglasses), IOC member and head of the Rio 2016 Games, was sentenced to more than 30 years in jail for corruption related to the bidding process. Here police escorts Nuzman to an interrogation.*

*Photo: Fabio Teixeira/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

## **Operation Unfair Play**

The many recent cases of corruption involving FIFA could indicate that the public interest in investigating corruption in sport for the past decade has been limited to football. But parallel to the FIFA investigations, the abuse of entrusted power for private gain has been exposed across many sports, involving sports leaders in boxing, volleyball, weightlifting, swimming, and others.

And 25 years after the Salt Lake City scandal, corruption still seems to flourish at the highest level in the Olympic Movement. In November 2021, Carlos Nuzman, a former IOC member and president of the Brazilian Olympic Committee, was sentenced to 30 years and 11 months in jail for buying IOC votes to secure Rio de Janeiro's hosting of the 2016 Olympic Games. In a federal court in Rio de Janeiro, Carlos Nuzman was found guilty of corruption, money laundering and tax evasion. At the trial, former Rio de Janeiro governor Sergio Cabral and Leonardo Gryner, a former director general of the Rio Games, were also sentenced to prison.

One year after the Rio Games, Carlos Nuzman was arrested in October 2017 as part of an investigation called 'Operation Unfair Play'. The operation was launched after the French newspaper Le Monde investigated former IAAF president Lamine Diack and his son Papa Massata Diack's involvement in the Russian case of state-sponsored doping and came across another story. Le Monde alleged that IOC members including Lamine Diack had been bribed a few days prior to the Olympic host city vote at the IOC session in Copenhagen in 2009 when Rio de Janeiro beat Tokyo, Madrid, and Chicago.

Already serving a 200-year prison sentence for fraud and corruption, Sergio Cabral told the Brazilian criminal judge Marcelo Bretas that the bribery scheme to bring the Olympic Games to South America for the first time in history was set up by Carlos Nuzman and Papa Massata Diack, and that he was approached by Carlos Nuzman a few months before the IOC vote was to take place in Copenhagen.

"Nuzman came to me and said: Sergio, I want to tell you that the IAAF president, Lamine Diack, is a person that is open to undue advantages. He can secure five or six votes. In exchange, he wants 1.5 million dollars."

## **16 kilos of gold**

The former Brazilian governor said he then paid 2 million US dollars in exchange for up to six votes for Rio de Janeiro, adding that he later paid Papa Massata Diack another 500,000 US dollars to secure three more votes and that the money came from a debt owed to him by the Brazilian businessman Arthur Soares known as ‘King Arthur’.

According to Sergio Cabral’s testimony, both the then Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and then Rio de Janeiro mayor, Eduardo Paes, were aware of the Olympic bribes, but neither of them were directly involved in the scheme.

Sergio Cabral also named the Ukrainian IOC member Sergey Bubka and the Russian IOC member Aleksandr Popov among those who received the Brazilian bribes. The two former Olympic athletes have denied the allegations, but a third Olympic athlete and IOC member, Frank Fredericks of Namibia, has been charged in the French part of the case.

According to Marcelo Bretas, the former volleyball player and Olympic athlete, Carlos Nuzman, was “the main creator of the illicit scheme”. Carlos Nuzman had been “taking advantage of the high position achieved over 22 years as president of the Brazilian Olympic Committee”, and that’s why “his conduct must be valued more rigorously than that of any corrupt person,” the judge said.

“The convict dedicated his public career to making Rio de Janeiro the host city for the Olympic Games, however, despite such social responsibility, he chose to act against morality and public property,” Marcelo Bretas noted.

During the investigation, the Brazilian police found that Carlos Nuzman had hidden and concealed the origin and ownership of 16 kilos of gold worth 270,000 US dollars in a safe in Switzerland. But it was his dirty deals with the Diack family that brought the Brazilian to a fall and led to the opening of new public investigations of Olympic corruption in other countries, too. So far, the Diack family has been linked to corruption involving Tokyo’s bid to host the 2020 Olympic Games.

Overall, the recent examples of Olympic bribes indicate a culture of corruption in the Olympic Movement that except for the rising costs of IOC bribes hasn’t changed much since the Salt Lake City corruption scandal 25 years ago.

## **The first UN report**

In December 2021, the culture of corruption in sport led the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to release the first-ever UN global report on the ‘bad men’ in sport who abuse their entrusted power for private gain. With references to many of the cases of corruption highlighted above, the report ‘Evolutions in Sport Related to Corruption’ concluded:

“The risk of corruption has grown alongside the globalization of sport. While the evolution of sport has been positive in many respects, it has also brought with it complex corruption risks that combine general risks, common to many different sectors, with sport-specific risks. For example, the Bochum match-fixing scandal included criminal infiltration of a football club, money laundering and competition manipulation.”

But although the Salt Lake City scandal 25 years ago documented the need for more public scrutiny of Olympic sport, and the many well-documented cases of FIFA corruption since then have confirmed the need for better public control over sport, the UN report also concluded:

“Public authorities have only recently displayed interest in regulating against corruption in sport. The strategy of infiltrating organisations used by organised criminal groups to target sports entities poses a threat that States can no longer ignore. But corruption in sport cannot be considered as a purely exogenous threat. What has also attracted public scrutiny is the reach, scale, and complexity of criminal networks within sport. Because these networks involve influential sport actors and institutions, because they stem from internal governance and compliance shortcomings, and because they undermine the trust in the sector, corruption in sport has become a subject of public interest.”

A quarter of a century after the Salt Lake City scandal, the UN had joined the game.



## ISL: The (once) biggest corruption scheme in sport

*Since the 2000 conference, journalists like Andrew Jennings, Thomas Kistner, and Ezequiel Fernández Moores have documented the widespread corruption in and around sport, especially in FIFA. The response from the Olympic family was denial, threats, or silence. But by the end of the first decade of the century, cracks in the glossy picture of sports business began to spread.*

*At Play the Game 2009 in Coventry, UK, German investigative journalist Jens Weinreich described the systemic corruption organised by the most powerful sports marketing company to benefit some of the most powerful people in sport. This was documented in a Swiss court case in March 2008, when directors of the International Sport and Leisure (ISL) company were charged with embezzlement and other types of financial crime. The directors were not charged with corruption for reasons explained below. So they were free to give testimonies and confirm evidence of what was at the time the biggest corruption scheme in Olympic sport. This is part of Jens Weinreich's speech in 2009:*

This is the verdict – 179 pages. The charge was 228 pages. The problem is ironic:

According to Swiss law, I am not allowed to show you all the details of these documents. On the other hand: According to Swiss law it was allowed to pay at least 138 million CHF to high-ranking sports officials.

In legal terms: bribery was not a crime in Switzerland at that time.

The ISL system of paying sports officials was worked out – as it came out during the court hearings – together with KPMG, some of the most famous law firms in Zurich and was officially permitted by the Swiss Tax Authorities. [...]

An impressive number of sports officials and assistants, who have worked for Horst Dassler, for Adidas and the ISL company, and who were created and brought into their positions by the visionary Dassler, are still in their positions in the Olympic world: as presidents of international federations, as IOC members, as so-called consultants, or – much clearer – as bagmen. One of Dassler's closest assistants was Jean-Marie Weber. The French-born Weber was always described as The Bagman.

What we got to know at last during the trial in the spring of 2008: Jean-Marie Weber was the man who paid at least 138 million CHF to high-ranking sports officials in the Olympic world between 1989 and 2001.



Photo: Jens Astrup/Play the Game

After Dassler's early death in 1987, Weber became one of the top managers of the ISL group. The group was united under the ISMM umbrella in 2001 when the marketing giant collapsed because of mismanagement, greed and megalomania. It was the second biggest collapse in Swiss economy after the Swiss Air crash.

Jean-Marie Weber was always the bagman – until the bitter end. But it took decades to prove that description. It is now proven. It is now documented in several court files. [...]

Here are some important questions – and preliminary answers:

Who got the money – the *Schmiergeld*, as they used to say in the German-speaking part of Switzerland?

Only Jean-Marie Weber knows who got it.

How much money did ISL pay in the 1980s? One can only estimate it.

How much money was really paid to sports officials over more than 20 years – not only over a period of 12 years? One can just estimate it.

How much money have ISL's opponents paid all those other marketing companies in the huge market? Same answer: One can only estimate it.

How did the international federations, how did the IOC, how did the so-called Ethics Commissions react after the ISL trial?

Short answer: There was no action at all. I have asked several senior officials. I do not know any reaction which I have to take seriously. No investigations at all. [...]

### **Who got the money?**

One important question: Who got the money? The answer is simple: Senior officials of the contractual partners of ISL.

Five of the defendants claimed they had no idea who got bribes. They claimed fellow director Jean-Marie Weber organised the payments. He laundered them through foundations in tax heavens and a British Virgin Islands company (and many others), which distributed the money to companies and individuals. Most of the money was given in cash. [...]

Weber has always refused to identify recipients, telling the Swiss court authorities: These payments were confidential, and I must respect that confidentiality. [...]

Christoph Malms, former chief executive, said that after joining ISL in the 1990s he was shocked to discover the business was built on bribes.

“I was told the company would not have existed if it had not made such payments,” Malms testified.

“I was always told they went to well-known decision-makers in the world of sports politics.”

Malms said kickbacks were usual in the sports marketing and sports political business worldwide. It was the style of the business. They have used terms like “provisions”, “finder fees” or even “salaries”.

Hans-Juerg Schmid, former head of finances, said during the court hearing:

“If we hadn’t made the payments, the other parties wouldn’t have signed the contracts.”

“It was like paying salaries. Otherwise [high-ranking sports officials] would have stopped working immediately!”

“The other side doesn’t want to be named, that is the very sensitive aspect of this business.”

During the hearing, Malms’ lawyer Werner Würgler desperately attacked two FIFA presidents and IOC members: Blatter and Havelange.

Würgler claimed that Joseph Blatter, back then general secretary and now president, had approached his client Malms and told him that if ISL wanted to keep FIFA’s business, Jean-Marie Weber would have to stay in his positions in the company. If not, “it would be bad for ISL.” Würgler also said that during the World Cup in France in 1998 the outgoing president João Havelange made the same demand.

Würgler described the situation as follows: Anybody at FIFA who knew about the bribes and who was getting *Schmiergeld* could exercise great power over fellow officials. Würgler said: ISL became a private source of money for FIFA officials, virtually something like their private bank.

There are numerous well-documented, strange operations within FIFA.

In their decision, the three judges in Zug stated that FIFA “knew more than they told investigators”, that the behaviour of FIFA officials “were not always in good faith”, and that some of their claims “were not credible”. [...]

### **Payments were lawful**

In the ISL case, FIFA was ordered to pay a part of the trial costs, despite claiming not to have misled the authorities.

We have got astonishing documentation of a huge bribery system. Some experts are saying: This is the biggest bribery system in Olympic sports ever. But nobody in the sporting world has taken any action. Not even against senior officials who were mentioned in the court documents.

Who should have taken action: Sepp Blatter? Havelange? IOC president Jacques Rogge?

By the way: Have I mentioned that Jean-Marie is still a member of the family? He is working with IOC members like Lamine Diack (president of the IAAF) and Issa Hayatou (vice president of FIFA and president of CAF).

As I said before: From a strictly juridical point of view, the ISL payments were in accordance with the former Swiss law. But the payments were never in accordance with the rules of sports federations and organisations.

Olympic sports organisations are always arguing that their moral and ethical rules have to be much higher and harder than other rules. The ISL bribery case appears to be a strange example of the extremely high standard in the Olympic family.

*Full text at [www.jensweinreich.de](http://www.jensweinreich.de). Jean-Marie Weber died in 2018 and never revealed his secrets. Lamine Diack died in 2021 while serving a prison sentence for corruption.*



## Sport needs a watchdog with teeth



*Experts in sports corruption would like to see more situations like this where the FBI raided the headquarters of CONCACAF in Miami Beach, Florida. Photo: Joe Skipper/Getty Images*

“If we do not act on sports corruption, sports leaders may soon say with nostalgia to each other: Do you remember the time when it was doping that undermined our values... yes, those were happy days!”

These words fell in September 2006, when Play the Game was invited to speak at a high-level conference for the first time. At the ‘Play Fair with Sport’ conference in Strasbourg, organised by the Council of Europe and UEFA, Play the Game’s international director Jens Sejer Andersen pointed to a growing number of cases of match-fixing, crime and corruption in sport.

“Every day it becomes increasingly clear that corruption in sport is not only a matter of individual greed but closely related to the way the entire sports system functions,” Andersen said and proposed an international agency to coordinate the fight against all forms of crime and corruption in sport.

The proposal was met with a deafening silence at the conference, and over the years the idea has mostly faced resistance among sports leaders and public officials alike.

However, when a panel on such an integrity agency discussed the proposal 16 years later at Play the Game 2022, the tone was impatient. Experts in the panel and among the audience almost demanded that Play the Game should take action.

As one of the experts put it: “A systemic failure requires a system change.”

“We cannot wait for public organisations or sports organisations to do it,” said Drago Kos, chairman of the OECD Working Group on Bribery.

“I see that Play the Game is the environment where this could happen. We need to develop a first draft to convince governments. I am absolutely convinced we can do it.”

Inspired by that call, Play the Game allied itself with German investigative journalist Grit Hartmann who had already produced the report ‘Red Card for Corruption in Sports’ on behalf of the German member of the European Parliament, Viola von Cramon (Green Party).

In early 2023, Play the Game sent out a questionnaire to 251 of the best minds dealing with sports politics – experts and stakeholders alike. This was only the first step in an open consultation process.

Play the Game did not ask whether such an agency was needed, but rather how its inception could be pushed forward and how it should be designed and set up to work effectively.

Play the Game asked mainly about:

- How an agency to hold individuals and organisations accountable and to protect the victims could be set up
- The best path towards a global regulator
- The mandate, governance, operational structure, and funding of such an agency

The responses far exceeded expectations: Nearly 200 people (four out of five) from 48 countries on all continents responded.

They provided a stunning 840+ comments, testifying to the expertise and commitment of those who are

affected by sports' transgressions on a daily basis, whether as athlete representatives, policymakers, public prosecutors, sports officials, academics, or journalists.

The report on the results entitled 'ClearingSport – towards an agency countering crime and protecting integrity in world sport' was published on [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org) exactly one year after the conference, in June 2023.

### **Wanting a watchdog with force**

The main finding of the survey was that a vast majority of respondents were not just in favour of an agency (although not everyone preferred the term 'agency'), but they want a particularly strong watchdog that not only barks but also has a strong bite.

This is illustrated, for example, by the by responses to a number of suggestions for the mandate of ClearingSport: How essential are certain capabilities/responsibilities of the agency considered to be?

In global sports where whistleblowers are mostly pushed back and top officials may not care about enforcing existing codes and rules (or breach them with impunity), it makes sense for respondents to put strong emphasis on the agency to function as platform for whistleblowers and provide a framework for source protection (88%).

Respondents also believed it is important that the agency has investigative powers (81%) and enforcement powers (87%) which they valued as highly as the ability to monitor code compliance (90%). Likewise, the

mandate to 'provide pathways for an effective remedy for victims' received over 80 per cent approval – another element that is almost entirely absent in the way sports deal with various forms of crime and integrity breaches.

### **Two models: With and without sport**

But the question of the mandate, strange as it may seem, can be regarded as secondary. The survey respondents were more concerned with another fundamental question:

To what extent should sports organisations be involved in an agency that deals with violations by officials, breaches of self-imposed rules and sports crime? Should they even be part of this agency at all?

Two agency models emerged throughout the comments: An intergovernmental agency or a stakeholder-legitimised agency.

The latter model relies on the participation of a range of stakeholders, reflecting sports' societal impact, and including independent athletes' associations as well as sports organisations. Proponents of this option also argue for maximum independence of the agency with no influence of sports governing bodies on executive decisions.

However, they note that "such an agency must have collaboration and support from the main global sports federations at the outset for any chance of success."

In contrast, the intergovernmental model is fuelled by a great deal of scepticism as to whether sports organisations should participate. Therefore, an agency set

up by a coalition of interested governments is suggested. This could be an European Union agency, though this approach is met with objection from respondents from other continents.

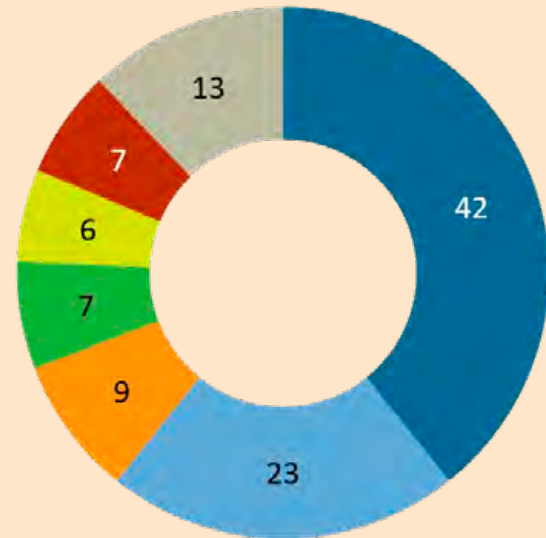
Governments involved would agree on a set of common sports crimes, harmonise legislation to criminally prosecute the offenders, possibly agree on cross-border jurisdiction, and mandate their national law enforcement agencies to cooperate with the agency.

The agency's mandate would be mainly limited to fighting sports-related crime, and by defining what constitutes sports crime, it would set standards for national sports federations, which could then be linked to public funding.

However, politicians would first have to recognise that signing declarations and non-binding partnership agreements only preserves the status quo in the interests of sports organisations (which often do not align with those of athletes or fans), and that national integrity bodies working only within frameworks of national legislation can hardly keep up with a globalised multi-billion-dollar business.

The two models are not entirely exclusive. The intergovernmental agency might be open at some point for sports federations to sign a code that is offered by the governments or, as it was put: "Provisions could be made for non-members to participate in and eventually join the coalition upon satisfying specified criteria."

**Primary occupation of respondents in Play the Game's survey**



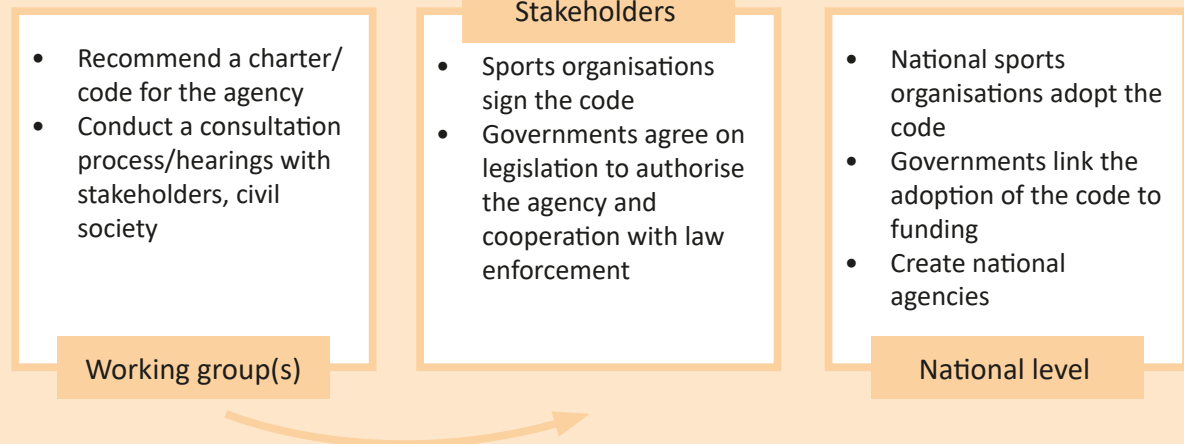
- Academics
- Sports
- Governments
- NGOs
- Investigators
- Consultants
- Journalists

*The survey had 198 participants, 102 non-anonymous, from 48 countries and five continents.*

### Intergovernmental model



### Stakeholder-legitimised model



*Two models prevail in the responses from the 200 experts, one that includes sport, athlete groups and other stakeholders, and one that is purely run by governments.*

## Independence is key

It is worth noting that many respondents to Play the Game's survey outlined "guiding principles" to determine the work of the agency: independence would be key, to be ensured by, among other things, skills-based, non-representative oversight bodies and executive.

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), perceived as dominated by sports federations, inspired numerous comments and reflections on how to irrevocably enshrine independence in the new agency – if not the intergovernmental model is preferred for this very reason.

Furthermore: The new agency should maintain a human rights-conscious approach, pay particular attention to victims and respect geographical and gender diversity throughout its own structure.

Although a survey obviously cannot provide a full recipe for combating all forms of misconduct or crime in and through sport, there are certainly good suggestions on the table now, including first ideas on funding. Many relevant as well as surprising questions were asked and need to be addressed.

To name just a few: Should a global regulator develop a full code of conduct and governance or instead – and at least for a start – focus on the enforcement of existing rules, be they sports regulations, civil or criminal law?

What framework for cooperation with law enforcement can be set? How can an agency be built up gradually? Should sports' sponsors or television rights holders play any role in it?

Certainly, the results of a survey- however profound and resourceful they are- cannot sway governments to change the rules of engagement and justify the public funds that are invested into sports by putting the "autonomy" of sport on a new footing.

Sports organisations, who have so far fought tooth and nail against independent oversight, will not be won over easily. But the time has certainly come where sports leaders should be nostalgic about the days when doping was the main threat to their credibility.

*"ClearingSport – towards an agency countering crime and protecting integrity in world sport" is available at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*



## Chapter 5

# THE SPORTING SIDE OF ORGANISED CRIME: GAMBLING AND FIXING

It is sometimes said that corruption is a victimless crime. Unfortunately, this was not the case for the journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale, a member of the investigative group Tiger Eyes. He was shot dead in the Ghanaian capital Accra in January 2019 following revelations of match-fixing in his home country.

Later that year, far away in Colorado Springs, USA, his colleague Anas Aremeyaw Anas entered the stage at Play the Game 2019 wearing a mask to conceal his identity. His team, Tiger Eyes, had conducted the investigation that ended the corrupt reign of the Ghana Football Association president Kwesi Nyantakyie.

“Football is supposed to unite us. But I knew that it was causing problems in society. When I took a closer look, I found that match-fixing was not a figment of anyone’s imagination. It was real. There are mafias out there,” said Anas Aremeyaw Anas.

“My team and I had to be very careful to ensure that the bad guys did not get to us. Unfortunately, one of my guys was not so lucky.”

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*The investigative journalist Anas Aremeyaw Anas appeared with a mask at Play the Game 2019 following the murder of a colleague after revelations of match-fixing in Ghanaian football. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



Corruption is certainly not a victimless crime, and even less so when organised crime infiltrates sport.

The victims come in many shapes and forms, as shown by the first-ever global report on corruption in sport from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2021. The report noted that when the credibility of sport is undermined by corruption scandals, the negative impact can be dramatic, including a decline in television audiences and attendance at stadiums, the withdrawal of sponsors and a reduction in the general interest in sport.

“Corruption in sport affects the financial health of federations, clubs and athletes, and erodes public trust in and saps the societal impact of sports activities. The educational and ethical values of sport and its capacity to foster positive social change depend on the exemplarity of sporting role models and the credibility of sporting institutions. Therefore, corruption in sport is a matter of public interest because countries invest in sport and rely on it to promote health, educative and social benefits,” the UNODC report ‘Evolutions in Sport related to Corruption’ stated.

In identifying major evolutions in sport integrity issues in recent decades, the report noted that the sports sector has undergone comprehensive changes.

Globalisation, a huge influx of money at the top level of professional sport, the rapid growth of legal and illegal sports betting and significant technological advances have transformed the way sport is played and consumed.

These factors, the report said, have also had a major impact on corruption in sport, both in terms of its scale and its form, and the role played by international organisations, governments, and sports bodies in combating this activity.

The report also highlighted that competition manipulation has become a significant problem. The role of organised crime groups in corruption in sport and the criminal infiltration of sports organisations stress the need to strengthen legislative and regulatory frameworks and tools.



*For a number of years, Declan Hill highlighted the threats from match-fixers at Play the Game conferences, while sport was very reluctant to act. Here the first presentation from 2005. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

The spotlight must also be put on sports administration and autonomy.

Pointing at possible responses to the evolution of corruption in sport, the UNODC suggests “implementation of the UN Convention against Corruption”, and the development of “comprehensive policies on anti-corruption in sport based on an assessment of the corruption risks faced”.

UNODC also proposes to establish bodies at the international organisation, government, and sports body levels “that have clear responsibility for the prevention, detection, investigation and sanctioning of corruption in sport, ensuring they have the necessary independence, training and resources required to carry out their functions effectively.”

### **Throwing the game**

When the UN Office on Drugs and Crime released its global report, independent investigative journalists and academic researchers had tried to raise public awareness of alarming global trends in match-fixing and illegal sports gambling for almost two decades.

These forms of corruption in sport have existed since the ancient Olympic Games, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw lots of scandals involving athletes throwing the game for money in football, boxing, cricket, wrestling, baseball, and other sports.

However, the evolution of global sports betting on the internet made match-fixing a much greater threat to sport than before, journalists and researchers warned at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One of the first to point out how crooks in sport and gambling profited from globalisation was Declan Hill, a Canadian academic and journalist researching match-fixing as part of his studies at Oxford University.

At Play the Game in 2005, the Canadian spoke in detail about the mechanisms of fixing a football match. He also showed that he had evidence, including confessions, phone conversations, and court testimonies, documenting that match-fixing was by no means a rare occurrence as claimed by then FIFA president Sepp Blatter.

Sepp Blatter characterised the case of the football referee Robert Hoyzer as a “one-off”.

The German referee was sentenced to 29 months in prison in 2005 for fixing German cup matches and matches in the second and third divisions.

But according to Declan Hill, match-fixing was widespread in many countries, and he cited a recent case in Turkish football involving an amount of 210,000 euro and a Malay-

sian case from the 1990s where 150 players were arrested for having fixed up to 90 per cent of the games in the national league.

At Play the Game's 2005 conference, another expert in the gaming and betting market, Warwick Bartlett, director of Global Gaming and Betting Consultants, pointed out that sport's governing bodies until then hadn't been fully aware of the presence of irregular betting patterns.

## **50 police raids**

The urgent need for action was further proven in 2006 by Play the Game when a review of articles published by international media during 2005 and early 2006 documented more than 25 cases of match-fixing allegations, police investigations and convictions in more than 20 countries across four continents. According to Play the Game, in most of these cases, match-fixers were aiming for the rapidly growing sums of betting money placed with internet bookmakers.

Two years later, Declan Hill published his first book on match-fixing titled 'The Fix'. The book revealed how a group of Asian match-fixers travelled the world approaching players and referees, trying to corrupt football matches at all levels. Yet, most sports leaders didn't really listen to the warnings until November 2009 when Europe was hit by its biggest-ever match-fixing case, the Bochum scandal.

The Bochum scandal implicated around 200 football matches across nine countries, with German police warning that the cases uncovered thus far were "only the tip of the iceberg."

15 people were arrested in Germany and two in Switzerland following more than 50 police raids across those two countries, Austria and Great Britain, during which cash and property worth more than 1 million euro was seized. At least 200 people, including 32 football players, were suspected of being involved in fixing matches.

Among the football matches believed to have been manipulated were three Champions League matches, 12 European League games, and one qualifying match for the European Under-21 Championship. At a press conference in Bochum, Germany, held by the police and UEFA officials, it was revealed that organised criminal gangs had influenced players, referees, coaches, and other match officials to make millions of euro on the betting markets.

"We at UEFA are stunned by the magnitude of this. We feel a certain satisfaction but on

the other side we are deeply affected by the scope of game manipulations by international gangs,” Peter Limacher, the head of UEFA’s disciplinary services, said after overseeing a new UEFA unit designed to target corruption and match-fixing by monitoring betting markets to detect suspicious patterns.

“UEFA will be demanding the harshest of sanctions before the competent courts for any individuals, clubs, or officials who are implicated in this malpractice, be it under state or sports jurisdiction,” UEFA’s then general secretary Gianni Infantino added.

### Organised crime syndicates

When four of the perpetrators charged in the Bochum case went on trial in October 2010, they were accused of paying players and referees 370,000 euro in bribes to fix the outcome of around 270 matches in Germany, Belgium, Slovenia, Hungary, Croatia, and Switzerland. According to the prosecutors, the four men won around 1.6 million euro by betting on the games.

In April 2011, three of the men were sentenced to prison for periods between three years and three years and 11 months. And in May 2011, the two leaders of the criminal gang, Ante Sapina and an accomplice known as Mario C., were also sentenced to prison for five years and six months each while a third accomplice, Dragan M., was given a suspended prison sentence of 18 months.

Ante Sapina had previously been found guilty in the match-fixing case involving the German referee Robert Hoyzer and sentenced to two years and 11 months in prison. During the Bochum trial, it was disclosed that he made a profit of 2.4 million euro on fixing football matches. Ante Sapina admitted influencing about 50 games, in-



*The 2005 revelations of how referee Robert Hoyzer (in yellow shirt) manipulated matches should have been a wake-up call for sport. But it took another five years before the international sports bodies recognised the gravity of the threat from match-fixing. Photo: Christof Koepsel/Bongarts/Getty Images*

cluding a Champions League game between the Hungarian club Debreceni VSC and Italy's Fiorentina and a World Cup qualifier between Liechtenstein and Finland in 2009.

The Bochum trial documented a scale of match-fixing in football that put pressure on FIFA to announce a plan to crack down on match-fixing and illegal betting.

A 20 million euro anti-corruption initiative was set up by FIFA and Interpol in 2011, including an anti-corruption centre placed in Singapore and a 10-year anti-corruption programme to educate players, referees, and officials. Many saw this as an attempt by FIFA to distract people from paying attention to the increasing number of corruption scandals in its own ranks.

"Potentially, it could be an excellent start to attacking corruption in football. These things seem very positive. The rest, sadly, is not," Declan Hill wrote in a Play the Game commentary, explaining:

"In FIFA's announcement about their new anti-corruption centre, there is no actual money being put aside for investigations or enforcement. Nor is there a mandate to investigate corruption inside FIFA. Without these things, the centre will largely be a sham."

Two years later, the European police agency Europol revealed that an 18-month-long investigation into match-fixing, Operation Veto, had uncovered more than 380 suspicious football matches in countries across Europe. Outside Europe, another 300 matches had been found suspicious.

"This is the work of a suspected organised crime syndicate based in Asia and operated with criminal networks around Europe. It is clear to us this is the biggest-ever investigation into suspected match-fixing in Europe. It has yielded major results which we think have uncovered a big problem for the integrity of football in Europe," Europol director Rob Wainwright said at a news conference in February 2013.

### **The Asian mastermind**

The Europol investigation involved 700 matches in 30 countries. A total of 425 suspects were identified, including match officials, club officials, players, and criminals across 15 countries.

50 people were arrested, but the alleged Asian mastermind behind the network, Singaporean businessman Dan Tan or Tan Seet Eng, as he is formally named, was still walking free.



*The Bochum trial documented how fixers operated in a multitude of countries and were able to corrupt even Champions League football matches. Photo: Vladimir Rys/Bongarts/Getty Images*

Dan Tan had been identified as head of the Singaporean match-fixing gang by his countryman Wilson Raj Perumal who was arrested in Finland in 2011 and sentenced to two years in prison following an investigation of the Finnish club Tampere United. After having served one year in prison, Wilson Raj Perumal was turned over to the authorities in Hungary for further investigations of his involvement in the global network of match-fixers.

At an Interpol and Asian Football Confederation (AFC) seminar on match-fixing held in Malaysia two weeks after Europol's announcement of the results of its investigations, FIFA declined to sanction the Singaporean FA for failing to extradite Dan Tan, who In-

terpol and the Italian police had issued an arrest warrant against, stating that it was above their jurisdiction.

“We have to bring in the governments because they have to change legislation and laws because a lot of countries do not have proper laws fighting match-fixing and corruption,” FIFA director of security Ralf Mutschke said.

A dramatic change in the authorities’ position came six months later when the Singaporean police arrested 14 people said to be part of a criminal gang involved in global football match-fixing, including Dan Tan.

The arrest came just days after the biggest Australian match-fixing scandal was announced in Melbourne. Australian police arrested nine players and a coach from the Southern Stars club suspected of being involved in a 2 million dollar match-fixing scheme with links to Wilson Raj Perumal.

In 2015, Dan Tan was released from prison on an appeal. But six days later he was re-arrested for “suspected involvement in criminal activities” and put in prison until the end of 2019 when he was released on a police supervision order that included conditions such as electronic tagging and weekly reporting to the police.

### **The Macolin Convention**

During Dan Tan’s six years in prison, his match-fixing ring was believed to have ceased operations in Singapore, but many other criminals tried to fix matches across Asia, Europe, Africa, North America, and South America. The police investigations of Dan Tan, Wilson Raj Perumal and other gang members based in Singapore and Malaysia made public authorities in many countries more aware of the risks of global match-fixing.

In July 2014, the 47 member states of the Council of Europe adopted a new convention on the manipulation of sports competitions named the Macolin Convention after the Swiss city where it was first signed. The convention committed the member states and sports organisations to raise their efforts in the fight against corruption in the sports arena and against illegal betting at a time when both appeared to be growing problems thanks to the explosive development of internet communication.

According to the Council of Europe, the purpose of the convention was to “prevent, detect, punish and discipline the manipulation of sports competitions, as well as enhance



*Not even an impressive amount of support from governments at the Council of Europe ministerial conference in Macolin in 2014 was enough to give a new international convention an easy start. Photo: Council of Europe*

the exchange of information and national and international cooperation between the public authorities concerned, and with sports organisations and sports betting operators.”

The new convention was immediately signed by 15 European ministers responsible for sport at a Council of Europe conference in September 2014.

However, to enter into force, a convention must not only be signed but also ratified – meaning that it gets the status of law – in at least five countries. And soon after the meeting in Macolin, Switzerland, the European Union blocked its progress.

Leading officials from the European Commission were convinced that ratifying the convention would demand a collective, unanimous decision by all 28 member states, but one country resisted: Malta. The small Mediterranean island state is a hub for international gambling companies which contribute 12 per cent to the country’s gross national product.

Malta disagreed that gambling companies should be sanctioned in the country where they offer their services, and insisted that any judicial process should take place in the company’s home country.

This opposition stalled the implementation of the Macolin Convention for years. But



even if the problem has not been solved by 2023, nine years after the first signing, some EU countries have decided to ignore the EU Commission and ratify the convention.

By autumn 2023, the convention was ratified by France, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, the Republic of Moldova, Switzerland and Ukraine. 32 other European countries had signed the convention, as well as Australia and Morocco.

### **Liberalisation increases risks**

At the Play the Game conference in 2015, Alex Inglot, communications director at the gambling data and security company Sportradar, said match-fixing had undergone a radical revolution in tandem with mainstream betting, and that the liberalisation of the global gambling industry presented greater opportunities for the match-fixers.

Online betting, live streaming, and an explosion in data availability and betting formats all served to increase gambling's popularity, but according to Stanislas Frossard, executive secretary at the Council of Europe, most nations did not have specific laws related to match-fixing.

The latest big country to embrace the liberalisation of gambling is the US, where match-fixing was a problem even before the gambling market was opened.

This was confirmed at Play the Game 2015 by Nicholas Cheviron, a supervisor and special agent with the FBI, who oversaw sports bribery and match-fixing investigations. To the FBI agent, match-fixing was a greater problem in Asia and Europe than it was in the US because his nation had fewer professional leagues, and the players were generally well-paid.

But Nicholas Cheviron also added that college games sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association are far less lucrative for players and therefore more prone to fixing.

Furthermore, he said, a recent study had found that 57 per cent of male college students in the US admitted to gambling. Thousands of gambling websites generated millions of dollars for organised crime, and the FBI's investigations into illegal sports betting often revealed match-fixing too. Since a federal ban on sports gambling in the US was lifted in May 2018, problems are expected to grow.

The new legal status of sports gambling in the US was discussed at Play the Game's first conference held in the US. At the 2019 conference in Colorado Springs, Declan Hill

argued that legalising sports gambling in the US could trigger a “tsunami of match-fixing” unless action was taken to prevent it.

“To introduce such a massive change with hardly any debate is a massive problem. Unless the US acts now, it will experience the same match-fixing problems as other nations where sports betting is legal,” the Canadian match-fixing expert said, adding:

“Which leagues are at the greatest risk? The clear winner is college sports. Students are thousands of times more vulnerable than most professional sportsmen. The minor leagues are where the issues will be felt most. Some players are earning less than the guy selling hot dogs.”

Richard McLaren, the Canadian lawyer who investigated the case of state-sponsored doping in Russia and many other cases related to sports integrity, pointed out that the major professional leagues in the US had initially opposed sports betting. But one by one they fell into line when they became aware of the vast additional sponsorship revenues they would receive from betting companies.

Likewise, the Ghanaian journalist, Anas Aremeyaw Anas, joined the Canadians in moving the spotlight to the governance of sports organisations, as he blamed FIFA:

“The people we are dealing with [*in Ghana*] are very powerful people because of one reason. That reason is FIFA. Why do I blame FIFA? Because when you hand out money, you have a responsibility to ensure that the right mechanisms are in place to distribute it. FIFA’s money was supposed to go to the villages, to the local sports clubs. It was FIFA’s money that empowered the mafia,” the masked African journalist said.



*College athletes like these American football players receive no salaries and have very little labour rights. Hence they are the most vulnerable to the threats of fixing as the US is liberalising its gambling market. Photo: Tom Hauck/Getty Images*

## Athletes underpaid

Furthermore, Richard McLaren stated that it is a myth that all professional athletes have high incomes. In tennis, he said, less than 4 per cent of male pro players break even, making the rest vulnerable to approaches made by match-fixers:

“Once they take that first step, once they accept that first business class plane ticket, they become vulnerable, they can be threatened by the match-fixers. These people are prepared to corrupt anyone. They are very sophisticated. They need sophisticated systems in place to avoid detection.”

According to Paulina Tomczyk, general secretary of EU Athletes which offers a collective voice to 25,000 athletes, no sport or country should consider itself immune to the match-fixing mafias.

“We’re working to protect our members from match-fixing. They need to recognise when an approach is made and know what to do when it happens. Don’t bet on your own

sport. Don’t give out inside information. Report anything suspicious,” she said at the conference while presenting PROtect Integrity, a new campaign steered by EU Athletes to educate athletes on key integrity principles.

Unfortunately, Paulina Tomczyk added, the project was not able to reach the places where it was likely most needed, in nations where athletes’ unions did not exist.

## A lonely fighter

But even in nations with a tradition of athletes’ unions, match-fixing was still a problem, Michael Bahrs, detective chief superintendent of Bochum Police, explained at the conference. After having spent 10 years fighting match-fixing, Michael Bahrs was asked what he had learned from his investigations, which entailed interviewing some of the worst match-fixers in the world.



*“Today’s sports associations are in a clear conflict of interest. I want to catch criminals. But they want to earn money”, said Michael Bahrs from the Bochum police at Play the Game 2019. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

“Nothing is being done. The main goal of today’s sports associations is to make money. They are creating more and more competitions. It’s all about profit. Making a profit is not immoral, but it creates a clear conflict of interest. The sports associations don’t want scandals,” Michael Bahrs said.

“I want to catch criminals. But they want to earn money. The federations should do their utmost to protect their players. They should warn them that they are absolutely at risk. Instead, they are signing sponsorship contracts with the betting companies.”

According to Michael Bahrs, investigating authorities lacked effective mechanisms to exchange match-fixing information across national borders. Joint investigation teams or partnerships between national crime-fighting agencies were rarely used in match-fixing investigations, the German police officer said.

“I am a lonely fighter. We need teams of experts. We need an international prosecutor’s office. Government officials have a duty to bring this issue into politics. Journalists have responsibilities too. A good story is even better if the criminals are caught. Match-fixing is organised crime. We shouldn’t just be talking about it. We need to take action.”

Perhaps 2023 has brought some of the progress that Michael Bahrs and his colleagues requested. With backing from the Council of Europe, state prosecutors from around the world have formed the MARS network (Magistrates/Prosecutors Responsible for Sports). The network aims to

- Promote the exchange of information and good practices
- Provide an international ‘forum’ (reference body) devoted to investigation and criminal proceedings
- Mobilise prosecutors in a maximum of countries, enabling them to know their counterparts in other jurisdictions and have direct contacts
- Provide practical, educational and operational tools
- Serve as a knowledge hub on specific legal and institutional situations

### **Fixing during the pandemic**

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic stopped many sports events across the world. But according to a 2021 Play the Game article by journalist Steve Menary, the pandemic did not stop match-fixing. The rising popularity of cricket in Europe led to major match-fixing

problems at pop-up tournaments staging 700 games in over 20 countries in 2020, the first year of the coronavirus pandemic.

“Where these pop-up matches are the only cricket being played it’s not a question of maybe corruptors get involved, they will, simple. Sometimes some well-known ones,” Steve Richardson, anti-corruption unit coordinator of investigations at the International Cricket Council (ICC), stated in a tweet.

His reaction was confirmed by the appearance of unregulated data scouts at European cricket matches that were live-streamed on the internet during the summer of 2020. When spotted by suspicious game organisers, the data scouts hid, sometimes in cars or behind bushes or up in trees, but still transmitting game data to bookmakers.



*State prosecutors dealing with sport have often felt alone when facing the criminal networks in sport. In 2023, the Council of Europe backed the creation of a network for them called MARS. Here from its 2nd meeting at the French Ministry of Justice. Photo: Play the Game*

Steve Menary also warned about the risks connected to friendly games during the pandemic.

“Friendly matches are a largely unsanctioned free-for-all often played in an integrity vacuum,” he wrote in an article for Play the Game’s website.

“With most leagues cancelled, there has been a surge of matches attracting suspicion in Europe in countries including Armenia and Belarus to Georgia to Russia and Sweden”, Menary noted, but adding that this was not only due to COVID-19:

“Every year, dozens of European friendly matches come under suspicion for suspicious betting and this trend is rising. In the 2019 edition of the ‘Suspicious Betting Trends in Global Football Report’, 2.0 per cent of all friendlies analysed in the previous 2018 season were deemed suspicious due to irregular betting movements. The proportion of friendlies deemed suspicious was far higher than the total for all games.”

## **Unscrupulous people**

Overall, the match-fixing cases highlighted in this chapter are in line with the findings of the global report on corruption in sport that the UN Office on Drugs and Crime presented in December 2021: Money rules sport as never before and unscrupulous people in and outside sport are more than willing to pursue the money across the globe.

According to the UN report, estimates of the value of the sports industry (excluding the gambling sector) vary depending on the range of metrics used. In 2018, estimates ranged from 488.5 billion US dollars when looking at sports-specific products to 756 billion US dollars when other economic sectors are included, such as transportation and entertainment.

“While these are significant figures, outside the world of elite sport, the sector is characterised by financial difficulties for sports people and institutions, which has associated corruption risks,” the UN report concluded. The report also noted that while total revenues in popular sports like football and tennis rose significantly from 2010 to 2020, the polarisation of revenue distribution is visible in most sports:

“Many international and national federations are struggling to attract media and sponsors. The vast majority of the 11,237 athletes who participated in the 2016 Summer Olympics did not have stable financial circumstances. For all athletes, their financial circumstances depend on their physical and psychological performance, which by nature is unpredictable. Notably, when the end of their career is approaching and they have few

post-career professional and financial prospects, athletes could be tempted to make easy money out of their last appearances. These precarious situations can lead some athletes and their entourages to carry out corrupt acts.”

The link between fraud and the vulnerability of athletes was already emphasised in 2012 by the professional football players’ association FIFPro.

The report showed that the majority of professional footballers lead a life like Mario Čižmek – neither glamorous nor enviable.

For a report, the ‘Black Book Eastern Europe’, FIFPro questioned 3,357 professional football players from 14 Eastern European countries, and the results showed a lack of respect for contracts, non-payment of salaries, violence, bullying and racism as part of everyday life. 41 per cent of players stated that their clubs did not pay salaries on time and around 5 per cent had waited for their salaries for more than six months.

Moreover, the report showed that one in ten had experienced different kinds of abuse, such as racism, violence or bullying.

According to FIFPro, the players who do not receive their salaries are more likely to consider participating in match-fixing, and 12 per cent of players stated that they had been approached to consider fixing the result of a match, while 24 per cent were aware of match-fixing taking place in their league.

## **Betting and sport are linked**

In many countries where betting is legalised, the profit from betting activities through public lotteries have long been channelled to sports organisations. But the illegal gambling market is a major challenge to sport.

The global betting market resembles an unregulated financial marketplace, with the main betting operators sheltered in “regulatory havens”, the UNODC report said, adding:

“Products and prices are seldom controlled, and in many jurisdictions, operators may not be obliged to conduct due diligence regarding the profile of bettors and the origin of money, or to ensure that money-laundering, manipulation or betting addiction risks are assessed and managed. In this context, it can be easy to place a high number of fraudulent bets on a specific match, use cryptocurrencies as a means of payment and avoid detection

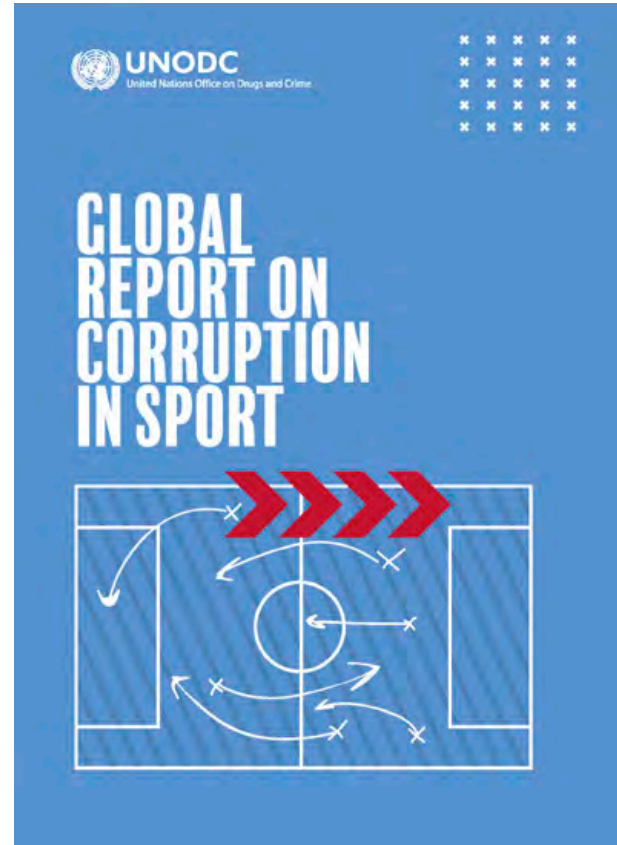
by selecting favourable operators and jurisdictions and disseminating the bets across them.”

The UNODC foresaw that in the space of just a few years, technological innovation has transformed sports betting into a highly volatile, liquid, and ill-controlled financial market. It has become possible to place large bets on a very wide range of sports involving primary and secondary competitions, professional and amateur sports, and with relative anonymity.

“Although there is a long history of the manipulation of sports competitions, the advent of online sports betting has exacerbated the scale of the phenomenon to the point that networks have been created at both the international and national levels to bribe, coerce, and threaten referees, players, and club officials to manipulate competitions to ensure given outcomes or events take place during a competition,” the report said.

“Some cases have also shown how athletes and officials are the perpetrators of these activities when they bet on competitions that they themselves are involved in.”

Well into the 2020s, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in many ways echoes what Declan Hill and other match-fixing experts said almost two decades ago. But whether the battle highlighted in the first-ever UN global report on corruption in sport is a battle on words only, or if international and national sports bodies and the public authorities will take action, remains to be seen.



*“In a few years, technological innovation has transformed sports betting into a highly volatile, liquid, and ill-controlled financial market.” Quote from the comprehensive UNODC report from 2021 on sport and corruption.*





## Why I became a match-fixer

*At Play the Game 2013, the former professional footballer, 37-year-old Croatian Mario Čižmek, told his personal story of how he was driven to fix matches while he was playing in the Croatian first league.*

Until the moment of this case called ‘Offside’, I played in a professional and responsible manner. I was completely honest in sports and anything I achieved was down to hard work and my love for sport. [...]

During the season 2009/2010, I played for NK Sesvete which fought for survival in the first football league. The situation in the club was exceptionally bad, there was a financial crisis, bad conditions for training and people on the board who did not care for the ‘employees’ and that was us – the players.

I and the other players had not been paid a regular salary for 14 months and I owed money on taxes and my pension.

We had no money, and we no longer spoke about training or football, but only about how we were going to survive. Every other day we would ask whether we would be paid, and they would say “Yes, on Monday.” Then we say, “OK on Monday.” But there would be no pay on Monday – only a promise to be paid on Wednesday, and then no money that day either.

It went on for months, and the whole team sank into depression.

The only way out was to move to another club, but the problem was that our club demanded a compensa-

tion that was way too high. We lodged a claim with the Croatian Football Federation Arbitration Court to terminate our contracts and get our dues paid. But those processes take a long time, so we were forced to play for the club for at least six more months and maybe a whole year.

I came to training as the rest of the team without any will or positive sports energy, and from day to day we were sinking deeper and deeper in our spirits. We did not have anybody to turn to because we were unprotected and left to our own devices. This was the situation that was the best for the criminals – they could create their own success on the backs of others.

In those depressive days, one person showed up, and it was a person who was known to all of us from the football society. It was a person who was a member of the Zagreb Football Association, and he promised us a way out of the crisis, and he said it was in cooperation with other clubs and the board of our club. He wanted us to fix the results of some of the games during the rest of the season. It was about six games that were not important for the future of our club because we were already certain to fall out of the first league.

And that is how it all began. One game after the

other there was constant pressure, we felt our souls were being eaten and we were deeply ashamed. The feeling was terrible, but I could not go back. The organiser was present everywhere in our lives and he put pressure on us. Each game he would call us and tell us how and what we had to do to fulfil his expectations and I sold my pride for small money compared to the loss that I feel and that I am living with today.

The agony lasted until the end of the championships and on 8 June I was arrested in my home in front of my daughters. The situation was terrible: Until yesterday I was in their eyes a father and a football player and in only a few minutes, I became their shame.

I was in jail for 47 days and it felt as if I was dreaming. But unfortunately, it was my reality. When I came out of jail, the case went to court. It was followed by the media, and that was an even heavier weight on me.

I was sentenced to ten months in prison and the authorities want me to pay back a sum of money. And worst of all, I can never play football in Croatia again because I have a lifelong ban from the Croatian Football Federation.

Today I am asking myself, was my career worth so much that I could gamble for the money that was not even close to what I have been playing for but had not been paid. Of course, I am not running away from my responsibility, and I realise the mistakes I made, and I will be responsible for what I have done.

But nobody can ever give back to me what I had before the Offside affair and that is the sporting spirit of doing your best and taking pride in it.

“Importance of the clean game” is the main precondition for success in all fields of life, and also in sports because only one bad step can ruin everything that we have been giving our lives for through training and sacrifice. Everything is wasted.



Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game

## Chasing the perpetrators of a trillion-dollar crime

It has happened now and then over the 25 years of Play the Game conferences that an audience left a session with a feeling of having visited a parallel universe filled with people and events that not even the wildest imagination could make up.



*The impressive research by Andy Brown, Steve Menary, Jack Kerr and Philippe Auclair brought them the journalistic prize '2023 IJ4EU Impact Award'. Photo: The Devil in the Data team*

Such a feeling reigned among many of those who attended Play the Game 2022 and heard 'The Devil in the Data team' describe the incredibly complex and creative workings of one of the world's biggest – if not the biggest – criminal industry: The illegal global gambling market.

The real size of this market is of course unknown, as the perpetrators of crime rarely publish transparent annual accounts and long-term strategies. Nor do the owners and directors reveal their true identities.

According to the Asian Racing Federation, almost two thirds of the global gambling market is controlled by such illegal companies – they don't have a license, they don't pay taxes, and they are not subject to any regulation whatsoever.

The scale of this is hard to grasp. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) the annual turnover of the *illegal* gambling market is up to 1.7 trillion US dollars, roughly three to six times the estimated value of the global drugs trade.

Four freelance journalists – Philippe Auclair (France), Andy Brown (UK), Jack Kerr (Australia), and Steve Menary (UK) – teamed up to take a closer look at this, and with support from the fund 'Investigative Journalism for Europe' (IJ4EU) they spent most of a year digging up astonishing facts.

Among the findings that dazzled Play the Game’s audience are:

- Topflight European football clubs eagerly accept sponsorships by unlicensed betting companies who do not even operate in Europe, and no questions about legality or ownership are asked.
- The sponsorships with European clubs and football players make the illegal companies visible on the lucrative Asian market and provides them with exposure, credibility, and impunity.
- Some of the dominant companies are run by criminals operating out of Russia, Cyprus, the Philippines, Vietnam, China, and other Asian countries.



Images from one of the tightly guarded compounds in Asia (here: Cambodia) where thousands of people – many of them migrants with their passport taken – work for the illegal gambling industry. Illustration with permission from the Devil in the Data team.

- There may be only a few dominant gambling companies on the illegal market, but they operate through hundreds of subsidiaries and brands, and thousands of websites across hundreds of national jurisdictions in an incredibly complex and opaque structure that protects their operations from criminal investigations.
- Some of these companies are also involved in other forms of internet fraud and scamming.
- They allow in-play live betting in almost any sport at all levels, and some of them even organise their own fake, live-streamed sports events over which they have full control, sometimes by hijacking people to play a game.
- They are involved in human trafficking in various forms. Tens of thousands of workers are currently working under slave-like conditions in the industry, behind fences in well-guarded compounds in South-East Asia and with their passports taken by their employers.
- Data collection at sports games is an essential part of the industry. There is convincing evidence that the same data collected by companies working to service sports organisations to protect the integrity of sport, somehow appear at illegal gambling sites. If this was only imagination. It is not.

Source: *The Devil in the Data* Team publications on [www.josimarfootball.com](http://www.josimarfootball.com) and [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)



## Chapter 6

# SPORT IS FAILING VICTIMS OF ABUSE

Public reactions to the exposure of doping, corruption, match-fixing, and other crimes in sport all seem to have one thing in common. At first, most people find it difficult to accept that a publicly recognised force for good like sport can also be a scene for crimes. Then it often takes years for sports organisations and public authorities to realise the scale of the crimes and sometimes decades to decide how to prevent future crimes.

The public reactions to revelations of sexual abuse in sport is no exception. One of many examples of public denial of sports-related crimes is the exposure of a rape culture in North American junior hockey.

The hockey rape culture was revealed 30 years ago when Canadian freelance journalist Laura Robinson decided to investigate a case of alleged violence and sexual assault in Canada's national sport.

In the summer of 1992, an informant told Toronto-based Laura Robinson to go to Swift Current in Southern Saskatchewan because “some hockey players had raped a girl and got away with it.” After having interviewed the girl's lawyer, the investigating officer, the minister from her church, and the coach of the local junior hockey team, Laura Robinson found several discrepancies in the way in which the justice system had handled the case.

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*Canadian reporter Laura Robinson on her way to the podium at Play the Game 2002 where she was the first to receive the Play the Game Award for her courageous research into a culture of sexual abuse in Canadian junior hockey.*

*Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

According to her research, the trained investigating officer was taken off the case and replaced with an inexperienced investigator. The guidance counsellor at the high school the girl and the hockey players attended was the wife of the major owner of the hockey team, who was also a former law partner of the Crown attorney who was supposed to be prosecuting the players. The counsellor had told the girl to drop the charges because the two alleged rapists were “good boys, they wouldn’t do this.”

The girl had just turned 17, went to church every Sunday, was a virgin, and had learning disabilities. On 1 November 1989, she was interrogated by the police for more than two hours with no counsel or parents present.

When the girl finally said: “Maybe I didn’t say no”, the charges against the players were stayed. Instead, public mischief charges were laid against the girl. At the trial in January 1990, the two players agreed that they had done everything to the girl that she had described, including penetration in three orifices. But although the girl said she begged them to stop and was terrified, the players said she begged for more.

At the end of the trial, the judge found the girl not guilty and said that because of the “degrading and disgusting” incident, the girl “suffered considerable physical and emotional pain,” adding “That’s not sympathy, that’s a fact” and that the girl “honestly believed that what happened to her was not by consent.”

Nevertheless, the sexual assault charges against the two hockey players were dropped. They continued to play for other teams in another province, and when the lawyer representing the girl asked the provincial justice department to hold an inquiry into the case, his request was denied.

“I could understand how a rape could happen, but how could such a travesty of justice happen? The initial investigating officer, Ian McLean, told me it was very important for this story to be told,” Laura Robinson told the Play the Game conference in Copenhagen in 2002.

### **Six years of research**

After the trial, Laura Robinson spent five more years investigating sex crime charges in Canadian hockey which made it clear to her that junior hockey had what sport sociologists call ‘a rape culture’, which she then described in detail in the book ‘Crossing the Line: Violence and Sexual Assault in Canada’s National Sport’.

“It wasn’t difficult to find more junior hockey teams that had been charged with sexual assault. In all but one case, gang rape was alleged. What was difficult was getting anyone in the hockey establishment to talk about this phenomenon or any convictions,” the Canadian journalist told the audience.

At first, she was doing the investigation for Saturday Night Magazine, one of the oldest and most respected journals in Canada. But when a new editor-in-chief took over, he wasn’t satisfied with her information and asked her to re-write the story.

After one year of rewrites, she decided to contact CBC TV. A documentary on the story was aired in 1996. Within the same week, Graham James, the hockey coach from Swift Current that she had interviewed three years earlier, had been charged with 350 counts of sexual assaults after two players went to the police.

“The next six months were like no other in Canada. The sacred sport of hockey had a dirty secret,” Laura Robinson said in Copenhagen, referring to huge media coverage when several NHL players decided to break the silence and more perpetrators went on trial.

By then, she had signed a book deal and began writing ‘*Crossing the Line*’. But when the book was released in 1998, Laura Robinson noticed that every time the publisher advertised their hockey books in newspapers, her book was missing.

“I believe my publisher didn’t really want to delve into the culture of abuse I had chronicled because it would upset the Canadian hockey myth to such an extent that the ‘hockey cheerleading’ books that Canada publishes each year would be seen in a completely different light.”

Writing and researching ‘*Crossing the Line*’ was one of the most difficult experiences Laura Robinson had ever had:

“I was twice denied media accreditation by the Canadian Hockey Association or Canada Hockey League. It made me physically and emotionally ill, and it seems to have permanently robbed me of a certain energy to really ‘attack’ projects. I can’t write into the morning hours anymore, and don’t look forward to intricate, investigative stories that will take months or years of digging and stepping on important toes.”

But in the end, the first winner of the Play the Game Award believed ‘*Crossing the Line*’ told a truth about Canadian hockey that most people found very difficult to hear.

“I am honoured that so many young people trusted me with their stories that contained so much pain and hurt and that I was able to tell them,” Laura Robinson said.



## **Patriot hearts**

Almost a decade later, the Canadian journalist had recovered from the difficulties she had writing 'Crossing the Line'. She was investigating another case of abuse that would upset Canadian sport because it involved 'JF', CEO of the committee organising the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver. (Note: We do not mention the person's name out of respect for a recent name protection court order in Canada).

In 2011, Laura Robinson wrote a comment for Play the Game in which she reviewed JF's recently released biography, 'Patriot Hearts', and questioned why his past as a member of an international missionary movement called Frontier Apostles was kept secret in the book.

In 2012, Laura Robinson wrote an article for Georgia Straits Times in which she revealed that the Irish immigrant JF had arrived in Canada as a Catholic Frontier Apostle missionary in 1969, five years prior to what he had written in his book. During the five years, JF was teaching physical education at the Catholic Immaculate Elementary School in remote Burns Lake, one of 26 schools run by the Catholic Prince George Diocese in British Columbia.

Eight of his former First Nations students had signed affidavits for the newspaper alleging JF had abused them physically and mentally, and many more students confirmed his abusive conduct.

Two years later, the police closed the investigation without laying charges. And for years, Laura Robinson and JF were involved in a legal battle over the publication of the allegations. But JF's former students did not accept the police's decision to close the investigation. They asked the Canadian Human Rights Commission for an inquiry into the handling of the JF case by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which the students accused of discrimination and racism. They wanted all 26 schools in the diocese to be investigated.

In 2018, the Canadian Human Rights Commission said that the arguments of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to stop the investigation of the former students' allegations against JF had been speculative and misleading.

In 2021, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal announced that it would organise an inquiry, and by late 2023 the case was still open and ongoing. According to Laura Robinson, the inquiry was going to be very different because the complaint was written a year before the remains of 215 children in 2021 were found in mass graves near the Kamloops

Indian Residential School in British Columbia, at a time when public awareness of racial discrimination against First Nations was on the rise in Canada.

“I am really, really, really tired of the revisionist history that was passed around. Especially, I have to say, from the sports community that has supported JF all these years. I have always asked people in the sports community, ‘Why don’t you at least talk to the people of Northern British Columbia and listen to their stories before you decide that they’re liars?’” Laura Robinson told CANADALAND.

### **A depraved sub-culture**

The Canadian inquiry into the alleged abusive conduct of the CEO of the Vancouver Games came after a decade where many serious sexual crimes in North American sport had been exposed and the global MeToo movement had changed the way sexual crimes in general were viewed in public and investigated by the police.

One of the first cases to indicate a change in public opinion on sports-related sex crimes was the arrest of a former assistant college football coach at Penn State University in the US. In 2011, Jerry Sandusky was arrested on charges of molesting eight boys, using his status as a football coach and founder of a charity foundation for at-risk boys he created through his position at the university to obtain easy access.

In 2012, a jury found Jerry Sandusky guilty of 45 counts of child sexual abuse. The former coach was sentenced to 30 to 60 years in prison. Four other high-ranking university administrators, including the head coach Joe Paterno, were fired for not acting on reports of an assault Jerry Sandusky had committed in 2001, and Penn State University paid out over 100 million US dollars to more than 30 victims.

Since then, many sexual abuse scandals have emerged at other major universities in the US, revealing what Laura Robinson has described as a “deeply depraved sub-culture of North American sport” where administrators are protecting the predators instead of the victims by not investigating reported sexual abuse. In 2016, the most horrific example of the depraved sub-culture was exposed by investigative journalists at the Indianapolis Star.

While investigating why Indiana high schools hadn’t reported instances of school officials having sex with underage students to state authorities, a source suggested that Indianapolis Star journalist Marisa Kwiatkowski should examine USA Gymnastics’ handling of allegations of sexual abuse.



No less than 156 women confronted the former doctor of USA Gymnastics and University of Michigan, Larry Nassar, in court before he was sentenced to 175 years in prison. The sexual abuse scandal led to new legislation enhancing safeguarding and athlete representation in US sport. Photos: Scott Olson/Getty Images

In August 2016, on the eve of the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, she and colleagues Tim Evans and Mark Alesia wrote the first article that led to the exposure of abuse committed by Larry Nassar, a faculty member at Michigan State University and former team doctor at USA Gymnastics during four Olympic Games.

“Top executives at one of America’s most prominent Olympic organisations failed to alert authorities to many allegations of sexual abuse by coaches – relying on a policy that enabled predators to abuse gymnasts long after USA Gymnastics had received warnings,” the article began.

The article went on to expose how USA Gymnastics in secret had compiled complaints dossiers on more than 50 coaches and filed them in a drawer in its executive office in Indianapolis but still declined to disclose the total number of sexual misconduct allegations it received each year.

Even without access to the secret USA Gymnastics files, the Indianapolis Star journalists tracked down four cases in which the national sports organisation was warned of suspected abuse by coaches but did not initiate a report to authorities. According to police and court records, those coaches went on to abuse at least 14 underage gymnasts after the warnings.

USA Gymnastics defended its handling of child abuse complaints by stating it followed reporting laws and was doing enough to protect children. Its president, Steve Penny, declined to be interviewed but released this statement:

“USA Gymnastics has a long and proactive history of developing policy to protect its athletes and will remain diligent in evaluating new and best practices which should be implemented. We recognise our leadership role is important and remain committed to working with the entire gymnastic community and other important partners to promote a safe and fun environment for children.”

### **“I am damaged goods”**

After reading the Indianapolis Star article, Rachael Denhollander, a former gymnast living in Kentucky, filed a criminal complaint against Larry Nassar and approached the newspaper with accusations against the doctor, alleging he assaulted her when she received treatment for lower back pain as a 15-year-old gymnast in 2000. She said Larry Nassar gradually became more abusive over five treatments, massaging her genitals, penetrating

her vagina and anus with his finger and thumb, and unhooking her bra and massaging her breasts.

“I was terrified. I was ashamed. I was very embarrassed. And I was very confused, trying to reconcile what was happening with the person he was supposed to be. He’s this famous doctor. He’s trusted by my friends. He’s trusted by these other gymnasts. How could he reach this position in the medical profession, how could he reach this kind of prominence and stature if this is who he is?” Rachael Denhollander said, while her husband explained how she had felt dirty because of it and when dating him had said that she was damaged goods.

Parallel to Rachael Denhollander, a former Olympic gymnast and medal winner living in California filed a civil lawsuit, alleging that USA Gymnastics failed to act on suspicions about Larry Nassar’s conduct which included anal and vaginal examinations of gymnasts in the care of USA Gymnastics “without gloves, a chaperone, and/or any form of lubricant.”

The woman told the Indianapolis Star that the abuse started when she was 12 or 13 and continued until she was 18, but that she didn’t report the abuse at the time because she didn’t know it was wrong.

“It felt like a privilege to be seen by him. I trusted him,” the former gymnast said.

According to the lawsuit, during examinations Larry Nassar would fondle and grope her feet, ankles, thighs, buttocks, hips, waist, breasts, arms, shoulders, and neck while talking about sex, describing oral sex, and telling her that other underage gymnasts were doing it.

The former Olympic medal winner wept when she told the newspaper it took her more than a decade to understand what Larry Nassar had done and that she had suffered immensely from anxiety, depression, a lack of trust and self-medication.

In response to questions from the Indianapolis Star, USA Gymnastics told the newspaper that it suspended Larry Nassar from clinical and patient duties on 30 August 2016 when it received the criminal complaint:

“Doctor Nassar is no longer affiliated with USA Gymnastics. Upon learning of athlete concerns, USA Gymnastics immediately notified law enforcement. Since then, we have cooperated fully with the law enforcement agency, including refraining from making further statements or taking any other action that might interfere with the agency’s investigation. We are grateful to the athletes for coming forward to share their concerns,” a USA Gymnastics statement said.

## **175 years in prison**

The Indianapolis Star interviews with Rachael Denhollander and the Olympic medal winner, who requested not to be named in the article, led to the arrest of Larry Nassar in September 2016. Two years later, the former doctor for the US Olympic team, USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University was sentenced to 175 years in prison after pleading guilty to sexually abusing seven girls and possessing child pornography. But that wasn't the end of the worst sexual abuse case in sports history.

Four months after the Larry Nassar sentence, Michigan State University agreed to pay 500 million US dollars to settle claims from over 300 women, who said they were assaulted by the sports doctor. And in December 2021, USA Gymnastics and the US Olympic Committee reached an additional 380 million dollar settlement with more than 500 victims. More than half of the victims said they were abused by Larry Nassar, while the remaining victims were abused by individuals affiliated with USA Gymnastics in some capacity.

In December 2018, an independent investigation by the law firm Ropes & Gray provided insight into the US Olympic Committee's role in the scandal, criticising the organisation for participating in a culture that facilitated the crimes and wilfully ignored warning signs.

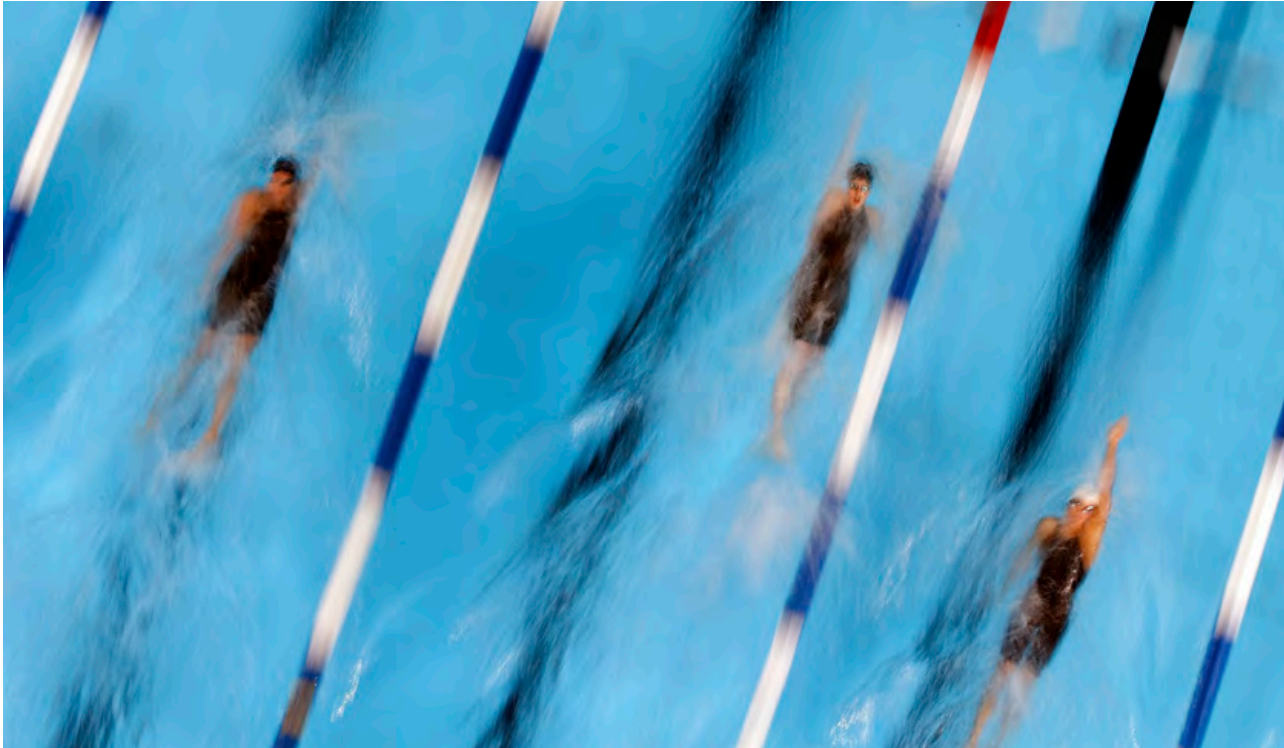
“While Larry Nassar bears the ultimate responsibility for his decades-long abuse of girls and young women, he did not operate in a vacuum. Instead, he acted within an ecosystem that facilitated his criminal acts,” the report said noting that USA Gymnastics and the US Olympic Committee's inaction and concealment had consequences.

The independent report confirmed that Steve Penny, then president of USA Gymnastics, contacted the US Olympic Committee to discuss allegations against Larry Nassar in July 2015, more than one year prior to his arrest following the allegations in the Indianapolis Star. But Scott Blackburn, chief executive at the US Olympic Committee, and Alan Ashley, the committee's chief of sports performance, deleted emails about the matter and kept the conversation to themselves without informing their colleagues or anyone at Michigan State University.

## A symptom of the problem

USA Gymnastics also contacted the FBI in 2015. But during the investigation, Steve Penny tried to keep the allegations from going public and offered to help an FBI agent get a job with the US Olympic Committee. Over the next 14 months, Larry Nassar quietly stopped working for USA Gymnastics but continued to see patients.

In July 2021, a report released by the US Justice Department's inspector general, Michael Horowitz, noted that about 70 young athletes were abused by the sports doctor during this period and that the FBI had made "fundamental errors".



*Some sports seem more prone to abuse than others. Between 1997 and 2017, at least 252 coaches in US swimming had been arrested, charged by prosecutors, or disciplined for sexual abuse or misconduct against individuals under 18. Photo: Jamie Squire/Getty Images*

According to the Horowitz report, FBI agents in both Indianapolis and Los Angeles failed to act with “prudence or sound judgement” when they neglected to alert local and federal authorities of the allegations against Larry Nassar. The report recommended that the FBI should clarify when agents must alert local authorities to potential crimes against children, improve how the bureau documents and oversees the transfer of investigations between offices, and develop a policy on when child victims may be interviewed by phone.

But to Rachael Denhollander, the first victim to pursue criminal charges and speak publicly against Larry Nassar, the US Justice Department’s report on the FBI’s failures in the Larry Nassar case was a great disappointment.

“There is no accountability. No criminal charges. No justice. No restitution for the damage they caused. No punitive actions. The rest of us are left with lifelong consequences and already bore the cost of pushing for the truth. And these agents retire on government pensions while survivors fight to stay alive. Nothing happens now,” Rachael Denhollander wrote on Twitter.

One month later, the former gymnast who is now an attorney and a leading voice on the topic of sexual abuse, was asked by National Public Radio whether the conviction of Larry Nassar was the end of widespread sexual abuse in USA Gymnastics:

“Oh. Absolutely not,” Rachael Denhollander said, claiming that what happened in USA Gymnastics was an entire system of abuse, a system of covering up sexual abuse, adding that there are still sexual abusers within the gymnastics industry who haven’t been brought to justice yet:

“I know for a fact that there are because I know the victims. Larry was not the problem. Larry was a symptom of the problem.”

## **Presidential predator**

And the problem was not one of USA Gymnastics only. In 2018, a report into USA Swimming claimed that the national sports governing body ignored and actively covered up hundreds of abuse cases taking place in a culture that accepted sexual relations between coaches and underage athletes.

The Southern California News Group found that between 1997 and 2017, a minimum of 252 coaches in US swimming had been “arrested, charged by prosecutors, or disciplined for sexual abuse or misconduct against individuals under 18” affecting more than 590



alleged victims. And other exposures in recent years of cases across sports in countries all over the world confirm that sexual abuse in sport is not a North American problem only.

In 2019, the French NGO Disclose published an investigation of sexual abuse in French sport since the beginning of the 1970s. The investigation revealed 77 cases involving at least 276 victims. Most of the victims were under 15 years old, and the cases involved 28 different fields of sport, including football, gymnastics, athletics, as well as archery, roller skating and chess.

According to Disclose, the French abuse cases unveiled “major failings by clubs and federations, local and national public authorities, and the justice system.” The failures included the absence of a system of control of voluntary sports teachers, instances where suspected perpetrators under investigation were allowed to continue in the activities, the lack of monitoring of sexual delinquents, and the inaction of officials and sports bodies which chose to cover up scandals rather than to defend the interests of the athletes.

But officials and sports bodies do not cover up scandals only. In recent years, some of the most powerful leaders in sport have been sanctioned for being directly involved in the sexual abuse of young athletes, including two presidents of national football federations.

In November 2018, The Guardian exposed that football’s world governing body FIFA was examining claims of sexual and physical abuse of members of the Afghanistan national women’s team. Khalida Popal, a former head of the women’s football department at the Afghanistan Football Federation (AFF), players Shabnam Mobarez and Mina Ahmadi, and head coach Kelly Lindsey told that several players were abused by staff members of the AFF, including its president Keramuudin Karim, a former governor and chief of staff in the ministry of defence.

When Khalida Popal learned that nine of the best national players in Afghanistan were kicked off the national team, accused of being lesbians, and began investigating the case she discovered that Keramuudin Karim inside his office at the football federation’s headquarters had his own bedroom behind doors that only he could open using fingerprint recognition. Some of the girls told Khalida Popal they were sexually abused and physically punished if they said no but that they were afraid of speaking out because being accused of being a lesbian or gay in Afghanistan is a dangerous topic you don’t speak about.

The AFF denied the allegations in a statement noting that it “vigorously rejects the false accusations made”, adding that the national football federation had a “zero-tolerance policy towards any such type of behaviour.” But FIFA was investigating the claims, and

a source at FIFA told The Guardian that it had been working with the UN to secure the safety of some of the Afghan players. In 2019, FIFA decided to ban Keramuudin Karim from football for life. One year later, the national football president's appeal of the lifetime ban was dismissed by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

“The president used his power to build a private kingdom inside the football federation. He is a former warlord and the creator of a culture of abuse. He was protected by armed bodyguards. He was forcing the players into the room where he was sexually abusing and beating them,” Khalida Popal told Play the Game.



*A former director of women's football in Afghanistan, Khalida Popal, speaks about her fight for Afghan women's right to play football in a safe environment. Her struggle to stop sexual abuse by the president and her continued fight from her Danish exile brought her the Play the Game Award 2022. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard, Play the Game*

“The players were not free. No one would hear them scream for help. And to silence the players after the abuse, the abusers blamed them for being lesbians. To many people in Afghanistan homosexuality is a crime. That is why the players were afraid and could not say anything. Not even to their moms and dads.”

When Khalida Popal and Kelly Lindsey decided to build the case and present their findings to FIFA, they discovered that football’s governing body one year earlier had received an email from members of the AFF who warned FIFA of the abuse.

“This is what hurt me the most,” Khalida Popal said, “that FIFA knew about the abuse in 2017 but left this culture to continue for two more years. FIFA did not take the case seriously until I spoke with the media, and it became public. I had no other options. FIFA had no reporting systems in place. They did not know how to handle the case.”

### **Child slaves**

Khalida Popal’s investigation of sexual abuse in Afghan football forced FIFA to adopt child protection and safeguarding systems. And the FIFA Human Rights Advisory Board, created in 2017, recommended that FIFA should establish a fully independent and appropriately resourced network of regional expert ombudspersons to receive and assess confidential reports of harassment or abuse by anyone linked to FIFA.

But in April 2020, The Guardian named another alleged presidential predator in football. Numerous sources told the newspaper that Yves Jean-Bart, president of the Haitian Football Federation (FHF), coerced young female players into having sex with him at a national training centre called The Ranch in Croix-des-Bouquets near the country’s capital Port-au-Prince.

According to former Haitian players at the FIFA-funded training centre, some of the players who were sexually abused by Yves Jean-Bart, known as Dadou, became pregnant and were forced to have abortions. Other players said they were abused by friends of the football president but were afraid to speak because he was a very dangerous man and could attack their families. But Yves Jean-Bart, who had been the president of FHF since 2000 and a member of various FIFA committees between 2002 and 2017, denied the allegations.

“If there were such cases, I would encourage the victims to file a complaint with the federation and the judicial authorities of the country. We are ready, at the level of the federation, to support them. There have never been, to my knowledge, even suspicions of

this kind. Personally, I am, and I have been, a non-violent man. I don't understand how someone can make me look like an executioner to the point where families would feel intimidated by me," Yves Jean-Bart said.

Nevertheless, based on the media reports, interviews with victims and witnesses, and reports from Human Rights Watch, the global player union FIFPro, and the IT consulting



*The Haitian football president Yves-Jean Bart (seen above chatting with then FIFA secretary general Fatma Samoura) was banned for life by FIFA, but acquitted by CAS in a decision that shows the whole sporting system is unable to protect young athletes, said Minky Worden from Human Rights Watch at the Play the Game conference in 2022. Photo: Catherine Ivill/FIFA/Getty Images*

company Signify Group, FIFA decided to ban Yves Jean-Bart from football for life in November 2020, pending his appeal hearing at the CAS. A few months later, FIFA released details of the investigation revealing that allegations against the Haitian football president were circulating on social media way before the first media reports were published.

Furthermore, FIFA's investigation of the allegations identified 34 possible victims and 10 potential perpetrators and confirmed that sexual abuse at the FIFA-funded training centre resulted in pregnancy for some of the victims who were offered abortions. According to FIFA, Yves Jean-Bart was in complete control over Haitian football and "many of the girls from very poor backgrounds became known as his 'restaveks', a Haitian term for child slave."

Among the possible victims pointed out in the FIFA investigation were 14 potential victims of Yves Jean-Bart. The Haitian football president used "authoritarian and economic power", FIFA said, to take "habitual mistresses" at the training centre where he would offer gifts of underwear to teenage girls to build abusive relationships and created a system of abuse within the entire football federation by placing loyal personnel in key supervisory and operational position.

"Mr. Jean-Bart used his senior position as president of the Haitian football federation to coerce or convince the (minor) female players to engage in sexual activities with him, by promising to help or threatening to damage their football careers," FIFA concluded. But although football's world governing body had banned two national football presidents for life, not all critics were satisfied.

The life ban of Yves-Jean Bart was surprisingly overturned by the Court of Arbitration for Sport at the start of 2023. CAS found "inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the statements of the victims and witnesses" and described evidence by FIFA as not "sufficiently evidentiary".

However, the CAS hearings did not offer sufficient witness protection measures to those witnesses who had been exposed to death threats and threats to their families like this one:

"Don't forget that you have family in Haiti ... You got into something that will be dangerous for you and your family. You are in a big deal. You have been to FIFA ... I'll be honest with you, we've already prepared your coffins because personally, I am going to crack your skull open."

So, for Human Rights Watch, the whole judiciary system in sport had failed:

“How can survivors of sexual abuse be expected to report abuse to FIFA if this travesty of justice is the outcome,” asked Minky Worden, director of global initiatives at HRW.

## **Football is God**

In March 2021, a British report had found the English Football Association culpable of institutional failure for its delay in introducing safeguards after 1995, when a football coach and high-profiled abusers in other sports had already been prosecuted and convicted. The report found 692 abuse survivors and 240 suspected abusers in English football in the period from 1970 to 2005.

Since then, FIFA has introduced so-called zero-tolerance policies against sexual abuse, but according to Human Rights Watch, these policies did not provide any protection in countries like Haiti and Afghanistan, where players received death threats. Minky Worden urged FIFA to adopt background checks for all members of national federations, anonymous reporting systems and free trauma support and therapy for victims and survivors. To her, the Haitian players were victims of a child exploitation ring masked as a football federation:

“There is no fit-for-purpose system. In these societies, there is terrible stigma and shame attached to being a victim of sexual abuse. Right now, the systems in place completely favour the abusers. Victims and survivors have no power. And if they come forward, they will lose their career, they will be shamed, and they may even be killed along with their family members. So given that power differential, why on earth would a teenager come forward?” Minky Worden said adding:

“It is shocking that there are no background checks for someone in charge of so many children. Football is big business and a golden ticket for a lot of women and children out of poverty. It is not right that they need to fight off sexual predators to achieve their dreams. Sport must both pay for the crimes of the past and make amends to those who believed that sport would be their golden ticket and instead turned into a nightmare. We are dealing with criminal elements and sexual abusers running sports federations. It simply cannot go on another day.”

To Kat Craig, a British human rights lawyer involved in both the Afghan case, the Haitian case, and the UK case, sexual abuse in football can be compared to the cases exposed

in the Roman Catholic Church, where hundreds of priests all over the world have been accused of sexual abuse and forced to leave the church.

“The church is an appropriate analogy because to some people football is God. There are a lot of lovely Catholic priests and lots of lovely football coaches, but that position of power brings a risk. Until we realise and acknowledge that, football will always fail children and vulnerable adults,” Kat Craig told Play the Game.

To the British human rights lawyer, the exposure of sexual abuse of children in football doesn’t hit the sport’s pockets in the same way as if it happened to powerful players at the elite level. As a result, sexual abuse has not been prioritised as a governance or integrity issue. Kat Craig has spoken to hundreds of girls who have been physically and mentally abused for years in a way that possibly will prevent them from having healthy emotions and sexual relations for the rest of their lives.

“That is the most horrific human rights violation happening here. You have an industry that chooses to present itself as a public good and we all buy into this idea of a football family. But when it comes to protecting the most vulnerable in this family, suddenly it is a closed shop. It is an astonishing concept,” Kat Craig said.

### **Football’s identity difficult to change**

In September 2020, FIFA and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) signed a memorandum of understanding that committed the two global organisations to address threats posed by crime to sport. Furthermore, FIFA president Gianni Infantino proposed the establishment of an independent, multi-sports, multi-agency international entity to investigate abuse cases in sport.

“It is a topic we have been hiding for too long and it is time to start opening it. What I am proposing is to study together the creation of an independent agency, some sort of a mix between sports bodies, institutional, governmental, and international organisations, who can help our children who want to play sport to be and to move in a safe environment,” Gianni Infantino said.

FIFA’s report on the issue was published in late 2021 but has so far led to little or no action.

Football’s attitude seems difficult to change. In March 2022, The Guardian published a list of countries where allegations of abuse in football had been reported in the past years.



*The systems in place completely favour the abusers. Victims and survivors have no power, says Minky Worden of Human Rights Watch, here speaking at Play the Game 2022. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

The countries included Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Barbados, Canada, Colombia, Comoros, Ecuador, Gabon, Haiti, Malawi, Mongolia, Netherlands, Sierra Leone, United Kingdom, United States, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe. And Kat Craig has now received more than 200 messages a week about abuse in football alone.

“Some messages are from players. Some are from whistleblowers. Almost all express fear, frustration, and anger about how the system is failing. It’s not just that the abuse was allowed to happen. It’s that when they alerted the powers that be, they were ignored, gaslighted or silenced,” Kat Craig wrote in a comment to The Guardian’s list.



In trying to answer the question of what needs to be done to protect athletes and whistle-blowers, the British human rights lawyer stated that FIFA's proposed global entity needed to be independent and transparent, have a person-centred approach, and be run by an expert staff with adequate resources.

“So, what would all this cost? WADA, the independent anti-doping agency, costs 46 million US dollars a year, to give you a ballpark figure. Sport can easily afford this. In 2018, FIFA generated more than 4.6 billion US dollars in revenue, with 2019 reserves soaring to 2.7 billion US dollars. In its own words, it is in a ‘healthy and sustainable financial position’. But if this new entity has the potential to benefit athletes across sport, then FIFA should not pick up the bill alone,” Kat Craig wrote.

If the above criteria were met and the new entity gained full buy-in from victims and survivors, as well as those involved in holding sport to account for decades, Kat Craig expected others to get on board, noting that FIFA had been candid about its desire to work with the International Olympic Committee and governments to help foot the bill.

“Just 0.01 per cent of [sport’s] global revenue value would see the new entity well-resourced to fulfil this crucial task. As someone who has seen the devastation that abuse causes to children around the world, I can think of no better way to spend that money,” she wrote in the Guardian.

## **Death threats**

But even if FIFA will manage to get the IOC and other sports organisations as well as governments on board for a global entity to fight sexual abuse in sport, a recent case in African basketball indicates that the new entity in some countries and sports organisations will face just as strong opposition as WADA did when the agency began investigating doping in sport two decades ago.

In June 2021, The New York Times and Human Rights Watch published reports of widespread sexual abuse and harassment of some of the most talented female basketball players in Mali. Three months later, an independent investigation ordered by the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) confirmed that at least seven coaches and officials in the West African country’s national basketball federation (FMBB) for decades had taken part in or known of sexual abuse of female players on the country’s national U19 and U16 teams.

FIBA finally suspended two basketball coaches, the president of FMBB, a former vice president and three other members of the national federation. However, the independent investigation by McLaren Global Sport Solution was not able to confirm reports that FIBA president Hamane Niang, president of Mali's basketball federation between 1999 and 2011, knew or should have known about the abuse.

The McLaren Global Sport Solution report stated that “the evidence indicates an institutionalised acceptance of sexual abuse that is totally unacceptable” and that the national basketball federation in Mali took part in several attempts to cover up the abuse and obstruct the investigation. 31 witnesses had been interviewed during the investigation but at least 22 other potential witnesses refused to speak with the investigators.

“Many victims would not come forward for fear of retaliation,” Richard McLaren, head of the Mali investigation, told Play the Game adding:

“When we commenced the investigation there were no safeguarding mechanisms in place. To start our investigation, we had to put them in place through the efforts of FIBA. However, safeguarding can not ensure no retaliation. I understand the legitimate and very real concerns they had.”

At a time when not only FIFA and the IOC but also the UN, UNICEF, and the Council of Europe in several reports had finally acknowledged that action is needed to prevent sexual abuse in sport, the Mali case proved to Human Rights Watch just how dangerous speaking of sexual abuse in sport can be. Although Minky Worden had warned of the risk, the president of FMBB had 42 days to threaten and intimidate the victims and witnesses and to obstruct the investigation before he was suspended.

“Intimidation, death threats, and silencing of whistle-blowers and survivors happen because these men are very powerful. Their platform of a national football or basketball federation gives them a chance to go to five-star hotels and to get international jobs as Hamane Niang did. So, of course, they will fight to keep their positions of power,” Minky Worden said.

“They have all the power and all the money, and they have no reason to change anything. It is cost-free for a national football president or a basketball head coach to sexually abuse teenage girls.”



## A Coubertoin tax against muscle drain

*The French economy professor emeritus at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, Wladimir Andreff, has contributed to Play the Game on many occasions since 1997. In a speech at Play the Game's conference in 2005, he proposed a solution to the financial imbalance in sport between developed and less developed economies. Today, it is worth asking if a global sports tax could also be used for other purposes, such as financing athlete unions, integrity initiatives, and other social ends that are not commercially viable.*

In 1978, James Tobin, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, recommended a tax on foreign exchange transactions that “will throw sand in the wheels of international finance” and put a brake on too many swift short-term capital movements on the world financial markets (Tobin 1978).

On the other hand, Pierre de Coubertin wished all the countries of the world to participate on equal footing in the Olympic Games. How is it possible to reconcile this Coubertinian idea with the harshness of budget constraints in developing countries? We outline below a solution (not a panacea) which is likely to alleviate, along with some of the financial problems of developing countries, the aforementioned problem of the muscle drain.

This is the aim of a so-called ‘Coubertoin’ tax [...] with the four purposes of 1) slightly covering the education and training cost, for his/her home developing country, of any athlete or player transferred abroad; 2) providing a stronger disincentive to transfer an athlete or a player from a developing country, the younger he/she is when the transfer takes place; 3) thus, slowing down the muscle drain from developing countries and

toward professional player markets in developed countries; and 4) accruing revenues to a fund for sports development in the home developing country from the tax levied on every athlete or player transfer abroad. The fund would firstly finance sports facility building and maintenance (thus facilitating a sport for all practice), and secondly physical education programs in schools (in some way, a reimbursement of the sporting education received in their home country by migrant athletes).

The idea is to levy the tax at a 1% rate on all transfer fees and initial wages agreed on in each labor contract signed by players from developing countries with foreign partners (usually foreign professional clubs and/or players’ agents). By its very existence, the Coubertoin tax should slow down the muscle drain, but a windfall benefit may be to slightly reduce the labor cost differential (including the tax) between home developing country’s and host developed country’s labor markets, thus lowering the (surely still strong) incentive for players to leave their home country. A specifically crucial issue is the one of international transfers of teenage athletes from developing countries, albeit it is not

the only one. One can get to grips with such an issue through differentiated taxation including a surcharge on the transfer fee and initial wage of teenage and very young players. [...]

When it comes to the issue of who will pay the Coubertobin tax and possible surcharge, it must be the individual or legal body which pays the bill for the transfer fee and the first year wage, whether it is an affiliated professional club or a players' agent. If two bodies are involved, both will help pay. Of course, no one should be taxed twice, once in the developing home country and a second time in the host country; the tax should only be collected in the former country in order to avoid double taxation.

### **Monitored and supervised**

Furthermore, there is a risk of bargaining and corruption surrounding the tax collection in developing countries. This is the reason why we suggest that the collection of the Coubertobin tax should be monitored and supervised by an international organization, either an existing one (UNDP or the World Bank) or an *ad hoc* one to be created (a sort of world agency for the Coubertobin tax, for instance, under the joint auspices of the UN and the IOC). This international organization would govern the whole process of tax calculation, collection and allocation, and would have to solve any emerging conflict between a player's home country or nursery club and his/her recruiting professional club or players' agent.

We could expect the new tax would meet with both hindrance and resistance. [...] First, the Coubertobin tax

will not be easy to implement and enforce insofar as it has to be accepted on a worldwide basis. Otherwise, some free-riding developed countries (professional clubs) will still transfer teenage players without paying the tax and will concentrate on the most talented Third World migrant athletes, while some developing countries will be deprived of the money supposed to reside in their sports development fund. [...]

It is clear that the Coubertobin tax cannot be introduced without some sort of general agreement joined by all countries involved in athlete transfers. Athlete transfers from countries that had not joined the agree-



*A tax on athlete transfers could serve sports development in the Global South, one of the world's most respected sports economists has suggested. Photo: Simon Bruty/ALLSPORT/Getty Images*

ment should be forbidden and fined or nullified when undertaken in a sort of international underground black market for sporting talents from developing countries.

Of course, all the professional leagues and clubs all over the world would attempt to resist the new taxation, and the joint efforts of the UN, IOC and international associations or federations (like FIFA in football), as well as political will in home and host countries, would be necessary to break through. The international organization in charge of the tax administration should



*Wladimir Andreff was right when predicting a new tax would meet resistance. Here, he speaks to journalists following his intervention at Play the Game 2005 in Copenhagen. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

supervise that tax revenues were really spent on sports development in home countries, including training the most talented players until 18 in order to raise their international market value. Nevertheless, the suggested Coubertobin tax seems desirable and feasible insofar as transfers of teenage or younger players are assessed as a harmful practice, specifically for developing countries.

### **Not restricted to football**

A new FIFA transfer regulation (FIFA, 2001) came into force on 1 September 2001; it contains a number of clauses relating to the protection of minors, training compensation and a solidarity mechanism. The new transfer rules limit the international transfer of minors (under 18). Transfers of minors are prohibited unless the player's family moves for non-football-related reasons. Within the EU-EEA (European Economic Area), players under 18 can only move if teams undertake to provide both sporting and academic training.

The new rules also establish that compensation for training costs incurred between the ages of 12 and 21 is payable when the player signs his first professional contract and on each subsequent move to another team up to the age of 23.

The first payment of training compensation is distributed on a pro-rata basis between the teams contributing to the player's training. The calculation of the training compensation is based on a four-tier categorization of teams to be determined by individual national football associations (federations). Finally, the new

rules include a solidarity mechanism whereby 5% of all compensation payments for transfers involving players over the age of 23 will be distributed to those teams involved in the training of players between the ages of 12 and 23. [...]

FIFA regulation is a step forward [but] may well be circumvented by host professional clubs, players' agents and teenage players (or their parents). We could imagine naturalizing the player on purpose, football-related moves of the player's family hidden behind apparently non-football-related reasons, false declarations about the player's age (a quite common practice in developing countries), and so on.

By its very nature, the new FIFA regulation is restricted to football only, while the suggested Coubertobin tax is widespread to all professional – team as well as individual – sports. If only for this reason, the tax would have a higher return and a stronger impact on financing sport development in home developing countries. Take the example of the Dominican Republic which exports exactly no football players whereas over 1,300 Dominican citizens are operating in various North American baseball leagues. [...]

A last note is that without a more efficient supervision of the players' agent business – including the FIFA permit to enter the business – neither the Coubertobin tax nor the FIFA rules will be implemented in full – i.e., without anyone circumventing them. Outlaw agents should be banned and expelled from the business. European clubs that keep on dealing with FIFA unapproved agents should be fined and demoted for

years. Outlaw agents are more inclined to deal with African, Asian and Latin American non-affiliated associations and straight with teenage players themselves (and their parents) insofar as they are crowded out by approved agents from the more profitable market of transactions transferring the most famous European and non-European professional athletes. In France, for example, over 200 agents are in the business whereas only 46 hold a FIFA permit; in Belgium, 26 of them are holding a permit out of 200. [...]

By no way a long-run solution to the muscle drain of talented teenage players could avoid a policy for sports development – and the issue of the required finance – in developing countries, and could be found without progress toward self-sustained economic development reducing the wage gap, including the revenue gap of professional sportsmen and women. Unfortunately, the regulation of the international mobility of teenage players can only alleviate the most undesirable consequences of the muscle drain.

The suggested Coubertobin tax can put a brake on international transfers of very young players. It is likely to be 100% efficient, namely in entirely phasing out illicit transfers undertaken by outlaw players' agents. We reach here the point at which economic tools must be completed by administrative and legal measures aiming at control over the players' agent business.

*For the sake of authenticity, the factual information from 2005 has not been updated.*

*Full text at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*

## When sport is more than a play



*Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

Fiction and reality intertwined when the theatre play 'Frontrunners' crossed the stage at Play the Game 2005 in Copenhagen.

Written by Canadian journalist Laura Robinson, the play was based on the true story of 10 native Canadian boys, all outstanding running talents.

Having survived all kinds of abuse at residential schools they were forced to attend, the boys were chosen to run 800 kilometres with a torch destined for the Opening Ceremony of the Pan-Am Games in Winnipeg in 1967.

When they finally arrived at the entrance to the stadium, the boys were told to hand over the torch to a non-native runner – the idea of a First Nation person representing Canada was not acceptable to the organisers then.

In 1999, the runners were called back and rehabilitated when the Pan-Am Games were again hosted by Winnipeg. After 32 years, they could finally complete their mission and deliver the torch in the stadium themselves.

Laura Robinson was present then and decided to write the story of these men whom she describes as survivors. She later turned the magazine article into a book, the book into a play, and the play into a movie.



*Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

### **Fiction or reality?**

The decision whether the play was fiction or reality was not made easier for the audience at Play the Game 2005, since two of the actors, Charlie Nelson and Fred Harper, were not real actors – but two of the frontrunners in the real world. For them, telling the story of

their lives on stage brought some meaning to the injustices they had gone through. For the audience, running with them took their breath away. Frontrunners showed that sport can be more than a play.





# HARD RULERS PURSUING SOFT POWER

At the end of 2021, the Language Council of Norway made a surprising move from language protection into sports politics. Arguing that the new year 2022 would see a series of global sports events hosted in authoritarian countries, they chose the verb ‘*sportsvaske*’ as the new ‘Word of the Year’ – derived directly from the English ‘sportswashing’.

The decision reflected a global shift in the sports political debate in this century. Often, the history of crimes in sport was told with athletes, coaches, doctors, and officials as the culprits of doping, corruption, match-fixing, sexual abuse, and other criminal conducts. But lately, the crime stories have focused more often on states as perpetrators.

Today, when nation-states try to wash away crimes against humanity by offering sports entertainment instead of human rights, they are accused of ‘sportswashing’.

Sportswashing was first used when Azerbaijan and its ruling Aliyev family hosted the European Games in 2015. Since then it has been used as a label whenever autocratic nations have thrown unprecedented fortunes into buying sports clubs and hosting international sports events – with the intent to, among others, distract from their bad human rights records and clean the images of their countries.

That challenge is in no way new to modern sport.

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*The opening ceremonies at major events are golden opportunities to convey a nation's self-image and technological capacity to a world audience. At the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, nearly 2,000 drones shaped a globe passing over the attendees. Photo: Ali Atmaca/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

When Nazi Germany hosted the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, the framing of Adolf Hitler's views on German values and culture was orchestrated by Joseph Goebbels, the minister of propaganda. And when Zaire hosted a heavyweight world title fight in 1974 between Afro-American boxers Mohammad Ali and George Foreman, the 'Rumble in the Jungle' was framed by supporters of Zaire dictator Mobuto Sese Seko as "a fight between two blacks in a black nation organised by blacks and seen by the whole world; this is a victory of Mobutism."

When China hosted the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, the event was met with threats of boycott and demonstrations organised by human rights defenders who protested against the communist regime's oppression of Tibet, the religious group Falun Gong, and civic rights in general.

But at the time, many observers also expected that awarding the Olympics to Beijing was a recognition of China's global importance that might lead to political and economic reforms.

"The greatest legacy of the Beijing Games will be a largely intangible one – its human and cultural legacy," wrote Susan Brownell, associate professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, US in 2008.

"Hosting the Olympic Games will require China to 'link up with international standards', accelerating the process that already began over 100 years ago. The changes that occur will not be those forced upon China by others, but will be those that China voluntarily seeks out so that it may play a key role in the global society of the 21st century." Hence, the opening ceremony was attended by government representatives of all kinds of political systems. And even if the hopes of reform would soon be disappointed, the event left China with an international influence much beyond sportswashing.

### **Framing the narrative**

The term sportswashing does not catch the full story of what a country can achieve through international sports events.

All nations, whether democratic or not, are trying to frame what they see as attractive values and cultures of their countries. In doing so, the universal popularity of sport is a perfect communication tool, and global sports organisations such as the IOC, FIFA, and

other international sports federations who hold the broadcasting rights to sports events worldwide are perfect partners for national governments.

The ability of a nation to frame attractive images and narratives of its ideas, values, and culture is often called ‘soft power’. The American political scientist Joseph Samuel Nye Jr. coined the term in his 1990 book ‘Bound to Lead’, which challenged the then conventional view of the decline of American power by focusing on other national powers rather than the so-called hard powers such as weapons and money.

“After looking at American military and economic power resources, I felt that something was still missing – the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than by coercion or payment,” Joseph Nye wrote in 2017 of the origins and political progress of his soft power concept. He developed the concept further in 2004 by stating that “the ability to combine hard and soft power into successful strategies where they reinforce each other could be considered ‘smart power’.”

With or without reading Joseph Nye, his power theories have been adopted by many nations around the world. They have invested massively in culture, tourism and sports to benefit from, among other things, the global fascination linked to the elite sport competitions, the opportunity to communicate national narratives through glamorous opening and closing ceremonies, and the visits from tens of thousands of fans.

Investments in international sport also open doors to the highest levels of global diplomacy and create new business opportunities that can diversify a country’s economy. However, the international limelight that comes with sports events will also bring public awareness to sides of a country that were hidden in the shades.

One of the tiniest countries to pursue soft power has drawn full global attention for more than a decade: Qatar, the richest country in the world per capita, an oil- and gas-producing peninsula in the Middle East ruled by an emir whose monarchy was realising a long-term strategy to gain soft power through sport.



*US professor Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” to describe a nation’s ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than by coercion or payment. Photo: VCG/Getty Images*

The strategy was intended to make an international name for Qatar and provide some protection for a small country surrounded by much larger nations with hard-power military resources. The investments included – and include – hosting hundreds of events across all kinds of sports, and the FIFA World Cup was the jewel in the crown.



*Essential for Qatar's soft power strategy has been the hosting of the World Championship in handball 2015 and hundreds of other international sports events. Here, the Qatari handball team – with many recently naturalised players – celebrates the surprising win over Poland in the semi-final. Photo: Christof Koepsel/Bongarts/Getty Images*

The public awareness of Qatar's existence exploded on 2 December 2010 when FIFA controversially elected Russia as the host for the 2018 FIFA World Cup and Qatar as the host country for the 2022 edition.

A few weeks before the selection, The Sunday Times had revealed that members of FIFA's Executive Committee were open to receiving bribes, and FIFA had to suspend two ExCo members. So, FIFA's surprising choice of the first-ever Arab World Cup host caused widespread public suspicion that corruption played a role in the Qatar bid.

Some of these suspicions would later be confirmed.

It was revealed that Qatar had promised FIFA a 100 million US dollar bonus for media rights if the country won the right to host the event, in clear violation of FIFA's own rules.

Moreover, a few days before the vote, French president Nicolas Sarkozy convened a secret lunch at the French presidential palace, where he was joined by UEFA president Michel Platini and the Qatari crown prince Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (who would become Emir in 2013).

This lunch between the three power-brokers and their advisors seems to have played a crucial role in turning the three UEFA votes at FIFA's Executive Committee in Qatar's favour.

French police has for years investigated allegations that a deal was made where Michel Platini would provide the decisive votes in return for Qatar's massive investments in taking over the French football club Paris Saint-Germain, buying broadcasting rights for French football through its agency BeIN Sports, and buying 50 Airbus planes for Qatar Airways.

### **Lack of labour rights**

But Qatar would also become a symbol of another problem: The general lack of labour rights for migrant workers in the Persian Gulf states.

One of the first human rights activists to link Qatar's lack of workers' rights to the 2022 FIFA World Cup was Nicholas McGeehan from Human Rights Watch. Four days after FIFA's election of Qatar, he wrote an article in The Guardian stating that the 2022 World Cup should "not be built on brutality". Criticism of Qatar's victory was not just correct, it was highly necessary:

“Unfortunately, it has been misdirected. While concerns over women’s rights and attitudes to homosexuality (not to mention the irresponsible lunacy of air-conditioning the desert) are entirely valid, there has been no meaningful criticism of what is by far the most problematic aspect of Qatar 2022: the systematic exploitation of the country’s migrant workforce and the possible enslavement of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of impoverished south Asian workers, who will be imported to meet the demands of a constructions sector expected to swell twentyfold from 5 billion to 100 billion US dollars over the next 12 years,” Nicholas McGeehan wrote, adding:

“The massive boom in Qatar’s construction sector will bring hundreds of thousands of South Asian migrant workers into a cultural, politically and socially homogenous region in which slavery’s moral repugnance has not yet been fully recognised, and a country whose labour market was designed to grant employers absolute control over their workers.”

Nicholas McGeehan also noted that hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup represented an opportunity for Qatar to take the lead on workers’ rights in the region. Strikes and trade unions were banned (and still are by 2023). The labour and immigration status of migrants was regulated by the so-called kafala system, which ties each worker to one employer in a highly dependent relationship often characterised by unpaid wages, inhumane living conditions, and unsafe working conditions, sometimes leading to suicides.

### **A perfect opportunity for unions**

Soon, both trade unions and human rights organisations realised that Qatar’s World Cup victory was a perfect opportunity for them to call for worker’s rights and human rights in the entire Gulf region. They began producing reports with facts and narratives supporting their calls for change in Qatar and the region.

In May 2011, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) launched a report uncovering the human costs of a huge migrant labour force in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates and proclaimed they would use the report to “put pressure on FIFA and the Qatar 2022 World Cup, for which 12 stadiums are expected to be built over the next ten years.”

While the ITUC had previously called for workers’ rights in relation to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa and the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, the 2011 report ‘Hidden Faces

of the Gulf Miracle' became the beginning of an even bigger global public campaign for labour rights at major sporting events.

Sharan Burrow, then general secretary of ITUC, promised to hold FIFA's president Sepp Blatter and Qatar's FIFA delegate, construction magnate Mohamad bin Hammam, as well as the labour ministers of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates responsible for improving migrant workers' conditions.

"A huge migrant labour force, with very little rights, no access to any unions, very unsafe practises, and inhuman living conditions, will be literally putting their lives on the line to deliver the 2022 World Cup," Sharan Burrow said, and Ambet Yuson, general secretary of the Building Workers International (BWI), agreed.

"Just 6 per cent of the working population of Qatar is Qatari – their economy and their ability to deliver the World Cup is totally dependent on severe exploitation of migrant labour, which we believe to be barely above the forced labour conditions," Ambet Yuson said.

### **Pressure on FIFA**

In November 2011, ITUC and BWI met with FIFA's general secretary Jerome Valcke to inform him that unless Qatar upheld labour rights, they would campaign against the 2022 World Cup being held in Qatar. They would fight for labour rights approved by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a tripartite UN agency representing governments, employers, and workers since 1919 to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work.

Six months later, the ITUC announced a new investigation into the conditions of workers in Qatar following a visit of Sharan Burrow to Nepal to hear first-hand accounts from workers who had just returned home from the emirate. The investigation was launched with a reference to Nepalese embassy statistics from January to October 2011 which showed that 13 Nepalese migrant workers in Qatar committed suicide and documented 22 work-related deaths and 92 unexplained deaths.

In June 2012, Human Rights Watch released its first major report on the matter titled 'Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar Ahead of FIFA 2022'.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 73 migrant construction workers for the report. All but four of the workers said they paid recruitment fees ranging between 726 and 3,651 US dollars and borrowed from private money lenders at interest rates ranging from 3 to



5 per cent per month to 100 per cent interest on their debts per year. Most of the interviewed migrant workers said they had mortgaged their homes or sold off family property to obtain their jobs. And nearly all of them said that their employers had confiscated their passports, which according to the ILO is “a key indicator of forced labour”.

These reports made Qatar’s organising Supreme Committee promise to establish labour standards that builders and other contractors hired to build the World Cup venues must meet. And FIFA pledged to raise worker rights issues with the government of Qatar.

Human Rights Watch called for additional steps:

“What the international community needs to hear are specific, public, and enforceable commitments from them and the construction companies. FIFA should also push for such action, given its public promise to promote labour rights in Qatar,” Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said.

### **Harrowing testimonies**

The campaigns for workers’ rights and human rights in Qatar didn’t reach a global audience until September 2013 when The Guardian in headlines labelled migrant workers in Qatar as ‘slaves’ and stated that the World Cup construction could “leave 4000 migrant workers dead” before the opening match of the World Cup tournament in 2022.

Citing ITUC, the newspaper said that the annual death toll among those migrants working on building sites in Qatar could rise to 600 a year unless the government in Doha made urgent reforms. The warning came after The Guardian had revealed that 44 Nepalese workers died between 4 June and 8 August 2013, about half of them from heart failure and workplace accidents.

“Nothing of any substance is being done by the Qatari authorities on this issue. The evidence-based assessment of the mortality rate of migrant workers in Qatar shows that at least one worker on average per day is dying,” the ITUC general secretary Sharan Burrow said, noting that with an expected increase of 50 per cent of the migrant workforce, there would be a concomitant increase in deaths.

“We are absolutely convinced they are dying because of conditions of work and life. Everything that The Guardian has found out accords with the information we have gathered from visits to Qatar and Nepal. There are harrowing testimonies from workers in the system there,” Burrow said.



*The sufferings of construction workers in the massive infrastructure projects needed for the FIFA World Cup – like the Al-Bayt Stadium (pictured) – caused worldwide debate. Photo: Lars Baron/Bongarts/Getty Images*

One month later, the then FIFA president Sepp Blatter admitted that FIFA could not turn a blind eye to the deaths of hundreds of construction workers in Qatar. Under pressure to act on The Guardian's revelations, Sepp Blatter said he would meet with the emir of Qatar to discuss the issue.

In a letter to FIFA released to the media, Hassan Al-Thawadi, head of Qatar's Supreme Committee, said it considered the findings presented by The Guardian to be of the utmost seriousness.

“Our prime minister has personally stated to us his firm and resolute commitment towards ensuring that genuine progress is made in the sphere of workers’ welfare. The health, safety, wellbeing, and dignity of every worker that contributes to staging the 2022 World Cup is of the utmost importance to our committee, and the state of Qatar, and we are steadfastly committed to ensuring that the event acts as a true catalyst towards creating sustainable improvement for every worker in our country,” the letter stated.

But the campaigns did not stop Qatar, the richest country in the world by income per capita. In November 2013, Amnesty International joined the campaigns by releasing its first major report on the issue: ‘The Dark Side of Migration: Spotlight on Qatar’s Construction Sector Ahead of the World Cup’. It was followed up three years later by a second major report on the subject: ‘The Ugly Side of the Beautiful Game: Exploitation of Migrant Workers on a Qatar World Cup Site’.

The many reports documented that the conditions for World Cup migrant workers in Qatar had made the fight for human rights in sport a much higher priority to both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International than ever before. But Qatar was not the only country of their attention.

### **Race to the bottom**

The lack of workers’ rights in sport were also highlighted on the eve of the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia.

One year prior to the games, a Human Rights Watch report ‘Race to the Bottom: Exploitation of Migrant Workers Ahead of Russia’s 2014 Winter Games’ concluded that Russia and the IOC should make rigorous monitoring of workers’ rights on Olympic construction sites a top priority to prevent further abuses.

According to the report, the large number of construction projects in Sochi had required an influx of tens of thousands of workers, including over 16,000 migrant workers from countries outside Russia such as Armenia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Serbia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. The migrants said they worked 12-hour shifts seven days a week and earned between 1.80 and 2.60 US dollars an hour.

“The Olympic Games are about excellence and inspiration. The world should not cheer Winter Games in Russia that are built on a foundation of exploitation and abuse,” Jane Buchanan, associate Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said.



*Russian anti-gay laws introduced shortly before the Sochi Winter Olympics 2014 triggered worldwide protests like this one in front of the Russian embassy in Madrid. Photo: Denis Doyle/Getty Images*

### **Schizophrenic attitude to LGBT rights**

According to Human Rights Watch, the Russian government “unleashed a crackdown on civil society unprecedented in the country’s post-Soviet history” in 2013.

The Russian government “introduced a series of restrictive laws, harassed, intimidated, and in several cases imprisoned political activists, interfered in the work of nongovernmental organisations, and sought to cast government critics as clandestine enemies, thereby threatening the viability of Russia’s civil society,” Human Rights Watch said.

Furthermore, on 1 July 2013, the Russian parliament passed a new legislation outlawing propaganda about “non-traditional” sexual relations to minors. The law was widely criticised for discriminating against homosexuals, but president Vladimir Putin said the legislation was aimed at protecting children against paedophiles only, and that homosexuals attending the Sochi Games should feel at ease so long as they “leave the children in peace”.

The Russian anti-propaganda law caused a major international debate led by gays, lesbians, and trans-people all over the world with strong support from government leaders in many democratic countries, although 40 per cent of all UN member states at the time were criminalising same-sex sexual acts between consenting adults.

“The status of LGBT rights globally is schizophrenic,” Jessica Stern, executive director of the New York-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, told *The Atlantic*, and noted that laws against homosexuality that had recently made international headlines weren’t necessarily new, but they were getting more attention because of the level of progress seen in other countries.

In a June 2013 report titled ‘The Global Divide on Homosexuality’, the Pew Research Institute arrived at similar conclusions, finding broad acceptance of homosexuality in North America, the European Union, and much of Latin America, but equally widespread rejection in predominantly Muslim nations and Africa, as well as parts of Asia and in Russia. The report noted that “acceptance of homosexuality is particularly widespread in wealthy countries where religion is less central in people’s lives”, but that exceptions included Russia and China, where levels of religiosity and tolerance for homosexuality are both low.

### **LGBT as a scapegoat**

Renato Sabbadini, executive director at the Brussels-based International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association, told *The Atlantic* that the Russian law could be seen as a means of placating the powerful Russian Orthodox Church and defending “traditional values” in opposition to the West, where LGBT rights were generally advancing. And Boris Dittrich, an advocacy director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights Program at Human Rights Watch, agreed:

“There are always elections coming up in Russia and it makes politicians popular to look for a scapegoat. LGBT people are a scapegoat because people don’t know much about LGBT, they mix it up with paedophilia, bestiality or even think it has something to do with

the devil,” Boris Dittrich told CNN, adding that there weren’t many openly gay or lesbian people in the Russian society that could be seen as role models for people to judge by.

The international protests were supported by political leaders in many Western countries, including the French president Francois Hollande and the British prime minister David Cameron. On the eve of the Sochi Games, US president Barack Obama even appointed an official US delegation composed of three openly gay athletes, tennis player Billy Jean King, ice hockey player Caitlin Cahow, and figure skater Brian Boitano.

Nevertheless, the international protests didn’t result in major boycotts of the Russian 50 billion dollar sports event. The most expensive Olympic Games in history went ahead as planned. However, so many athletes came out as homosexuals in protest of the Russian anti-propaganda law that the Sochi Games became known in some places as ‘The Gay Olympics’. And the media coverage of the protests even overshadowed the coverage of Russia’s exploitation of thousands of poor migrant workers who transformed the Black Sea coast resort into a modern Olympic host city.

But even though the IOC after the Sochi Games introduced a specific anti-discrimination clause to its host city contracts saying that “any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender, or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement”, the clause didn’t stop Russia’s race to the bottom. And other countries took part in the race, too.

### **Public protests in Brazil**

A few months after the Sochi Games, Brazil was hosting the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the first of two global sports events in the country. It was followed by Rio de Janeiro’s hosting of the Olympic Games in 2016, the first Olympics in South America.

When Brazil acquired the rights to host these two global events in 2007 and 2009, respectively, the country’s economy and democratic culture was flourishing and its global influence on the rise.

The events were framed by the Brazilian presidents, first Lula da Silva and then Dilma Rousseff, as a unique opportunity to celebrate Brazilian culture, promote Brazilian tourist attractions, and boost the Brazilian economy. However, one year ahead of the World Cup, Brazil’s hosting of the two events turned into a political nightmare for the government and the president’s Labour Party.

In June 2013, a few weeks prior to Brazil's hosting of the FIFA Confederations Cup, millions of Brazilians took part in some of the largest social rights protests in the country's history. The social unrest began in São Paulo after public transport fares were increased by 10 per cent, but soon an estimated two million people across more than 100 cities took part in the demonstrations, where they protested political corruption, police brutality, forced removal of poor habitations, and the cost of at least 25 billion US dollars to host both the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games.

While the protesters were demanding better health care, education, and transportation for all Brazilians, they were met by heavily armed riot police who responded by firing



*“Forced removals” – “Maracanã [stadium] privatized”. The popular protests went from the streets to the stands during FIFA’s Confederations Cup in 2013. Photo: Ronaldo Martínez/Getty Images*

teargas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets at the protesters, and sending armoured vehicles into the crowds to disperse the demonstrations. The social unrest went on for two weeks with at least four people dead and hundreds of people injured and arrested.

This was a huge shock to FIFA and to the IOC: How could a people believed to be football fanatics take to the streets and include football and sports leaders as targets of their protests?

On the eve of the World Cup, in June 2014, new demonstrations for social rights hit the streets of more than ten Brazilian cities. Hours before the opening match, riot police fired percussion grenades and teargas at protesters in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo causing Amnesty International to accuse the police of using excessive force.

During the World Cup tournament, an army of police officers managed to prevent the social unrest from growing into new mass protests. But the damage was already done. More than obtaining soft power from hosting the FIFA World Cup, Brazil was suffering from “soft disempowerment”.

The 2014 World Cup became a clear example of how sports mega-events can generate social fragmentation in politically and economically unstable host countries instead of national pride. It showed how growing public distrust in sports organisations led protesters to target both political and sports leaders, pressuring them to stop spending public money on soft power races to the bottom.

### **Corruption schemes in Rio**

Brazil’s challenges did not stop there. At the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, around 30,000 heavily armed police officers and anti-terror specialists from the army were deployed. They managed to prevent new street fights, but there were other obstacles for the Olympic event, particularly the worst economic recession in Brazil for decades.

Furthermore, a few months prior to the Olympic opening ceremony in Rio de Janeiro, Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff became involved in an impeachment process after a year-long police investigation of corruption involving the state-run oil firm Petrobras and several of the engineering companies that built the Olympic venues.

The companies caught up in the Petrobras probe “very probably” broke laws against price-fixing and bribery on contracts to build Olympic venues, Igor Romario, a Federal Police chief who was a key figure in the Brazilian investigation, told Reuters:

“In every situation where there has been an investigation into contracts with these





*In the lead-up to the European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan's ruler Ilham Aliyev ordered the arrest of many journalists and human rights activists, the barring of international foreign correspondents, and a ban on Amnesty International, Rebecca Vincent and Gulnara Akhundova told Play the Game 2015. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

companies, this model of corruption was repeated. It's possible that it was repeated in the projects for the 2016 Olympics.”

Today we know it was not only possible, but actually happened. Several Brazilian politicians and sports leaders are serving jail sentences for corruption related to Rio 2016.

At Play the Game's conference in 2017, former Brazilian football player Rai Oliveira said the legacy of the 2016 Olympics included abandoned venues, a reduction in public resources for sport, and a corruption crisis in Brazil's National Olympic committee.

On top of that, Patrick Hickey, an Irish IOC Executive Board member and president of the European Olympic Committees (EOC), was arrested by the police during the Rio Olympics and put to prison following an investigation of illegal reselling of Olympic tickets. An unprecedented violation of the impunity that international sports leaders most often take for granted.

Hickey's case has not come to a conclusion in Brazil, but in 2022 he officially withdrew from his Olympic roles after six years of 'self-suspension'.

### **Embezzling with impunity**

Before Brazil, the Irish IOC member had played a key role when 'sportswashing' made it to the global agenda.

In 2015, the London-based Sport for Rights campaign was set up to draw attention to Azerbaijan's bad human rights records ahead of and during its hosting of the first-ever European Games, and it used the term to point at Azeri dictator Ilham Aliyev.

"The authoritarian regime of Ilham Aliyev is using the games to present an image of itself as a progressive nation, but in reality, Azerbaijan is a country where dissenting journalists and activists are brutally repressed while the president and his cronies engage in corruption and embezzlement with impunity," Sport for Rights wrote in a press briefing, adding:

"Azerbaijan is engaged in sportswashing, attempting to distract from its human rights record with prestigious sponsorship and hosting of events including the European Grand Prix 2016, matches in the 2020 European football championship, and this month, Olympic spin-off the European Games. The Azerbaijani government hopes the games will 'showcase Azerbaijan as a vibrant and modern European nation of great achievement'. To this end, President Aliyev has invested 6.5 billion US dollars in the games, building venues across Baku. The regime is paying for all travel and accommodation for visiting teams."

The European Games was invented in 2012 by the EOC, an umbrella body for 50 national Olympic committees in Europe, back then headed by the Irish IOC member Patrick Hickey.

Prior to the games, Patrick Hickey said that "Baku 2015 will come to life through the dedication and effort of your entire country", and that it had been "an absolute pleasure working with the Azerbaijani leadership."

This evaluation did not surprise British investigative journalist Andrew Jennings:

"Hickey gets cosy with people many of us wouldn't invite home to meet our loved ones. Seeking a wealthy patron in Europe to pay for a regional Olympics to mirror the Pan-American Games and not finding any takers among reputable leaders, Hickey turned to the president of the national committee of Belarus, whose day job is being Europe's last dictator," Andrew Jennings told Sport for Rights.

“But Lukashenko is broke, so Hickey pursued the oil-rich president of the Azerbaijan Olympic Committee, another head of state. A noted kleptomaniac and jailer of journalists, Ilham Aliyev has reportedly offered millions to fund the event in 2015.”

Aliyev had certainly made sure the games would become a family event – for his own family. Not only was he presiding over both the country and the National Olympic Committee. He appointed his wife, Mehriban Aliyev, as head of the Organising Committee of the European Games, and his daughters were deeply involved in business related to the event.

After the European Games in Baku, Rebecca Vincent and Gulnara Akhundova, human rights activists at the Sport for Rights campaign, attended Play the Game’s 2015 conference in Aarhus.

The activists spoke of an atmosphere in Azerbaijan reminiscent of the former communist era in the country and said that Ilham Aliyev’s desire to avoid criticism of his national soft power strategy had resulted in the arrest of many journalists and human rights activists, the barring of international foreign correspondents, and a ban on Amnesty International.

“Failing to take a stand is helping nations like Azerbaijan to sportswash their image,” Rebecca Vincent said

### **Mega-events come with oppression**

Research published in 2022 at the University of Copenhagen shows that the hosting of mega-events inspires more repression rather than reform in authoritarian regimes. The global limelight contains dangers for those in power, says professor Adam Scharpf.

“Their political opponents can use the sporting events to demonstrate their discontent under the indirect protection of foreign journalists. This is why the autocrats come down hard on their critics before the sporting events take place,” explains Adam Scharpf.

The research echoed what Jules Boykoff, a professor of politics and government at the Pacific University in Oregon, argued at Play the Game 2017: Citizens often experience severe restrictions on their right to protest during such events despite legitimate concerns that they are funded at the expense of, for example, public health and social welfare.

Jules Boykoff referred to “greenwashing”, or sponsors paying lip service to environmental concerns at mega-events, as well as forced evictions and the “militarisation of the public sphere”.

Likewise, Minky Worden, director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch, added that human rights violations often increase as global mega-events grow in scale, resulting in disregard for the rights of minorities, abuse of migrant workers, and repression of journalists and demonstrators.

As an example, Minky Worden pointed out that China had pledged to implement reforms before being awarded the Olympic Games but following the award of the 2008 Games to Beijing, its human rights record worsened. Something that did not prevent the IOC from awarding Beijing the 2022 Olympic Winter Games.

### **Violent attacks on gays**

“Research has shown that if you award a mega-event to an authoritarian regime, you will create human rights abuses. We must recognise that these nations want the games to gain soft power,” Minky Worden said prior to Russia’s hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

Before the first whistle of that World Cup, Graeme Reid, director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights Program at Human Rights Watch, argued that “the well-founded fear of activists in Russia” that the anti-propaganda law introduced before the Sochi Olympics “would not only restrict freedom of expression but would send a message that the government condoned homophobia, leaving gay people vulnerable to violence and abuse”.

The passing of the law coincided with a ratcheting up of homophobic rhetoric in state media and a dramatic increase in attacks by vigilante groups and individuals who preyed on young gay men, lured them via dating apps to fake rendezvous, and beat, humiliated, and tortured them.

“The attackers filmed these attacks and posted the footage on social media, including images of them attacking the men they perceived as gay, confident of their impunity. As expected, the police failed to recognise the attacks as hate crimes,” Graeme Reid said, adding that sport may have moved on, but LGBT Russians don’t have that luxury:

“Despite the furor, the facts on the ground for LGTB Russians were not changed. The four years since Sochi have been marked by discrimination and brutal anti-gay violence, and while the focus of the international media has long ago moved on, Putin’s ‘traditional values’ continue to do immeasurable damage.”

### Putin the winner

To Minky Worden, the FIFA World Cup in Russia was the first test of FIFA's new Human Rights Policy from 2017 that included zero tolerance for discrimination based on sexual orientation. After the tournament, she labelled the event "Russia's bloody World Cup" and framed it as "a preventable own goal" for FIFA.

"FIFA's flagship tournament could have done something to relieve the worst human rights crisis in Russia since the Soviet era, but instead the football organisation condoned



*"If England had won, would anyone have questioned the result?" asked the head of the FIFA World Cup organisers in Qatar, Hassan Al-Thawadi, when confronting critics at Play the Game in 2017. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

many human rights violations, undermining its own policies. Russian president Vladimir Putin emerged as the big winner, using the games to sportswash his rule – to legitimize it by hosting a sporting mega-event,” the director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch said.

Minky Worden noted that from Russia’s escalating crackdown on peaceful critics to its unwelcoming anti-propaganda law to workers dying when building new stadiums, the World Cup did little to counter Russia’s rights abuses. According to Building Workers International (BWI) at least 21 World Cup workers died. And Josimar, a Norwegian investigative magazine, exposed that at least 110 North Korean forced labourers worked at the World Cup venue Zenit Arena in St. Petersburg.

“Beyond worker abuses, the World Cup gave one of Russia’s worst human rights violators, the Chechen ruler Ramzan Kadyrov, a global platform to launder his reputation. Russia’s Chechnya province is home to some of the country’s worst human rights violations. Kadyrov is known to publicly condone honour killings, order house burnings, and openly threaten journalists and human rights defenders,” Minky Worden said.

“In 2017, Kadyrov presided over a horrific and unprecedented anti-LGBT purge, as Chechnya’s security forces rounded up men perceived to be gay, tortured them, and forcibly abducted some. Kadyrov denied it, proclaiming in an interview with HBO: ‘We don’t have such people here. We don’t have any gays, to purify our blood. If there are any, take them’. In a later interview, he pretended he was unable even to pronounce the word homosexual.”

Nevertheless, the FIFA World Cup moved on to Qatar, despite ongoing violations of workers’ rights and human rights in the country, including discrimination of women, under the rule of its emir since 2013, the powerful IOC member Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

### **Delivering on the unimaginable**

Hassan Al-Thawadi, head of Qatar’s organising Supreme Committee, did not shy away from confronting his critics when speaking at Play the Game 2017 in Eindhoven in the Netherlands. There, he defended his nation by describing its winning World Cup bid as ‘top notch’.

“If England had won, would anyone have questioned the result? No one claimed that the whole system was flawed before the bidding process was complete. We have always been open and transparent,” he argued.

Hassan Al-Thawadi denied that Qatar had bought the World Cup and maintained that his nation had been cleared of any wrongdoing by a 2014 report from the then FIFA Ethics Committee chairman Michael J. Garcia and added that issues related to work and welfare are “not unique to Qatar”.

The Qatari argued that due to the extreme heat, the region had never hosted such a major event, but today’s state-of-the-art stadium cooling technology had made it possible. To Hassan Al-Thawadi, the World Cup in Qatar would even serve as a platform to help “heal the wounds of the region” and allow people in the Middle East to interact with those from other countries.

“It’s easy to be cynical. We are living in a world that pokes holes in our dreams. But we are delivering on the unimaginable,” Al-Thawadi said.

However, in October 2022 on the eve of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Amnesty International released a report that recognised some progress but concluded the host country still had a long way to go. The report ‘Unfinished Business: What Qatar must do to fulfil promises on migrant workers’ rights’ stated that after years of denial and inaction, reforms of Qatar’s labour system didn’t come about before 2017 under a three-year agreement with the ILO with the aim of dismantling “the toxic kafala sponsorship system, tackle wage abuse, enhance health and safety measures, prevent and prosecute forced labour, and promote worker’s voices.”

The report contained a plan for action, calling for Qatar to address gaps and remaining weaknesses in its labour reform process, end forced labour, protect domestic workers, investigate workers’ deaths, strengthen heat protections, expand the scope of the workers’ welfare standards, fully end the kafala system, allow trade unions, increase the minimum wage, tackle recruitment abuses, strengthen remedy mechanisms, and compensate historic abuses.

Both Qatar and FIFA ignored calls for compensating the families of those migrant workers who had returned to their poor countries in body bags or with crippling diseases caused by the working conditions.

When FIFA held its 73rd congress in Rwanda in March 2023, the Guardian quoted a coalition of eight global union federations, including BWI, for saying that migrant

workers were facing deteriorating conditions since the World Cup, with rogue employers “emboldened by an absence of enforcement and growing confidence that rights violations will go unpunished”.

### **Qatargate at the heart of EU**

Furthermore, a corruption scandal dubbed Qatargate was exposed on 9 December 2022 when the Greek member of the European Parliament, Eva Kaili, was arrested in a case of cash-for-favours scheme involving large sums of money and gifts allegedly paid by Qatar and Morocco to influence decision-making inside the European Parliament.

Both countries denied any wrongdoing, but the Belgian police seized more than 1.5 million euro in cash during raids around Brussels and arrested six suspects, including Luca Visentini, a then newly elected general secretary of ITUC who was later dismissed from his post.

Visentini admitted receiving 50,000 euro from the NGO ‘Fight Impunity’ run by former MEP Pier Panzeri who allegedly ran the bribery ring and confessed to distributing cash bribes on behalf of Qatar and Morocco to influence European politicians. But the ITUC said an external audit report had found “no evidence of donations from either Qatar or Morocco influencing the ITUC’s policies or programmes”.

Eva Kaili was one of the European Parliament’s 14 vice presidents. In early November 2022, she travelled to Qatar and held meetings with Qatari top leaders, including the prime minister, to discuss bilateral relations. A few weeks later, the Greek defended Qatar’s labour rights publicly, and in December 2022 she voted in favour of visa liberation for Qatari and Kuwaiti citizens inside the EU.

According to Europe News, Kaili defended her innocence but spent four months in prison before she on 12 April 2023 was given an electronic bracelet and moved to house arrest. But Qatar’s hard rulers of soft power on sport’s global playground walked free.

### **Genocide and games**

Likewise, the 2008 Olympics did little to improve human rights in China. In April 2021, the Human Rights Watch report ‘Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots’ concluded that human rights crimes in China had reached “unprecedented levels that make the Chi-



nese government guilty of the worst human rights crackdown in China since the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989.”

Two months later, Amnesty International’s secretary general Agnès Callamard released the report ‘Like we were enemies in a war’ and said the report documented that the Chinese authorities had created “a dystopian hellscape on a staggering scale” that threatens to deprive Muslim minorities in China of their religious and cultural identities.

On that backdrop, an international boycott campaign was launched to stop the 2022 Winter Olympics from being hosted in China.

The campaigners called on the IOC to move the Olympics away from Beijing because of the Chinese government’s human rights violations against one million Uyghurs and other Muslims that researchers estimated had been detained in 400 re-education camps, detention centres, and prisons in Xinjiang.

While the Chinese government framed its use of hard power against Muslim minorities as a necessary part of a national “war on terror”, the then US secretary of state Mike Pompeo in January 2021 accused China of “genocide and crimes against humanity”.

Even though most democratic countries in Europe and North America decided on a diplomatic boycott of the Olympic Winter Games in Beijing that protesters labelled ‘The Genocide Games’, Olympic athletes and national Olympic committees followed the IOC and took part in the games.

“It is for other governments to deal with the Chinese government in a meaningful way, not by sacrificing their own athletes in a gesture that they know will not be effective. My sense is that governments are too conflicted to engage in concerted action directed at China,” Richard W. Pound, the then longest-serving IOC member, told Play the Game. He admitted that China’s hard power strategies weren’t necessarily in line with the principles of the Olympic Charter.

“They may not be, but the IOC and the Olympic Movement must exist and operate in a world that is far from perfect. We can use the Games to show that peaceful interaction can still exist even in a divided world.”



*Chinese President Xi Jinping was mostly accompanied by representatives of authoritarian states when he opened the Beijing Olympics in 2022. Democratic leaders stayed away to signal their opposition to China's brutal oppression of the Muslim Uyghur minority. Photo: Anthony Wallace/Pool/Getty Images*



## The political power of the Olympic opening ceremony: Lessons from Beijing and Sochi

*In an article released on 19 January 2022, just before the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Play the Game's senior analyst Stanis Elsborg illustrated how the Chinese and Russian regimes employed the opening ceremonies for political purposes during their hosting of the previous Olympic Games in 2008 and 2014, respectively.*



*The Chinese flag was carried by Chinese children wearing national costumes representing all 56 ethnicities in China. A message of ethnic integration. Photo: Vladimir Rys / Getty Images*

[...] In the opening ceremony at the 2008 Olympics, there were about 100 [TV] clips that were different between the national and the international version.

[...] Above all, the camera was seeking Hu Jintao, who appeared 23 times in the Chinese version against only seven times in the international version, which instead continued to show the actual artistic programme on stage.

The Chinese president was also used in a geopolitical manner. During the parade of nations, the Chinese version of the opening ceremony zoomed in on Hu Jintao when Hong Kong and 'Chinese Taipei', as Taiwan is called at the Olympics, entered the stadium. When Hu Jintao is shown in connection with Taiwan, it can be interpreted as a sign of China's geopolitical aspirations for Taiwan.

The showing of Hu Jintao and Hong Kong at the same time can be seen as a signal to the Chinese people that Hong Kong – despite its independent Olympic status – has returned to the motherland. [...]

Of course, the unrest in Xinjiang before the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the Tibetan Uprising was not highlighted during the opening ceremony. Instead,

the Chinese organisers used the opportunity to send a message of ethnic integration in China.

Children in national costumes from the 56 different ethnic groups in China, including Tibetans and Uyghurs, carried the national flag into the stadium before handing it to Chinese military personnel who oversaw the hoisting of the flag. It later turned out that the children were not at all representatives from all the different ethnicities, but only from the ethnic group of Han Chinese, which makes up 92 per cent of the population [...] It would not be a surprise if the 2022 Beijing opening ceremony would contain similar scenes.

*[Ed. This actually happened and was analysed in a later article by the same author on Play the Game's website].*

As an example of the personal worship of Russian President Vladimir Putin, he was shown 40 times in the Russian version of the opening ceremony against only 16 times in the international version.

That was not the only difference in the versions of the opening ceremony in Sochi. The Russian flag was displayed 335 times in the Russian version of the opening ceremony and only 117 times in the international version. In the months leading up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Putin tabled a bill in parliament for wider use of state symbols such as the flag and national anthem saying “[Watching] the flying of the state flag and listening to the anthem will bring our citizens back... to patriotic feelings.” [...]

The close ties between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state in Putin's Russia were also staged in the



*Dancers with inflatable balloons symbolising the St. Basil's Cathedral and the close relationship between church and state in today's Russia at the opening ceremony of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.*

*Photo: Bruce Bennett / Getty Images*

opening ceremony in Sochi 2014. In an introductory video sequence that kicked off the ceremony, the Church was portrayed in the form of the St. Basil's Cathedral on the Red Square under the letter 'bl', which means 'we'. St. Basil's Cathedral with its characteristic onion domes was shown alongside the main character of the opening ceremony, a little girl called Lubov, meaning 'love', and the Kremlin buildings, which house President Putin and his administration.

It could be seen as a symbol that the 'we' of Russia today is building on a unit of Putin's Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church.

## Opening a difficult dialogue

“I was surprised that we did not speak more about sport.”

The remark from the vice director of media and communication for the Beijing 2008 Olympics, Sun Weijia, fell as he and his delegation left Play the Game 2002 and said goodbye to the hosts. It was one of the first occasions, if not *the* first, where the Chinese Olympic hosts decided to embark on a dialogue with their critics far away from their home turf.

To Play the Game’s knowledge, it was also the last.

Sun Weijia put himself in a hot spot, having accepted half an hour’s unrestricted debate after his presentation of the aims of the Beijing Olympics. He expressed his belief that the games would leave a legacy of significant progress in Beijing’s infrastructure, provide greater international exposure for the nation’s culture, and further integrate China into the global community.

These themes did not concern the audience much. Instead, Sun Weijia was met with a wave of questions about human rights from journalists, human rights NGOs, and academics.

“We do attach great importance to the improvement of human rights, but we think that different national situations, different backgrounds, and different stages of development can lead to different needs in so far as human rights,” Weijia said, referring to the huge size of the Chinese population.

“The biggest demand in my view is the legitimate claim for development, a better life. Over the past 20 years, the Chinese government has succeeded in improving the living standards for all these people, and I think this is the biggest contribution a country can make to the cause of human rights.”

Reporter Olukayode Thomas of Nigeria then asked what a high standard of living is worth without freedom.

“In China, freedom for everybody is guaranteed by the constitution,” countered Sun Weijia.

“The staging of the Olympics will certainly improve democratisation and modernisation of China – but that doesn’t mean that we are not a democratic country now.”

The questions continued: The ban on the religious group Falun Gong, the oppression of the Tibetans, press freedom, public executions, and the selling of the executed prisoner’s organs to foreign patients. Sun Weijia summed his answers up by acknowledging the importance of human rights:

“But I could never understand the approach that consists in taking your criteria for human rights in your country and for your people, and imposing these criteria for other countries,” Weijia replied.

### **The Olympics could improve China**

The dialogue with China continued at the next Play the Game conference in 2005 where professor Hai Ren from Beijing Sport University also stressed the context of rapid economic growth and social change, noting that “the income gaps have widened dramatically.”

“China used to be poor but homogenous, but now a polarising trend has suddenly appeared. Some have succeeded in the social and economic transition into prosperity, but others have suffered from stagnation and social turbulence,” he said, warning that inequality had reached an “alarming degree”.

He saw the Olympics as an exercise for the Chinese to learn how to respect and cooperate with each other. The transition from a traditional society with many self-sufficient small farmers to a state-planned economic structure became dominant and continued for nearly half a century. “So how to cooperate with each other based on legitimate principles is still a big lesson for Chinese to learn,” Hai Ren explained.

“The Beijing Olympics may provide a chance to change the situation mainly through the Olympic volunteer campaign,” said Hai Ren referring to a survey from Beijing which showed that 94 per cent of all respondents wanted to be volunteers at the Olympic Games.

To realise the slogan ‘Humanistic Olympics’ would also take great effort, Hai Ren said.

“Due to various reasons, from policy-making to media coverage, in the minds of many Chinese the



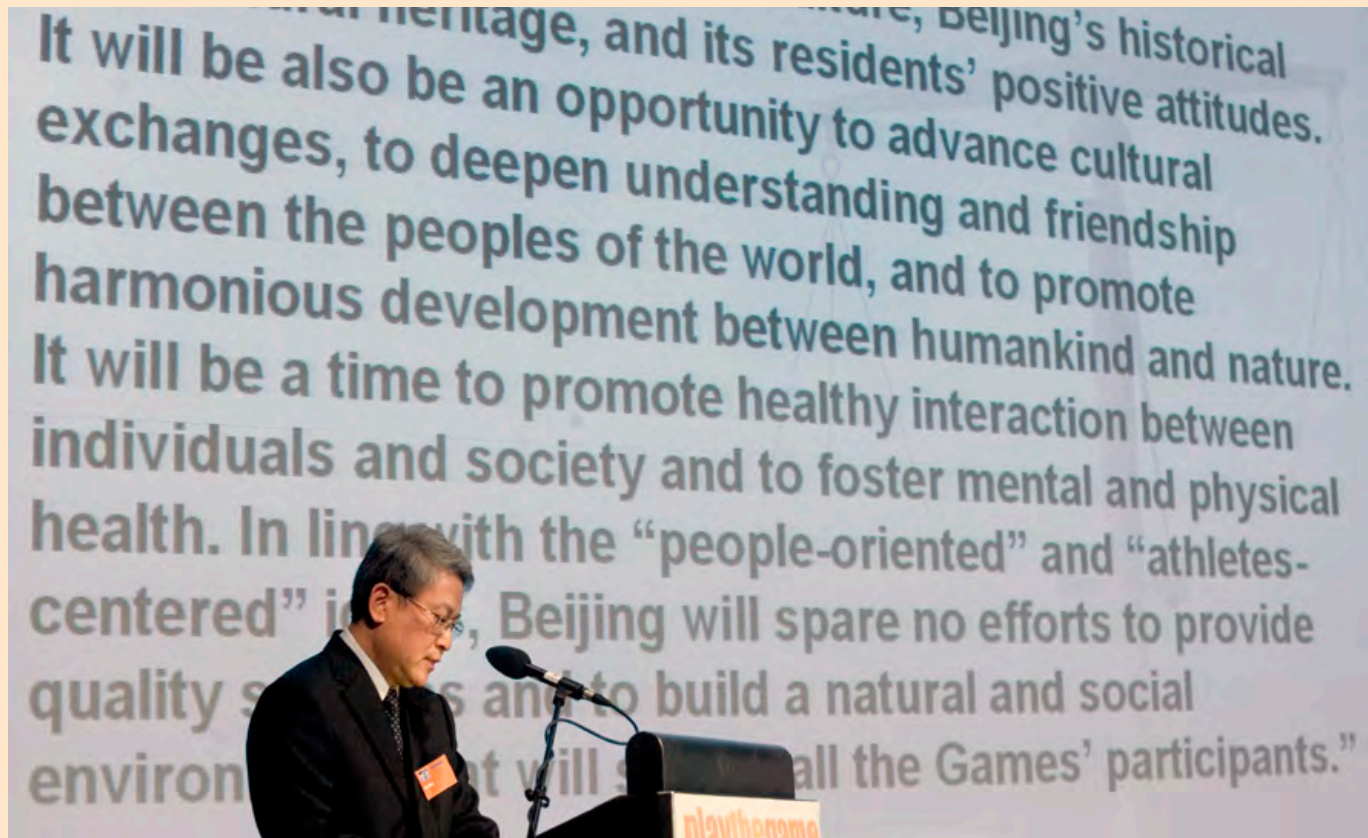
*When meeting a wave of critical questions in 2002, the deputy head of media relations for the Beijing 2008, Sun Weijia, insisted on every nation’s right to have its own interpretation of human rights.*

Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game

Olympic Games consist of superstars meeting far away from ordinary people. Perhaps this is the reason that the BOCOG referred to the Humanistic Olympics as the People's Olympics to correct the wrong ideas."

"The Humanistic Olympics are intended to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between China and

the world, but the question is how to make this happen and lead the understanding to a deeper and more comprehensive level. It cannot be achieved merely by demonstrations at the Olympic ceremonies or art exhibitions. It demands various sorts of interactive cultural activities participated in by both natives and visitors."



*Professor Hai Ren acknowledged challenges connected to the rapid growth in China and hoped the Olympics would help overcome and facilitate cross-cultural understanding. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

## Testing media freedom

Play the Game chose to pursue its own project of cross-cultural understanding when it launched 'Play the Game for open journalism' in collaboration with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in 2008.

The project was based on a website that aimed to assist around 10,000 foreign correspondents at the Beijing Olympics who would operate under a new media law. Two delegates from the project were present at the Games, giving advice and gathering information about the experience of journalists.

While most sports journalists were largely happy with the conditions they were working under during the Olympics, many of those following events off the field of play had problems.

There were hundreds of violations of media freedom rules for foreign correspondents during the Olympics, including the roughing up of photographers, detention of journalists, intimidation of sources, and blocked access to politically sensitive hotspots within China.

Based on the evidence gathered under the Beijing Olympics, the project concluded by giving five recommendations:

- Recent legislation allowing for freer working conditions for foreign journalists must also be extended to Chinese journalists.
- Restrictions on free coverage of certain subjects of vital importance to Chinese society, such as Falun Gong, Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan should be lifted.
- Sources must enjoy the same freedom as journalists to speak freely.

- China must ensure that local police and other authorities understand the rules for the media.
- China must deal with the cultural challenge to promote a debate about achieving its aims of a harmonious society while allowing for critical and independent journalism.

There were many clear signs that the project delegates in China were monitored, but their work was not impeded. However, when Play the Game's director Jens Sejer Andersen visited an international academic conference with 1,500 participants in the week before the Olympics, his communication was clearly intercepted and conversations with Chinese researchers were interrupted by officials.

"I was not completely surprised that I was under surveillance, but I had expected the system to act more discreetly," Andersen said. It was a very different experience when he was invited to give lectures on sports governance, corruption and crime in 2013 at the Beijing Sport University.

"In China, you must of course be respectful of the conditions your hosts are working under, but I found a very open atmosphere in which the students and I could have lively discussions about the role of civil society, as well as the risks of corruption in top-down controlled monopoly systems, like sport. The political climate in China and the world has changed, but hopefully, there will be room to discuss integrity and democratic values in sport also in the future."



## Hunting white elephants

White elephants is the name given to prestigious sports facilities that are left without any reasonable function once the last athlete has left the event. In 2011, Play the Game and the Danish Institute for Sports Studies involved colleagues all over the world to register how 75 stadiums in 20 countries were used after they had been constructed for major events.

The report 'Word Stadium Index: Stadiums built for major sporting events – bright future or future burden?' concluded that large stadium facilities are very difficult to fill.

It is mainly the public purse that ends up covering the costs, and in the worst cases, the maintenance becomes a significant burden on the local community. It speaks for itself that by 2011, 31 of the report's 35 football stadiums used for World Cups since 2002 had public owners.

The picture was even more glaring if you compared the costs of construction to the economic strength of the host nations. Nigeria's 426 million US dollars Abuja National Stadium seats approximately 60,000 spectators and was built in 2003 amid allegations of corruption. The price per seat was equivalent to three times the annual purchasing power of the average Nigerian.

The centrepiece of the report is the so-called 'stadium index', which compares each stadium's total attendance in 2010 to its capacity, thereby providing a measure of utilisation that is more comprehensive than just the number of events.

The best-utilised stadium in the study is the downgraded Olympic stadium from the 1996 Summer Olympics, Atlanta's Turner Field, which in 2010 attracted over 2.5 million spectators. With a capacity of over 49,000, it boasts an impressive stadium index of 50.6. The score can be attributed to the local baseball team, the Atlanta Braves, who plays to full houses in a large number of games throughout the season.

At the opposite end of the scale – not without some irony – is another Olympic stadium that has been converted for baseball, Nagano's exhibition stadium from the 1998 Winter Olympics, which only attracted a total of just under 18,000 spectators in 2010 despite a capacity of 30,000. This gives it a stadium index of 0.6. Baseball is strong in Japan, but the Nagano stadium is not home to an attractive team.

The average score of 13.4 illustrates that mega-events often lead to the construction of venues that are not needed locally. Portugal's hosting of the European Football Championship in 2004 is a cautionary tale in point.

Three venues have a stadium index of less than 3, and the report questions whether Portugal should have organised the European Championship on its own in the first place. The contrast with Germany's hosting of the 2006 World Cup is striking. While the German stadiums have an average utilisation index of 16.2, the stadiums in Portugal have an average utilisation index of 8.8.

## Predictions for Brazil verified

In 2012, Play the Game made a prediction about the use after the event of the 12 stadiums built or renovated for the FIFA World Cup in Brazil. By analysing local football attendance and other expected events, Play the Game predicted that not one of the 12 stadiums would reach the international average of 13.4 points. The prediction was made public at a Play the Game Day in São Paulo and attracted much national attention. A story on the news site uol.com had 100,000 readers within a few hours.

11 years later, researchers from Inteligência Esportiva Institute at the Federal University of Paraná checked the predictions for each stadium for the years 2015-2019 and 2022. Some scored better, some worse than the predictions, but no stadium reached the international average, although the Neo Química Arena in Brazil's biggest city São Paulo came close with a score of 13.0.

The worst scores were achieved by Arena Pantanal in central Brazil and the National Stadium of the capital Brasilia with 0.8 and 0.9, respectively. So typically, these two stadiums could not gather enough people over a full year to fill the number of seats available.

In 2007, the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) estimated the total costs for building and renovating the stadiums to be around 3.8 billion US dollars. Recent reports from state auditors and the Ministry of Sport have calculated the total price to be six to seven times higher – mostly paid by public money.

*Find the World Stadium Index at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*



*The National Stadium of Brazil was renovated at great costs for the 2023 FIFA Confederations Cup and the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Since then, the stadium would not be filled even if all visitors during a year arrived on the same day. Photo: Shaun Botterill/Getty Images*



## Chapter 8

# THE SECRET WAYS OF GOVERNANCE IN SPORT

Imagine that you are getting closer to the end of a two-day-long sports political meeting without any remarkable occurrences in a magnificent ballroom with gold-plated stucco, voluminous chandeliers, and oil paintings of the Hungarian elite looking down on everyone.

Such was the setting on 22 February 2011 when the EU Sport Forum organised by the European Commission gathered all sides of European sport at the Corinthia Grand Hotel Royal in Budapest: Sports federations, Olympic committees, ministries, fan groups, anti-doping agencies, and athlete unions.

As a panel debate with 14 speakers was finally winding up, and many among the 450 participants were thinking longingly about the upcoming gala dinner, something totally unexpected suddenly happened.

A small, compact man stood up on the thick woven carpet, grabbed the microphone, gave a belated welcome to his native country and proceeded to deliver the most astonishing series of declarations:

“We have, we have to talk about corruption,” he insisted. Sport has become a very important source of income “in both civilised and uncivilised countries.”

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*One of the most corrupt sports leaders in modern times has reason to celebrate. His undisputed control over world volleyball allowed him to cash in at least 33 million US dollars and probably much more in return for his honorary services to sport. The IOC knew about it, but let him off the hook. Photo: Alexander Hassenstein/Bongarts/Getty Images*

“Corruption is an increasing trend in sport,” he said. “Purchasing positions applies to all areas of sport, and even the doping controls and the doping laboratories are tainted by corruption.”

He referred to the idea of creating an agency against sports corruption and sent a strong appeal to the EU Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou:



*The weightlifting president Tamas Aján studying shining objects at the Olympic Museum of Peru. Aján blew the whistle on corrupt sports leaders in 2011 and later turned out to be a practising expert in the matter himself.*

*Photo: Raul Sifuentes/LatinContent via Getty Images*

“Madam Commissioner, I will emphatically ask you not to neglect this issue. We have to bring publicity into this, we have to open up this issue to the public because the public is the best remedy for stopping the spreading of corruption.”

Referring to his 45 years in sport, he said he could – but did not want to – “give you specific examples in any area of sport.”

“There is no sports organisation today where the appointment to important posts would not be tainted by corruption. In some countries, money seems to be growing on trees, and these countries can buy positions in places where they have no professional influence.”

The speaker was no less than Tamás Aján, president of the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), honorary member of the International Olympic Committee, and a part of world sport’s inner power circles since 1975.

That such a high-ranking member of the Olympic family would spill the beans about sports corruption was shocking in 2011. Not even the most outspoken IOC members had done so.

It was a breach of the *omertá* – the rule of silence – under which sports leaders had successfully managed to keep the media and the public authorities from looking into their business. The fact that Aján urged the European Union – a public authority – to take action against the autonomous Olympic sport, just emphasised the surprise.

More than a decade later, Aján’s statements seem even more revealing. Today we know that his words were not only a sharp attack on all sports. They were an accurate description of his own corrupt practices as president of the IWF.

### **Revelations by a German reporter**

These practices first came to light in 2013, when investigative reporter Grit Hartmann exposed in German media and on Play the Game’s website how internal critics at the IWF tried to hold Aján accountable for millions of dollars that were missing in the Swiss bank accounts of the federation. Despite the accusations, Aján has since then been re-elected twice as IWF president with an overwhelming majority.

The critics tried to report the mismanagement to the IOC and the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). The IOC coldly dismissed the complaint, stating it was a matter of internal regulation in the IWF. Later, CAS confirmed that the IOC had a right to deny dealing with the case, as the international federations were autonomous.

The doors remained open for the corrupt weightlifting leaders, headed by the president, to continue cheating with doping procedures and paying out cash rewards before elections.

But the doors slammed when Grit Hartmann joined forces with the EyeOpening Media team and in January 2020 produced a TV documentary for German national broadcaster ARD that exposed a number of cases of financial mismanagement and frequent manipulation of doping procedures within weightlifting.

This led the IWF Executive Board to suspend Tamás Aján for 90 days and to hire the Canadian lawyer Richard H. McLaren to examine the allegations.

### **Dysfunctional and ineffective**

In spite of the COVID-19 crisis and the reluctance of most IWF officials to cooperate, McLaren reached conclusions that echoed Grit Hartmann's journalistic footwork.

According to McLaren, the IWF president Tamás Aján had an "autocratic authoritarian leadership style" resulting "in a dysfunctional, ineffective oversight of the organisation by the Executive Board." Aján "disabled anyone other than himself from understanding the overall affairs of the IWF."

The report said that the "financial records are a jumble of incomplete and inaccurate figures distorted by a failure to accurately record cash expenditures and revenues and disclose hidden bank accounts by Dr. Aján."

Aján's ruling style was labelled a "tyranny of cash. Cash collected, cash withdrawn, and cash unaccounted for, of which Dr. Aján was the sole collector. The primary sources of this cash were doping fines paid personally to the president and cash withdrawals of large amounts from the IWF's accounts, usually withdrawn before major competitions or IWF congresses."

"It is absolutely impossible to determine how much of the cash collected or withdrawn was used for legitimate expenses. The McLaren Independent Investigation Team has determined that 10.4 million US dollars is unaccounted for."

"The investigation uncovered 40 positive Adverse Analytical Findings [doping tests] hidden in the IWF records. This includes gold and silver medallists who have not had their samples dealt with."



*Grit Hartmann talked about the rampant corruption at the IWF at Play the Game 2013 and in several articles in German and English. Both the IOC and CAS refused to deal with the case. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

“The two most recent Electoral Congresses were rampant with vote buying for the president and senior level positions of the Executive Board, despite monitoring.”

In the hours after the release of the report, Play the Game asked Richard H. McLaren if the overall legal framework for sport – for instance, the trust in self-regulation and the limited competencies of the Court of Arbitration for Sport – should change:

“It probably should, yes. In the case of the IWF, the federation has a very soft and not very well thought out code of conduct which does not give them the necessary provisions to allow proper internal investigations.”

McLaren doubted that the IOC was the right institution to serve as a watchdog for the Olympic federations and referred back to the fact that the IOC dismissed complaints from IWF insiders back in 2011.



“The response from the IOC back then is standard policy. They think the international federations should handle their own affairs without IOC intervention unless there is a clear cross-connection. This was not the case here, although the critics at the time, including the current Executive Committee member Antonio Urso from Italy, believed so.”

“They thought that the problem revolved around two Swiss bank accounts to which IOC grants were transferred, but it was not the case. The problem occurred further down the chain after the money from Switzerland was transferred to Hungary. So, the critics had the right idea, but they were barking up the wrong tree.”

### **Takes one to know one**

If anyone in 2011 doubted what Aján told the EU Sports Forum, the evidence produced by Hartmann and McLaren confirms the saying that ‘It takes one to know one’. Aján shared a truth about corrupt sports leaders that he knew better than anyone.

But was he right in blaming all other sports? This question is hard to answer.

Those who have the facts may not want to speak. Being a whistleblower in sport comes at great risk as shown in the next chapter.

But whistleblowers act in vain if nobody listens. And very few sports have the international attention necessary to ensure that the media takes an interest in wrongdoings in the corridors of power.

And even when the media takes an interest, the case may die out if the revelations are not followed up by public authorities – be it politicians or the police.

Many sports fans around the world have heard about how the most prestigious international sports, athletics and football, have been marred by institutionalised corruption at the top. But other sports go under the radar.

Volleyball, handball, and swimming have been exposed for irregular practices too, but even if they are commercially important, the politics of sports do not draw international headlines.

Take for instance the head of world volleyball from 1984–2008, Ruben Acosta from Mexico – or Dr. Acosta as he preferred to be called though no papers supported this doctoral title.

As a president of the Federation Internationale du Volleyball (FIVB), Ruben Acosta – very actively assisted by his flamboyant wife Malú – introduced a kind of management style that is comparable to absolute monarchy.

Ruben Acosta made the FIVB a resounding commercial success: He changed the point system of volleyball, he decreed tiny shorts for female players, and last but not least, he embraced and developed beach volleyball with its flavour of sun, sex and soft drinks. All these initiatives were aimed at making the ailing sport more appetizing on the TV screens.

Acosta singlehandedly introduced a rule by which every person who signed a TV or marketing contract on behalf of FIVB was entitled to a personal commission of 10 per cent of the contract sum. Eventually, the FIVB congress endorsed that role, accepting Acosta's reasoning that using external agencies would be more expensive.

### **President signs all contracts**

In parallel, Acosta introduced another unofficial rule: That the president signs all contracts. In that way, at least 33 million US dollars were channelled to the Acosta family according to FIVB minutes after Acosta's retirement. Other evidence indicates a much larger amount.

When some volleyball leaders finally began to question Acosta's commissions, a code of conduct was soon introduced, according to which anyone who criticised volleyball or its institutions could be excluded by the president.

On that account, several respected international volleyball leaders were thrown out of the FIVB in the first decade of this century including Lasse Svensson from Sweden, Luis Moreno from Peru, and Mario Gojman from Argentina. They were not even allowed to enter the local volleyball club, so in fact, they were deprived of a basic civic right, the right to take part in association life.

The FIVB also tried to stop Play the Game from raising a debate on the issue at its 2005 conference. In response to Play the Game's invitation to join the conference, the then secretary general of the FIVB, Jean-Pierre Seppey, wrote back threatening legal action against all members of Play the Game's board and programme committee.

Seppey claimed that since FIVB's critic Mario Gojman was involved in legal action against the FIVB in Switzerland, such a debate would be illegal. Play the Game kindly

reminded the secretary general of the facts that Swiss law does not apply to Denmark, and that it was legal for anyone to speak at conferences.

Acosta may be gone, but today world volleyball is led by one of his former trustees who also has a questionable track record. Since 2012, when the Brazilian Ary Graça was elected with a majority of one vote, he has been in full control and gathered a group of compatriots around him within the FIVB management. As reporter Lúcio de Castro from Agência Spotlight revealed in 2014, Graça left a troubled legacy behind in Brazil where he was volleyball president for 17 years. State auditors and the volleyball confederation CBV confirmed that Graça and the now FIVB director general Fabio Azevedo mismanaged volleyball funds, for instance by making lucrative contracts with front companies owned by friends and allies.

But private corruption is not a crime *per se* in Brazil, and criminal cases against Azevedo and Graça have been dismissed. Can players around the world trust the FIVB leadership? Like other federations, the FIVB is under no effective independent oversight, neither from the inside nor outside.

### Prostitutes and hunting trips

When Northern European sports leaders defend the sporting system, they often refer to ‘culture’ to explain why the federations may sometimes be corrupt. Although not stated directly, ‘culture’ refers to something rooted in exotic countries far away.

These sports leaders were in for a shock when Austrian and Norwegian police in April 2018 raided the offices of the International Biathlon Union (IBU) and raised charges against its Nor-



*The Brazilian president of world volleyball, Ary Graça, has in many ways built on the legacy of his corrupt predecessor Ruben Acosta. In Brazil, he was investigated for embezzlement in the national volleyball federation.*

*Photo: Adam Pretty/Getty Images*

wegian president Anders Besseberg and the German secretary general Nicole Resch. Five years later, Norwegian police formally charged Besseberg for having received expensive watches, prostitutes, and hunting trips paid for by Russian biathlon officials in return for a lenient policy towards the use of doping substances by Russian athletes.

The allegations were also examined by the IBU's own External Review Commission headed by the British lawyer Jonathan Taylor:

“The complete lack of basic governance safeguards previously in place at the IBU meant the former IBU leadership was able to operate without checks and balances, without transparency, and without accountability,” the report stated in 2021.

“The report shows why all integrity decisions should be made by an independent body that is dedicated solely to protecting the ethical values of the sport, not by an executive board that has to deal with a number of conflicting interests.”

Even if some federations like FIFA have given their ethics committees more independence, only the IBU and World Athletics have set up independent outside agencies to deal with violations of rules and principles.

### **Breaking European hegemony**

To date, no international Olympic federation – or the IOC itself – has made thorough governance reform without massive pressure from the media, the public, the politicians, and the police.

Since the 1970s, an almost unchangeable system has been built up by visionary sports leaders with an appetite for big business. It was the Bra-



*The head of world biathlon, Anders Besseberg, surrounded by Russian sports officials in 2013. Russian sport bribed Besseberg to obtain protection for their doped athletes.*

*Photo: Alexander Hassenstein/Bongarts/Getty Images*

zilian football president João Havelange who was the first to benefit from the situation that arose when a number of African and Asian nations became independent after decades or centuries of colonial rule.

These countries wanted to break the European hegemony in world sport, and Havelange offered political, commercial, and sporting opportunities that secured him votes for his ascension to the FIFA presidency in 1974.



*Tuvalu may not have many athletes – here is its delegation at the Rio 2016 Olympics – but the country has the same voting power in most international sports federations as countries with hundreds of thousands of athletes.*

*Photo: Cameron Spencer/Getty Images*

Havelange set an example that inspired other sports leaders, for instance Primo Nebiolo in athletics, Ruben Acosta in volleyball, and – a generation later – Hassan Moustafa in handball.

Today, most international federations are run by the one nation, one vote system. It ensures global representation, but its downside is that it gives influence to a number of small nations independent of their true engagement in the given sport.

A veteran international athletics leader, Helmut Digel from Germany, who can in no way be considered revolutionary, wrote in October 2023 on the online media ‘Inside the Games’ that the one nation, one vote system was introduced by “authoritarian personalities such as Primo Nebiolo, the late president of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), Sepp Blatter, the former head of FIFA, and a number of other leaders” who wished to “cement their power”.

“Under the democratic ideal of ‘one country – one vote’ it has become very easy for power-hungry people to manipulate the system [ ... ] in the interest of their own power,” Digel wrote, adding:

“In the past decade, almost all Olympic International Federations have increased their membership to more than 150 countries, with the vast majority of members often having only a very few athletes practising the sport in question. Some of these members exist only on paper but their representatives enjoy the benefits of being part of the International Federation. [It] happens more and more often that delegates vote on the future of a sport who have almost no athletes in their own National Federation.”

### **Member nations without activity**

An example of this development was uncovered by the Danish newspaper Politiken in 2016 when it documented that out of the then 204 member federations in the International Handball Federation (IHF), only 84 had a national team active enough to be listed in the sport’s world ranking and more than half of the member nations could not be reached through websites or social media accounts.

But all 204 member nations have one vote when the president since 2000, the Egyptian Hassan Moustafa, seeks re-election. And as this book goes to print, he is heading for a sixth four-year term.

American Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, and Swaziland might not be able to find players enough for a handball tournament, but each of them has the same voting power as Germany with 900,000 players.

“One vote per country looks like a sound basis for democracy, but it may only be an illusion,” the Swedish whistleblower Christer Ahl told *Play the Game* 2013.

Ahl was ousted in 2009 as chair of the Rules and Referees Commission of the International Handball Federation (IHF) after revealing match manipulation orchestrated by the IHF president.

“It can amount to camouflage for a dictator, who will easily be able to take advantage, especially if the vast majority of the member federations are uneducated, uninformed and unaware of what support they should have the right to expect. Handball has its traditions and continued strength in Europe. Only two or three countries in each of the other continents are competitive internationally.”

If the basic building element of sports democracy is a nation, then it is a perfect democracy. If, however, the individual athlete is the cornerstone, the one nation, one vote system is completely unfair and out of proportion.

### **Fosters vote buying**

Professor Jürgen Mittag from the German Sports University Cologne drew up the benefits and pitfalls of the one nation, one vote system in his contribution to the project ‘Action for Good Governance in Sport (AGGIS)’ run by *Play the Game* in 2012–2013.

Based on the approach that countries are composed of people who are naturally equal, the general principle that is applied to international sports organisations allocates each country or federation one vote to exercise in democratic decisions, disregarding its size, financial contributions, or influence in the world.

“The key advantage of this mode of decision-making is that sports federations are all deemed equal, and the one-federation-one-vote system ensures due representation and reveals the sovereignty of the single federations,” Jürgen Mittag said, but he also warned of the risks of this democratic approach.

“Egalitarianism and power come into conflict in all types of political interactions, but international bodies face it most severely,” he said and gave an example.

While there were 6.3 million registered players in the German Football Association and 4.18 million in the US Soccer Federation, the British Virgin Islands counted just 436 registered players and Montserrat no more than 200 players. However, each association had just one vote in voting procedures of the bodies of international sports organisations, for example in the FIFA Congress.

“This constellation fosters the dark sides of sport such as corruption or vote buying,” Jürgen Mittag said.

“Transferring the approach of weighting of votes to international sports organisations may improve the democratic quality of international sports organisations as well as reduce such dark sides,” Jürgen Mittag stated.

### **Weighted votes in seven sports**

This statement was confirmed when Play the Game decided to analyse how such weighted voting systems could work in practice.

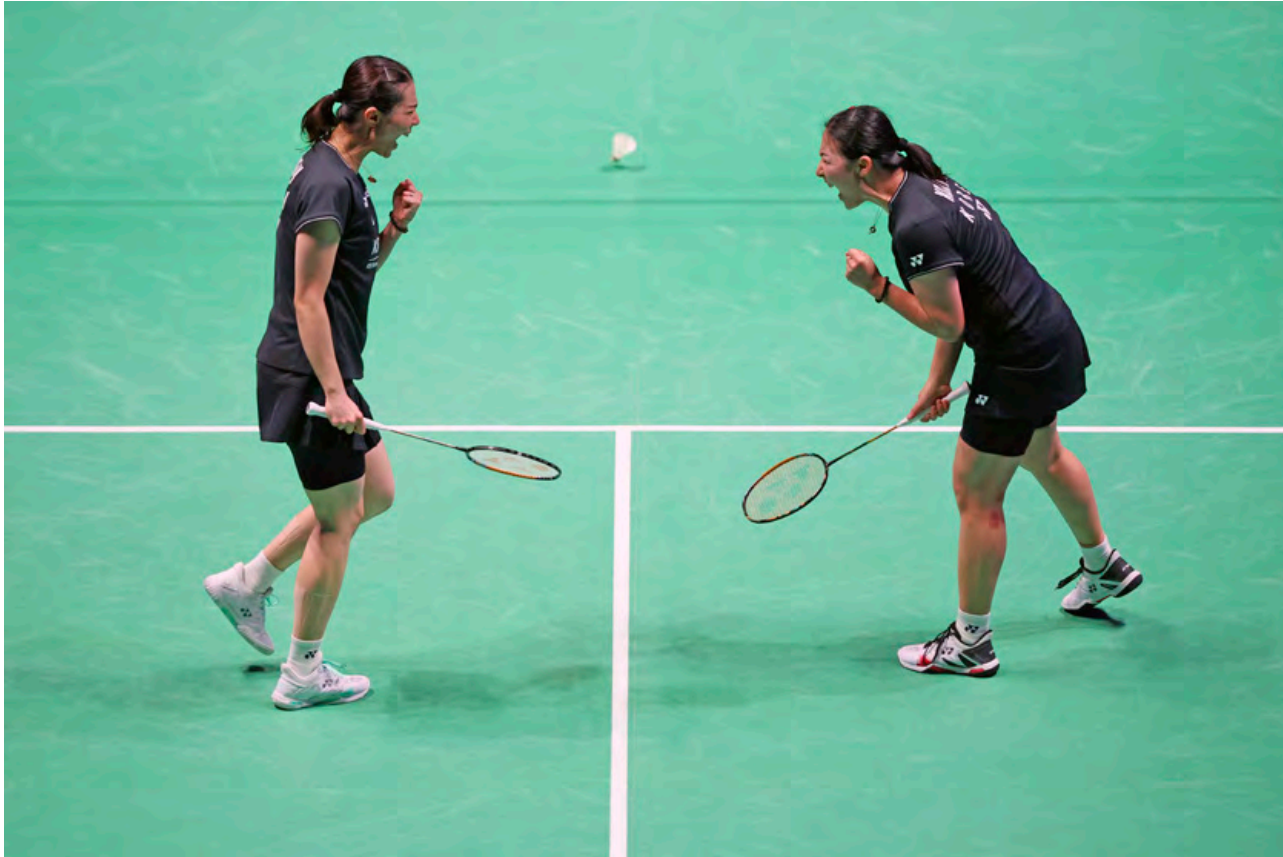
In the report ‘A vote with a weight’ from 2022 authored by PhD Peter Forsberg from the Danish Institute for Sports Studies, it was shown that only seven of 35 international Olympic sports federations currently use a weighted voting system: Badminton World Federation (BWF), World Rowing (WR), World Taekwondo (WT), the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), the International Ski Federation (FIS), the International Tennis Federation (ITF), and the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF).

These federations see two main advantages of having a weighted voting system. The first advantage is related to being able to reflect a member association’s involvement in the sport in their voting power. This is for example the case in the Badminton World Federation, which has 197 member associations with very different involvement in badminton.

Member associations are given 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 votes depending on their involvement in badminton. The greater the involvement, the more votes – because this is more fair, the Badminton World Federation argues:

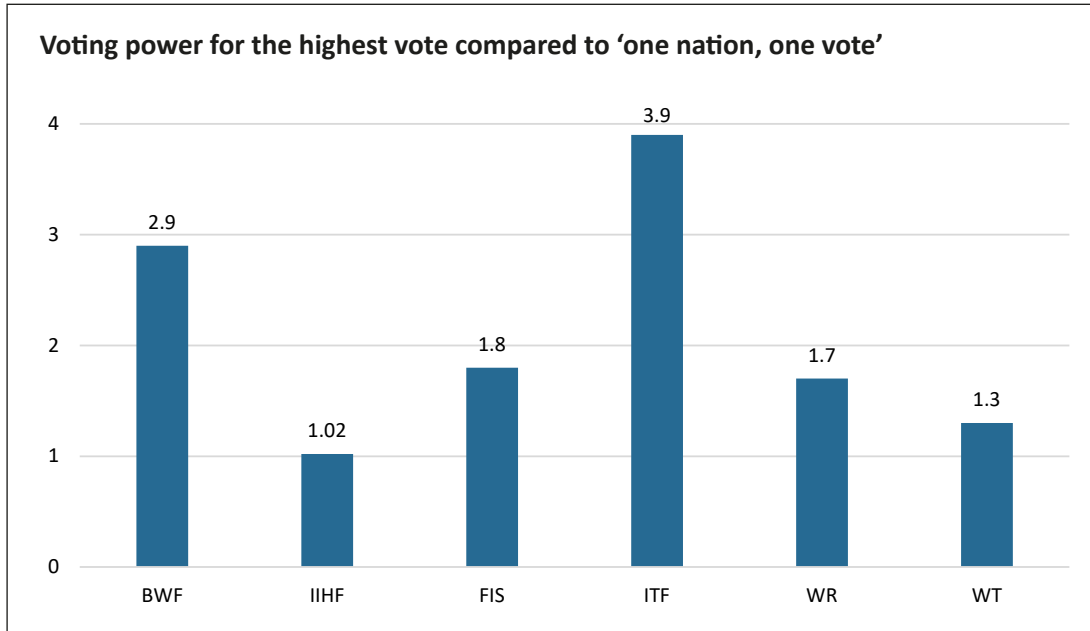
“A ‘one nation, one vote’ system can be seen as unfair, where member associations with millions of players and huge investments in the international badminton system have the same influence on the overall badminton development as a developing member association with only a few hundred players and with very limited involvement/contribution to the international badminton system.”





*It would be unfair for nations with a huge activity in badminton to have the same number of votes as countries with little activity argues the World Badminton Federation – but 28 out of 35 international Olympic sports federations are based on one vote per nation. Photo: Naomi Baker/Getty Images*

The second advantage of having a weighted voting system is related to good governance. This advantage is explicitly mentioned by the Badminton World Federation, World Rowing, and World Taekwondo. They argue that the weighted voting system diminishes the risk of corruption, vote-buying, and using the voting system as a short-term political tool.



*The figure shows how much more voting power member associations with the most votes at each federation have compared to a situation where 'one nation, one vote' is used. The impact is biggest in the International Tennis Federation, where the member associations with the most votes (12 votes) have 3.9 times as much voting power compared to a situation where 'one nation, one vote' was used. The member associations with the lowest number of votes (1 vote) conversely have less voting power than in a 'one nation, one vote' system.*

*Source: A vote with a weight (Forsberg, 2021)*

## **No separation of powers**

Another key obstacle to the well-functioning of sport's democratic communities is the lack of separation of powers into legislative, executive and judicial powers – something that is evident in the work of the supreme judicial body in international sport, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

A case in point is the legal battle between WADA, the IOC, and Russia over sanctions in the case of state-sponsored doping of Russian athletes.

The handling of the case by the various institutions created the worst governance crisis

in anti-doping for two decades and was ultimately settled by CAS. However, critics see the structure of CAS as a major part of the problem in sports governance.

“Today, neither WADA nor CAS are independent. As in the rest of society, the world of sport should surely apply some mechanisms which can separate the legislative power, the executive power, and the judicial power,” Michael Ask said in 2019 when he was chairman of the Institute of National Anti-Doping Organisations (iNADO).

His words fell in an interview with Play the Game at a time when both WADA, the IOC, and CAS were accused of trying to protect Russia from being properly sanctioned.

“Sport should still be allowed to organise as it pleases. But when we talk about elite sports, with the many national and economic interests that are at stake in sport at this level, it makes good sense to me if WADA and CAS were independent of both the sports organisations and the politically elected governments. I am talking about a separation of powers which all democratic countries endeavour to achieve.”

Michael Ask referred to the fact that the IOC and the governments of the world share the power of WADA and that the IOC also has a strong influence on judicial decision-making in CAS.

### **CAS could get a key role**

Ask was not the first legal expert to call for a reform of CAS. In 2015, Antoine Duval, a senior researcher in European and International Sports Law at the ASSER Institute in The Hague, noted in his Play the Game comment piece ‘The rules of the game’ that sport was at a turning point and CAS needed to reform.

“As FIFA and the IAAF sink more and more into chaos, it becomes clear that one of the sporting challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be to democratise and check the massive transnational organisations fuelled by TV and sponsoring money that govern global sport,” Antoine Duval wrote with a reference to ongoing corruption scandals in two of the largest international sports federations.

“To this end, the CAS has a key role to play. It could become a sort of global administrative and constitutional court for sport, reviewing the legislative and administrative decisions of the sport governing bodies. However, this will be realistic only if CAS itself is reformed to match the level of independence, transparency, and accessibility needed to ensure its legitimating function.”

Antoine Duval identified three pillars for reform of CAS: Independence, transparency, and access to justice, and laid forward a roadmap to reform by introducing ten proposals to reduce the influence of sports organisations in the International Council of Arbitration of Sport (ICAS) which is responsible for the administration and financing of CAS.

The proposals included changing the selection procedure for ICAS, stringent control over the independence and impartiality of CAS arbitrators, publication of all CAS awards and key administrative documents, and a more comprehensive legal aid scheme for appellants to CAS.

Since then, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that CAS hearings, if requested by one of the parties, must be open to the public in accordance with the right to a fair trial enshrined in Article 6, paragraph 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

If sport does not act by itself, others may. As politicians and anti-doping officials in the US were deeply troubled by the way the IOC, WADA and sport in general handled the Russian-international doping scandal, the US Congress voted for a new law, the 'Rodchenkov Act' from 2019, that allows the US to prosecute individuals for doping schemes at international sports competitions involving Americans.

Also, the domestic sexual abuse scandal in USA Gymnastics resulted in a bill that allowed the US Congress to take more political control over American sport. And US law was decisive in the criminal actions against more than 40 football and business leaders connected to FIFA.

But in general, Antoine Duval was not impressed by the legal fight for better sports governance:



*Neither WADA nor CAS are sufficiently independent, said Michael Ask, then chair of iNADO, in 2019.*

*Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



*If reformed, CAS could play a key role as a constitutional court for sport, legal expert Antoine Duval from The Hague argued. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

“Yes, a few heads are now rolling in football, but so far, the FIFA scandal has not changed the structure of the system. The real issue is the lack of political accountability of the governing bodies and the post-democratic nature of institutions like FIFA and the IOC. If needed, the IOC will fight tooth and nail to defend the autonomy of the Olympic Movement. 20 years ago, American politicians also said they would clean up the Olympics after the Salt Lake City scandal – guess what, it did not happen,” Antoine Duval told Play the Game in 2019.

## Flaws of legal system

Two years later, the German journalist Grit Hartmann further documented the flaws of the legal system in sport.

Grit Hartmann's report for Play the Game 'Tipping the scales of justice – the sport and its 'Supreme Court' included a survey showing that athlete groups had largely lost confidence in CAS. Two-thirds of the athletes did not consider the sports court to be independent and impartial, but rather an extension of the sports federations.

Until Play the Game made a media request in April 2020, CAS had not updated the relevant case statistics for four years, Grit Hartmann notes, finding only 40 of 948 awards made by CAS in 2020 in the database on their website.

"Over the last two decades, CAS has published only about 30 per cent of its awards. This alone could earn the judicial apex of the sporting conglomerate the reputation of being the most secretive pillar in the global governance of sport," Grit Hartmann concludes.

"The institution settles disputes for a multi-billion-dollar industry and prides itself on consolidating transnational sports law, but at the same time, it keeps it largely a secret how the law is to be interpreted."

The secrecy of CAS was also questioned by the Swedish professor Johan Lindholm in his 2019 book on CAS and its jurisprudence. Based on 830 CAS awards collected up until 2014, Johan Lindholm said:

"Decisions that in practice establish rules of direct and substantial importance in disputes that directly affect clubs and individuals, and that may lead to severe consequences, including both extensive disciplinary sanctions and monetary damages, cannot in practice be read, reviewed, considered, evaluated, or criticised."

According to the Play the Game report, many of the CAS arbitrators held positions in sport organisations they were appointed to by sports governing bodies, which represents a clear conflict of interest. As an example, IOC vice president John Coates resided on top of the CAS pyramid as president of the court's governing board ICAS, and IOC president Thomas Bach led the ICAS Appeals Division between 1994 and 2013 – during which time he was also vice president and executive committee member of the IOC for some years.

"They have the jurisdiction and the authority over a global order like a court has, but they do not meet the criteria you would expect. The way CAS works does not comply with the right to a fair trial. How is CAS supposed to decide independently in disputes



*The so-called high court of sport publishes only a small amount of its decisions, and many of its procedures are kept secret, a Play the Game report from 2021 shows. Photo: Silvio De Negri/DeFodi images/Getty Images*

with sports organisations as a party, when representatives of these organisations decide on its composition?” Miguel Maduro, a former advocate general at the European Court of Justice, said in the 2021 report.

Still, by 2023, twelve ICAS members will be selected directly by the IOC, the international sports federations, and the national Olympic committees. These twelve then pick four more members with a view towards safeguarding the interests of the athletes, while

only the last four ICAS members are supposed to be independent of any preceding body.

To Miguel Maduro, the fact that John Coates can be a rule maker inside the IOC and head of the CAS arbitrators shows how far sports arbitration is from the rule of law:

“You cannot be a legislator and a judge at the same time. It is the opposite of the rule of law,” the Portuguese said.

Miguel Maduro has profound experience not only with the inner workings of courts but also with good governance which is one of his teaching areas as a professor.

This qualification earned him a short-lived career on the inside of a sports organisation when he was briefly enlisted as chair of FIFA’s Governance Committee to help clean up football.

The Committee was declared independent by FIFA, but when Maduro tested the independence, FIFA failed.

Less than a year after joining the committee, Maduro spearheaded the decision that the president of Russia’s football federation and head of the upcoming FIFA World Cup organising committee, Vitaly Mutko, could not stand for re-election to FIFA’s top political body, the 37-strong Council.

Mutko had one quality that according to Maduro stood in his way: He happened also to be the deputy prime minister of Russia – a position, by the way, he had been promoted to by Vladimir Putin after Mutko had to withdraw as minister of sport in the wake of the Russian-international doping scandal.

According to FIFA’s regulations, Mutko represented a clear and inadmissible mix of state affairs and politics. In principle, the decision was simple. In practice, the successful blocking of one of Russia’s most powerful men and a key figure for the World Cup meant that not only Mutko but also Maduro was out of FIFA business when FIFA president Gianni Infantino convened his congress in May 2017.



*The way CAS works does not comply with the rights to a fair trial, says the Portuguese law professor Miguel Maduro.*

*Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*





## World handball hi-jacked by its president

*After 32 years in the service of the International Handball Federation, Christer Ahl, a US-based Swedish citizen, was forced out as chair of IHF's Rules and Referees Commission in 2009 when he intervened against the manipulation of Olympic qualifying games for Beijing 2008. The manipulation took place when the Egyptian IHF president Hassan Moustafa and the president of the Asian Handball Federation, the IOC member Sheikh Al-Sabah from Kuwait, had placed a couple of incompetent Jordanian referees to secure that the Kuwaiti male handball team would defeat the favourites from South Korea. Similar fraud was made on the female side. The Court of Arbitration for Sport supported Ahl's decision that the matches should be replayed, and eventually, the best teams made it to Beijing.*

*Knowing that he would not be re-elected at the IHF Congress in Cairo in 2009, Christer Ahl travelled instead to Play the Game 2009 in Coventry to share this story and many other examples of mismanagement by Hassan Moustafa.*

In late 2007, it came to the attention of the IHF Council that for some time the president had received reimbursements without receipts for travel where tickets had been obtained elsewhere. This runs counter to IHF standard procedures but had apparently gone on for some time, with the knowledge of the treasurer. The Council did not insist on retroactive measures but wanted the practice stopped immediately. The president grudgingly backed down and promised immediate change.

Quite amazingly, when the minutes of the meeting later appeared, they claimed just the opposite, that the Council had unanimously agreed that the president could continue his special practices. Every attempt to get the minutes corrected and the illegal practices

stopped has been fruitless, including efforts to get other Council members to speak up and demand a change.

*Hassan Moustafa was nevertheless re-elected with a massive majority at the 2009 congress, even if delegates saw how he personally turned off the microphone of his opponent during the presidential election. At Play the Game 2013 in Aarhus, Christer Ahl continued his account of events at the IHF.*

Soon after his own re-election in 2009, the president instructed the IHF Council to vote in favour of his proposal to change his own position as an elected official receiving 30,000 Swiss francs annually, to a full-time president with a salary of half a million.

This also gave him the excuse to move his office from Cairo to Basel, where he is now controlling all IHF communications and activities. These changes were never endorsed by the IHF Congress. But it was easy to get the IHF Council to go along, as he also increased their remuneration by an average of 500 per cent.

They now get amounts which for many of them are small fortunes that they could never risk by going against the wishes of the president. The total amount of payments to the Council members exceeds two million Swiss francs, i.e., more than the entire budget for IHF development aid. The president also found other ways of ensuring his personal enrichment.

He arranged with SPORTFIVE, the holder of the IHF TV rights, to give him a personal services contract for 600,000 euro, an unethical arrangement that got IOC president Rogge to condemn the action in public.

But this was still a small matter in comparison with the accusations surrounding these TV rights for the following period. The president's main collaborator at SPORTFIVE had left to establish UFA Sports, and suddenly UFA's bid was the highest one.

The handling of the supposedly secret bids caused the authorities in Germany to start a criminal investigation involving police searches in the homes and offices of both the president and the UFA boss. [...] *[Editor's note: The criminal charges were later dropped due to lack of evidence].*

Not long after the bid process, all three key employees of the IHF were fired by the president, despite being regarded very highly. But they had one argument



*Preventing the manipulation of Olympic qualifiers ended 32 years of service in international handball for Christer Ahl, here in a break during Play the Game 2009. Photo: Jens Astrup/Play the Game*

against them: They were the persons who witnessed the president's handling of the bids!

Two of these officials were replaced by one person, who was made general manager, Amal Khalifa, the president's loyal assistant from his days in Egypt. [...]

[After an earlier dispute with WADA] it seemed that things were under control through the efforts of a very competent head of the IHF Anti-Doping Unit. But this person was too much inclined to follow WADA regulations, such as correctly keeping the plans for testing secret.



*The Egyptian Hassan Moustafa took office at the IHF in 2000 and has since then been the undisputed ruler of world handball with very little appetite for opposition and transparency. Photo: Jan Christensen/FrontzoneSport/Getty Images*

When he kept refusing to share all the confidential information with the president, it was soon time for him to be fired. Eventually, the president found his person also for this job, of course yet another acquaintance from Egypt. This man had the relevant experience, so this is not the issue, but obviously, the president likes to show the world of handball that he does not care about appearances, and that nobody can stop him from doing what he wants. And of course, one wonders about the confidentiality issue these days.

Another area that invites controversy is the awarding of events. When the host for the Men's World Championship in 2015 was to be decided, France as defending champion was the clear favourite. But who came out ahead instead, if not Qatar? So, their sudden success did not start with football. I am sure they will be able to do a good job, and at least the climate will not be an issue here.

Qatar has already had a cosy relationship with the president for many years, arranging annually a so-called world championship for clubs, where Qatar gets to field several teams with borrowed players. [...]

The president has made major efforts to change the IHF by-laws to support his quest for autocracy and centralisation. It is good to know that one can get away

with ignoring the regulations, but it is even nicer if the by-laws allow what the president wants to do. Most important decisions, including financial matters, can now be handled without involving the Council.

Continents and national federations find that they have lots of duties, but very few rights. The clubs are not even regarded as stakeholders. Recently, some of the very top clubs took the IHF to court, as the IHF refuses to negotiate critical issues such as the competition calendar and compensation to clubs for releasing players for IHF events. The IHF president unilaterally dictates what the clubs get. If they disagree, then they get nothing. [...]

However, if you did not already know it, you will not now be surprised to learn that the president and his closest collaborators were all re-elected for four more years earlier this week, without anyone finding it even worthwhile to try to oppose their candidacies. If you are loyal to the president, then you have the votes secured...

*By the end of 2023, Hassan Moustafa is still president of the IHF and declares himself open for a sixth four-year term.*

## Sports Governance Observer: A set of tools to minimise corruption and maximise legitimacy

At the turn of the century a new term started appearing among sports researchers. In 2004, it was raised for the first time at the political level among the sports ministers in the Council of Europe. And when it rose on Play the Game's horizon in 2005, it was like a revelation:

Good governance in sport.

It immediately appeared as a term that could unite – and potentially solve – the very diverse challenges that had been raised as individual and separate matters at the first three Play the Game conferences in 1997, 2000 and 2002:

Corruption, abuse, systemic doping, discrimination, mismanagement...

Consequently, Play the Game 2005 got the title 'Governance in sport: The good, the bad and the ugly' – and honestly, the former was not as well represented as the two latter!

Today, one of Play the Game's dictums is: "Good governance does not solve all problems in sport. But without good governance, no problem will be solved."

On its way to that conclusion, Play the Game got the chance to gather some of the best international experts in sports governance, when the European Union co-funded the project Action for Good Governance in International Sports Organisations (AGGIS).

The project originally set out to define guidelines for better governance in sport, but at the very first meeting among the researchers there was a unifying call: The world had enough guidelines, what was needed was a benchmarking instrument.

Over the next years, the researchers developed the Sport Governance Observer tool and set out to benchmark the 35 Olympic Summer and Winter sports federations.

A complete version of the tool was developed and applied by PhD Arnout Geeraert, a senior research fellow at KU Leuven and associate professor at Utrecht University, who presented an astonishing conclusion at Play the Game 2015 in Aarhus:

More than two-thirds of the international Olympic federations could not even comply with half of the very basic criteria for good governance as the researchers had defined them.

A few of the key findings:

- A minority of 12 federations (35 per cent) published externally audited annual financial reports on its website.
- Only 11 federations (31 per cent) had some form of limitation of terms for elected leaders in place.

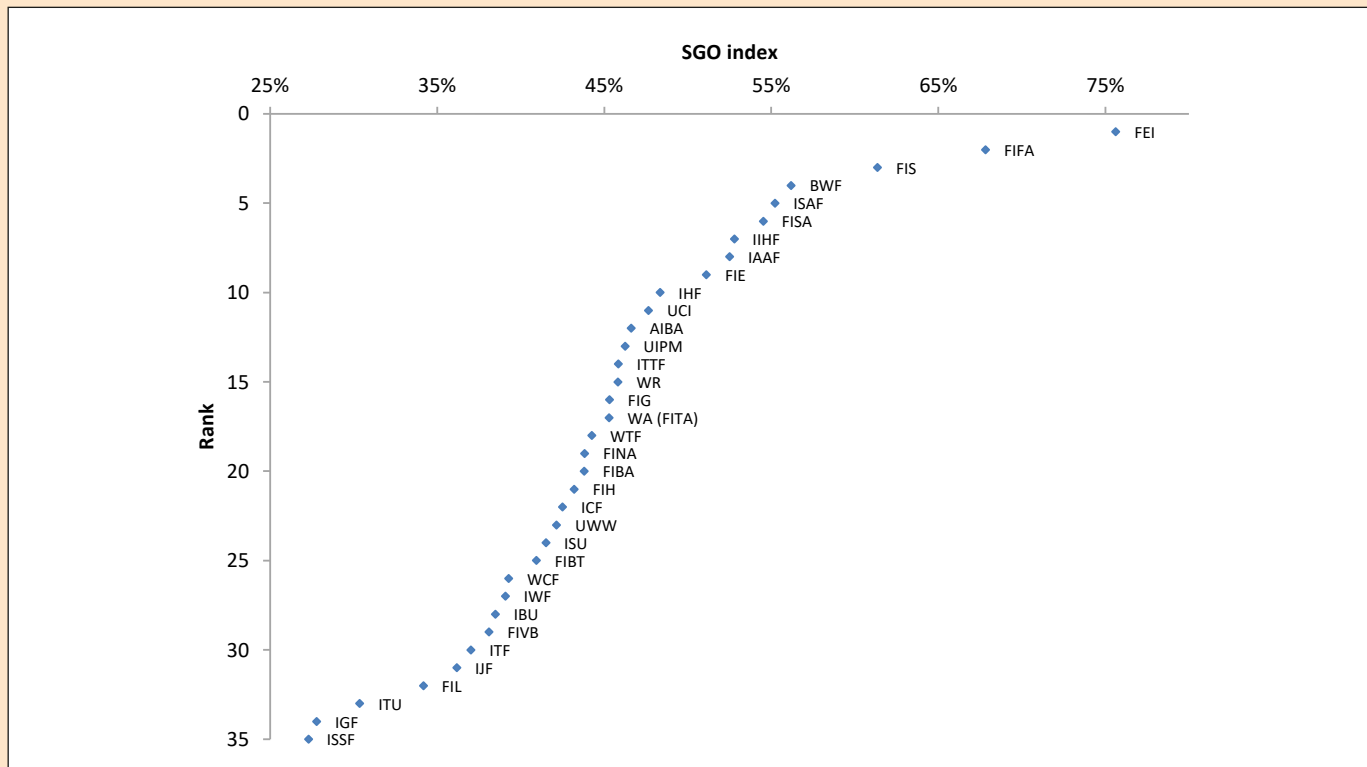


Arnout Geeraert (speaking, right) is the main author of the Sports Governance Observer tools that have been developed in a collective effort mainly between sports organisations and academics. On the panel from Play the Game 2017 were also some of the other co-creators from the Netherlands, Poland and Brazil. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game

- None of the federations published reports on remuneration, including per diem payments and bonuses, of its board members and senior officials.
- A minority of six (17 per cent) federations had clear conflicts of interest rules. Seven (20 per cent) federations did not have conflicts of interest rules in place at all.

- In none of the federations, the selection of host candidates for major events took place according to a transparent and objective process.

The conclusion was not lost on IOC president Thomas Bach who – without referring to Play the Game’s benchmarking – announced that the governance of the federations would not be monitored by an independent organism.



The first benchmarking of the 35 Olympic federations in 2015 showed that the vast majority failed to meet 50 per cent of the governance criteria laid out in the Sports Governance Observer. Source: Sports Governance Observer 2015 /Arnout Geeraert

At the end of the day, the IOC chose the family solution. Since 2016, the Association of Summer Olympic Federations has been in charge of the independent evaluation of its own members, plus the federations of Olympic Winter Sports. Independence the Olympic way.

### **Hierarchic self-governance**

In 2015, good governance had long been pursued in the corporate world, and the call for good governance had finally also reached sports.

“The AGGIS project and its new tool, the AGGIS Sports Governance Observer, is reflecting this call, which has emerged in sport much more slowly than in other sectors due to the traditional closed hierarchic self-governance of the sporting world,” Arnout Geeraert said when he presented the four good governance dimensions of the Sports Governance Observer: Transparency and public communication, democratic process, checks and balances, and solidarity.

To the senior researcher, ‘hierarchic self-governance’ meant that international non-governmental sports organisations are the supreme governing bodies of sport since they stand at the top of a hierarchic chain of commands, running from continental, to national, to local organisations.

Those at the very bottom of the chain such as athletes and/or clubs are subject to the rules and regulations of the governing bodies, often without being able to influence them to their benefit.

“But a long list of rule or norm transgressions and scandals in the sports world has prompted the debate

for more public oversight and control over the world of sports and it is at the highest level of sports organisations that these practises seem to coalesce in their most visible and blatant form,” Geeraert said.

### **Good structures are necessary**

Eyebrows were raised for other reasons when the first Sports Governance Observer gave FIFA one of the highest scores in 2015 after years of evident corruption. But this reflected both the fact that FIFA had made important rule changes and that the benchmarking did only cover rules and regulations, not behaviour.

“As for FIFA, [...] they remain far from what could be expected. A score of 68 per cent is nothing to boast about when you consider FIFA’s magnitude and financial strength – not to mention the long history of corruption among leading figures in the federation. Remember, we are only measuring basic governance criteria,” Geeraert said, and Jens Sejer Andersen from Play the Game added:

“No governance measure can once and for all stop people with a firm decision to steal and manipulate. But good governance structures are necessary for honest leaders to curb corruption and deliver effectively on the objectives of their organisation.”

“Our aim has been to make the Sports Governance Observer report critical enough to be a wake-up call and constructive enough to be a useful guide for better action. It is not just a question of avoiding corruption but also of getting federations that are up to their tasks in a rapidly changing sports environment.”

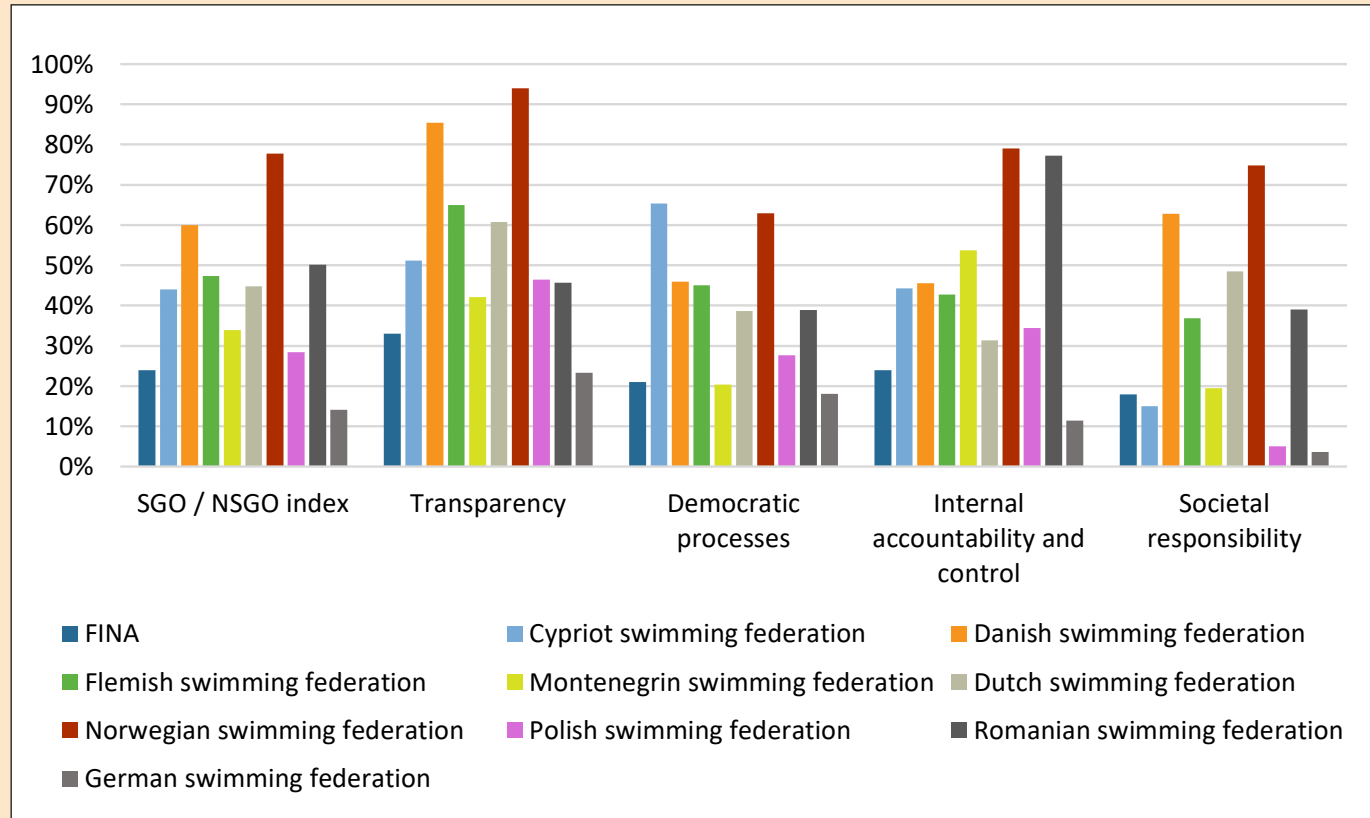


## Accountability is no threat

The culture of secrecy in international sports governance was also an important issue for Barrie Houlihan, a professor at Loughborough University and a partner of AGGIS. To him, the sports family had a particular

duty to accept their social responsibilities and explain in public what they are doing and why they are taking the actions they are:

“International or regional sports federations hold an almost unique position in organisational life as they are



With data from national and international federations alike, it is possible to compare the world umbrella organisation with its national members. This figure compares the international swimming federation (FINA) with national swimming federations. Source: Sports Governance Observer 2018/Arnout Geeraert

to a very large extent legally permitted monopolies. Given the economic power of the federations and their significance for the lives of sportsmen and women, I think they now have a much stronger obligation to be open about how they are making their decisions and to justify the decisions they make,” Barrie Houlihan said.

But the most important point about accountability, he said, was that it generally equates to good business practices and good management. Successful organisations understand that they need to manage their relationship with key stakeholder groups and that is an ingredient in their success, it’s not a threat.

And there were some very simple steps international sports organisations could take which would not in any way threaten what they do.

“One such step is in relation to transparency: How do they organise themselves, where are their key decisions taken, who is involved in the decisions, how are their senior decision-makers chosen, what is the electoral process? Enhanced transparency, like many other aspects of good governance, is part of everyday practices in modern democracies,” Barrie Houlihan argued.

### **New tools developed**

Over the past ten years, Play the Game has updated the Sports Governance Observer methodology and developed a version aimed at the national level in partnership with sports organisations, academics, and the Council of Europe.

As of 2023, the National Sports Governance Observer has been applied by the project partners and numerous other stakeholders in a total of 25 countries.

Moreover, at the request of a group of anti-doping agencies, Play the Game coordinated the creation of the National Anti-Doping Governance Observer, benchmarking anti-doping agencies in 11 countries. This was, like the other projects, co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union.

The benchmarking tools developed over the past decade have always been freely available. But in 2021, it became even easier for people to do their own benchmarking when Play the Game presented interactive online versions of the two key tools, the Sports Governance Observer and the National Sports Governance Observer.

“Benchmarking sports governance is not a simple exercise, but we hope the tool will be useful for all the sports leaders, athletes, researchers, fans, journalists, and other stakeholders who have a serious interest in improving the governance of their sport,” said Jens Sejer Andersen from Play the Game, who coordinated the projects.

“The online tools can give an indication about how efficient an organisation is at countering corruption and mismanagement, but it also shows how good an interaction the organisation has with its members, stakeholders, and the society at large,” Andersen explained.

## A series of benchmarking tools in sports governance

### **1. Action for Good Governance in International Sports Organisations (AGGIS / 2013)**

In 2012-2013, Play the Game/Danish Institute for Sports Studies cooperated with six European Universities (Loughborough University, Utrecht University, University of Leuven, German Sport University Cologne, IDHEAP Lausanne, and Ljubljana University) and the European Journalism Centre on the topic of good governance in international sports organisations. The cooperation took place under the framework of the Action for Good Governance in International Sports Organisations (AGGIS) project, which received financial support from the European Commission's Preparatory Actions in the field of sport.

### **2. Sports Governance Observer (2015)**

After the funding period of the AGGIS project, Play the Game/Danish Institute for Sports Studies engaged in a project with the University of Leuven with the aim and view of elaborating the Sports Governance Observer from a checklist into a practical benchmarking tool.

### **3. National Sports Governance Observer (2018)**

In 2017-18, Play the Game along with sports organisations and academic partners from nine European countries received a grant from the EU's Erasmus+ Programme to create the National Sports Governance Observer tool to assess the level of good governance in national sports federations. In the first round of the project, the NSGO tool was applied to sports organisations in Cyprus, Denmark, Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Brazil and Montenegro.

The partners were the German Sports University Cologne, Germany, KU Leuven, Belgium, Molde University College (MUC), Norway, University Bucharest, Romania, University of Warsaw, Poland, Utrecht University, the Netherlands, Cyprus Sport Organisation (CSO), Danish Football Association (DBU), Flemish Sports Confederation (VSF), International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE), Norwegian Football Association (NFF), Polish Golf Union (PGU), Romanian Football Federation (FRF), Enlarged

Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS), Council of Europe, and from Brazil, the NGO Sou do Esporte and the Federal University of Paraná.

#### **4. Sports Governance Observer (2018 and 2019)**

Based on an updated methodology inspired by the NSGO project, a new round of benchmarking of 11 international federations was carried out in 2018 (by Arnout Geeraert, KU Leuven) and 2019 (Jens Alm, Play the Game).

#### **5. National Anti-Doping Governance Observer (2021)**

From 2019 to 2021, the NADGO project developed a code of good governance and a tool to evaluate the performance of national anti-doping agencies. Later, the tool was used to benchmark 11 national anti-doping agencies.

The partners were KU Leuven, German Sport University Cologne University of Warsaw, European Elite Athletes Association (EU Athletes), Fair Sport, Institute of National Anti-Doping Organisations (iNADO), Anti Doping Denmark (ADD), Sport Ireland, National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA Germany), Polish Anti-Doping Agency

(POLADA), Slovak Anti-Doping Agency (SADA). In addition to the home countries of these agencies, the project also benchmarked the agencies of Bulgaria, Brazil, Kenya, Norway, Portugal, and India.

#### **6. National Sports Governance Observer 2 (2021)**

In the second round of the project, with support from a special Danish government grant, the NSGO tool was applied to sports organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Georgia, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Lithuania, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Ukraine and the United States of America. The findings were published in the report 'National Sports Governance Observer 2' edited by Sandy Adam, Leipzig University.

#### **7. Interactive online tools (2021)**

In 2021, Play the Game presented free and interactive online versions of the NSGO and SGO tools for benchmarking national and international sports organisations.

*More information about the projects can be found at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*



## Chapter 9

# TRAITORS OR TRUTH-TELLERS?

”Bye-bye, Copenhagen...”

An email with this headline arrived in Copenhagen on the eve of the first conference named Play the Game in the year 2000. One of the most awaited speakers for the conference, the self-taught anti-doping detective Sandro Donati, had given up on his plan to present his ground-breaking research on international doping because his employers at the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) had left his request for travel permission unanswered.

Travelling without permission could endanger his job, Donati feared, because CONI had already raised – and lost – 11 legal cases against him in order to get him fired as CONI’s head of research.

Was CONI not happy that their own employee would expose the organisation’s involvement in international doping over the past 20 years?

The conference participants decided to ask for explanations by sending a telefax to CONI’s general secretary dr Raffaele Pagnozzi asking for an explanation – with no result. But when one of the conference organisers, secretary general Aidan White from the International Federation of Journalists, made a telephone call to Pagnozzi’s office, a written response was finally sent:

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*Phaedra Almajid secretly informed journalists and FIFA about corrupt payments by Qatar in the bid process for the World Cup 2022. When FIFA breached the confidentiality agreement, Phaedra Almajid experienced that the safety of her and her family was at stake. Photo: Lars Christian Økland/TV2 Norway*

Pagnozzi claimed that no permission had been requested which contradicted written evidence. As a citizen of Italy, Donati was free to travel as he pleased, Pagnozzi wrote. And then Donati decided to get on a plane and speak as a private person at the closing of Play the Game 2000.



*The fax that convinced Sandro Donati he could travel without getting fired. Contrary to the evidence, CONI's Raffaele Pagnozzi claims there never was a petition from Donati to attend Play the Game 2000.*

The organisers of a conference that claimed freedom of expression was challenged in sport could not have wished for a better dramaturgy. CONI's resistance, the commitment from the participants, and the surprise turn of events created the perfect setting for Donati's personal testimony on how he blew the whistle on organised cheating, corruption, and doping in sport.

Donati was never fired but retired a few years later. Not all whistleblowers are that lucky.

People's right to speak out – their freedom of expression – is considered a force for good in democratic societies.

But even there, public access to information is restricted. And in autocracies, members of the press are often silenced and treated like they are enemies of the state.

That's why outspoken insiders sometimes are the only ones to enlighten the public in any society, and sport society is no exception. Especially because most sports organisations and clubs are privately run and unlike public institutions not obliged by law to allow public access to documents.

Speaking out or raising a concern, either within the workplace or externally, about a danger, risk, malpractice, or wrongdoing which affects others is defined as 'whistleblowing'.

In the society of sport, blowing the whistle may potentially arise in relation to doping, corruption, match-fixing, conflicts of interest, misuse of confidential information, discrimination, and physical or sexual abuse.

### **Few policies of protection**

However, blowing the whistle can have serious emotional, financial, and relational consequences.

Very few sports organisations have policies in place to help whistleblowers come forward and raise the concerns they have about wrongdoings in sport.

Some researchers believe that sports organisations should do more to protect whistleblowers and render guidance and support before, during, and after the act of whistleblowing.

“Athletes should not feel like they have to choose between their careers and the truth,” Kelsey Erickson, a research fellow in anti-doping at Leeds Beckett University, and Susan Backhouse, director of Research and professor of Psychology and Behavioural Nutrition at Leeds University, wrote in *The Conversation* in 2019 after their publication of a WADA funded study of athletes’ lived experience of whistleblowing on doping in sport.

“Yet, our new research shows that this is (too) often the reality for many involved in the sporting world. Telling the truth isn’t always rewarded. Instead, speaking up – whistleblowing – is too often followed by retribution. Our research shows that whistleblowing can and does have life-altering implications for whistleblowers.”

### **National traitors**

Without insiders ready to risk retribution for speaking out, few of the cases highlighted in this book would probably have been known to the public.

From a democratic perspective, whistleblowers who expose sports-related crimes, discrimination, and exploitation should be treated as the greatest heroes of sport. Instead, they are often treated as if they were national traitors.

This is certainly the case for Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov. Blowing the whistle on state-sponsored doping in Russia changed their lives fundamentally.

When the Russian couple attended the 2019 Play the Game conference in Colorado





*Living in exile in the US with an undetermined immigration case, Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov cannot travel and could only appear online at the Play the Game conferences in 2015 (picture) and 2017.*

*Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

Springs, Yuliya Stepanova was still struggling with the consequences of speaking out about how she had been part of the doping system in Russia.

“Unfortunately, I cannot change my past. I was in the Russian doping system, I cheated, and now I am talking about it. I regret not speaking out sooner, but I am grateful to the WADA code for giving athletes a second chance,” the Russian whistleblower said in her speech in which she stated that cheating was put into her head by the people who surrounded her.

“Coaches and sports officials were telling me that athletes from all other countries dope and that doping is a hidden part of athletics. Well, their belief came from somewhere. Most likely from the fact that they were able to get away with cheating in the past. So,

those who run and govern sports, please, stop making deals that allow covering up doping use and making adults believe they can get away with cheating, and then younger generations of athletes will stop hearing that cheating is the only way to reach the top.”

### **Seeking asylum in the US**

Yuliya Stepanova stated that in her case there was no way to escape the Russian doping system if she wanted to compete internationally. Because, she said, Russian athletics officials selected up to five athletes in each running event who were untouchable and could dope throughout the preparation process and during the national championship.

“The Russian Ministry of Sports made sure that the Russian anti-doping agency and the Russian anti-doping lab allowed doping for the chosen ones. Only the existence of an ethical system that follows the rules could have prevented me from doping,” she said.

When Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov first went public in December 2014, they were accused by many Russians of being national traitors and received all kinds of threats.

“We were not able to find much support inside of Russia, but we are happy to see that most Russian sports officials were not right. The best part for us over the past few years was to learn that there are people who care about fair competition, we just wish those people were louder and stronger because clean athletes need to see it and feel it,” Yuliya Stepanova said.

After the speech at Play the Game 2019, the whistleblowing couple attended a panel debate with Damien Larin, a confidential information manager at WADA, and Bryan Fogel, the director who won an Oscar for ‘Icarus’, a documentary about Grigory Rodchenkov, the former head of the Russian anti-doping lab who also fled Russia one year after Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov accused him of running the Russian doping programme.

Yuliya Stepanova questioned why Grigory Rodchenkov only came forward after his role in the doping cover-up had been exposed. According to her, he could have stopped the doping system for many years, but instead, he and her coach Sergei Portugalov would bet on whose doped athlete would win “as if we were horses”.

Bryan Fogel defended Grigory Rodchenkov by saying he would have risked assassination had he come forward sooner.

A few months after the chemist fled Russia, his deputy at the anti-doping lab in Moscow, Nikita Kamaev, was found dead under mysterious circumstances. Two weeks ear-



*The whistleblowing role of the former head of the Moscow Lab, Grigory Rodchenkov (top photo), led to hefty discussion in a panel at Play the Game 2019 (bottom). From left to right 'Icarus' director Bryan Fogel, the Stepanov couple and Damien Larin, confidential information manager at WADA.*

*Top photo: Andreas Selliaas, idrettspolitiik.no*

*Bottom photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



lier, Vyacheslav Sinyev, the founding chairman of RUSADA, had also died unexpectedly. In 2020, Grigory Rodchenkov told Luke Harding, a former British correspondent in Moscow and the author of ‘Shadow State: Murder, Mayhem, and Russia’s Remaking of the West’ that he believed his former colleagues were murdered, and that the Kremlin wanted him dead too.

“It’s a fact of life. I was scared for two or three days only. I know it will never stop, even when Putin dies,” Grigory Rodchenkov said in a Skype interview, hiding his face behind a black scarf and dark glasses at a secret location in the US.

Fear of retribution was the reason why Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov left their home country before the German documentary was released in 2014. Two years later, the young couple and their son Robert arrived in the US as asylum seekers and lived in different secret places. They were out of work and had only little contact with their family in Russia. But they managed to survive with help from American friends and temporary economic support from the IOC. And they didn’t regret blowing the whistle on Russian sports governance.

“Politicians and sports leaders in Russia don’t care about the athletes. They are only interested in their own economic success and in framing the country as a superpower,” Vitaly Stepanov told the National Broadcasting Service of Denmark in 2020.

“We did the right thing. It was scary to hear how the Russian [opposition] politician Aleksey Navalny was poisoned recently. That’s what they do to people in Russia who try to change the society. I don’t think we will ever go back to Russia. The political situation in the country only gets worse,” Yuliya Stepanova said.

### **Raising a human rights case**

In 2021, the sufferings of Yulia and Vitaly Stepanov were analysed in depth by the International Human Rights Center at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. On behalf of the couple, the centre submitted a communication to the UN Human Rights Committee that tried to hold the Russian state accountable for violating its international obligations in relation to UNESCO’s International Convention against Doping in Sports and the Council of Europe’s European Anti-Doping Convention.

According to the human rights centre, the Russian state had violated several of the whistleblower couple’s rights protected under the International Covenant on Civil and

Political Rights, including articles on “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment” and “medical or scientific experimentation” as well as “forced labour or slavery”. Furthermore, the centre pointed out that Yuliya Stepanova struggled with severe physical and psychological health issues from her past in the Russian doping regime.

“She is already experiencing health issues, including the prospect of kidney failure because of abnormalities in her blood. Her blood is oversaturated with iron. To keep ferritin from poisoning her, she needs to keep running on a daily basis,” the human rights communication to the UN stated while noting that she was also psychologically crushed when she was abandoned by the state after her doping case was confirmed by WADA.

“They had cared for her when she was useful and then discarded her when she wasn’t. All her life, men had used her. Her coaches and doctors were interested in her body or her talent. One or the other or both. She realised how cold the big machine could be when you are no longer deemed athletically hot.”

### **The first-ever sports case at the UN**

Unfortunately, the UN Human Rights Committee denied registering the case, said Faraz Shahlai, who was in charge of the matter at Loyola Law School.

“They said that the claims were not sufficiently substantiated. In general, only a handful of cases get accepted every year,” Shahlai wrote to Play the Game.

One reason for the rejection could be that the Stepanovs have not exhausted their possibilities in Russian courts, and another that this case was the first-ever sports case in front of UN treaty bodies.

“We believe that our arguments were very novel for the international human rights circles, and once they put this case next to cases of let’s say torture, the death penalty, procedural rights et cetera, then this case would have less chance to be considered and processed,” Shahlai wrote.

To Jorge Leyva, CEO at the Institute of National Anti-Doping Organisations (iNADO), Yuliya Stepanova’s sufferings document a gap in the elite sport system that needs to be revised.

“Many people will say, that Yuliya could have just gone to another club and renounced the national team. I do not think that was a real option in her case. And that is not an option for many, many athletes. Their sport is a source of income. They earn money and

support their families,” Jorge Leyva told Play the Game.

“We see in anti-doping the courage it takes for athletes to denounce doping. It’s not just about right or wrong, but also about their relations with colleagues, teammates, friends, doctors. Many athletes in many countries are not able to blow the whistle and say stop. It takes a lot to bring these cases forward. So, I think we have only seen the tip of the iceberg.”

“We have not really figured out all the ethical and moral consequences of doping and I think the human rights perspective is important for people to realise what systematic doping means and what it does to people,” Jorge Leyva said.

### **Dangerous truth**

Jorge Leyva’s views were confirmed by Grigory Rodchenkov in Bryan Fogel’s 2017 documentary ‘Icarus’. The documentary revealed that the Russian doping conspiracy goes back to the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and Western allies led by the US.

In 2018, the Russian whistleblower also told the Danish tabloid newspaper Ekstra Bladet that many Soviet athletes were doped with steroids such as stanazolol, oral turinabol, and testosterone and that the Soviet secret service, KGB, helped hide positive doping samples.

“When I got to the lab in 1985, there was widespread misreporting of positive tests to protect doped athletes. The KGB was often at the lab to assist during major events. The KGB was helping to both swap and substitute clean urine for dirty urine,” Grigory Rodchenkov explained.

25 years later, the Russian chemist was head of the Moscow lab when president Vladimir Putin allegedly gave orders to Russian sport leaders to “do what it takes” to improve results



*Having heard the story of Yuliya Stepanov, Faraz Shahlai from the Loyola Law School tried to raise her case at the UN Human Rights Committee, but in vain.*

*Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

after Russia's poor performance at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver.

To help his country win more medals, Grigory Rodchenkov said he then developed a cocktail of three anabolic steroids for Russian athletes and introduced a swapping system for the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi in which he and his assistants with the help from FSB agents replaced positive doping samples with negative samples.

### **Secret agents in sport**

The involvement of intelligence services in sports is nothing new. Another Russian sports whistleblower hiding in North America in fear of retribution is Vladimir Popov. For decades, the former KGB lieutenant colonel was responsible for state surveillance of the sports sector in the Soviet Union and in control of hundreds of secret agents. In 1995, four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he moved to Canada.

When the Russian historian Yuri Felshinsky in 2008 published his book 'The Corporation: Russia and the KGB in the Age of President Putin', Vladimir Popov was an anonymous source of information about how sport and politics are intertwined in Russia.

In the book, the historian wrote that Juan Antonio Samaranch, IOC president from 1980 until 2001, allegedly served as a secret KGB agent and that the Spanish dictator General Franco's former secretary of sport became president of the IOC with help from the KGB.

Since 1977, Juan Antonio Samaranch had served as Spain's ambassador to the Soviet Union and Mongolia. According to Yuri Felshinsky, the Spaniard began collecting Russian antiques and shipped them to his home in Barcelona.

But after a while, a secret agent from the KGB who monitored the Spanish embassy met with Juan Antonio Samaranch and gently explained to him that his actions were classified by Soviet law as the smuggling of contraband goods.

"He could either be compromised through the publication of articles in the Soviet and foreign press detailing his activities, which could undoubtedly have put an end to his diplomatic career, or he could collaborate with the KGB as a secret agent. Samaranch chose the latter option," the Russian historian alleged.

Yuri Felshinsky also noted that documents show how Viktor Chebrikov, then KGB deputy head, told colleagues in other Eastern Bloc countries to support Juan Antonio Samaranch in any way they could to help him be elected president at the 1980 IOC session in Moscow.

“Samaranch was elected president of the IOC where for many years he loyally served the country to which he was connected by his work as an agent and by his gratitude for its help in getting him a high international position,” the Russian historian wrote. One year later he repeated the allegations in his book ‘The KGB Plays Chess’ in which Vladimir Popov for the first time was named as the source of the information.

The Russian revelations of how much power secret KGB agents allegedly have had over both Russian and international sports governance made the German investigative journalist Jens Weinreich question whether Juan Antonio Samaranch played a role when Russia’s president Vladimir Putin, a former KGB agent, in 2007 convinced a majority of the IOC members to vote for Sochi as the first Russian host city of the Olympic Winter Games.

“Do members and ex-members of the KGB and its replacement organisation FSB still make Olympic history,” Jens Weinreich asked in a commentary written for Play the



*The late Juan Antonio Samaranch started his diplomatic career as Spain’s ambassador in Moscow, where his position as IOC president also ended in 2001 (picture). Some suspect him of having worked for the KGB.*

*Photo: Peter Power via Getty Images*





*Russian officials cheered in Guatemala in 2007 when Sochi was awarded the hosting rights to the 2014 Winter Olympics Games. The decision provoked German journalist Jens Weinreich to ask if Russian intelligence services are still making Olympic history. Photo: Pablo Porciuncula/Pool/Getty Images*

Game. Neither the IOC nor the KGB nor the FSB answered the question. However, almost a decade later, the former KGB agent Vladimir Popov still feared for his life when he met the Danish journalist Jan Jensen and the Norwegian journalist Andreas Selliaas at a secret location for an exclusive interview.

In the interview, published by Ekstra Bladet and Nettavisen, Vladimir Popov confirmed Grigory Rodchenkov's information about KGB involvement in hiding positive Russian doping samples ever since the Olympic Games in Moscow. The reason for him to speak out about his past as head of the KGB's sport section, he told the Scandinavian journalists, was that he owed his former KGB colleague Aleksander Litvinenko to let the world know the truth.

Aleksander Litvinenko had become a prominent critic of Vladimir Putin and died from poisoning in London in 2006. In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Russia was responsible for his death.

## **Bankrupt and broken**

The Russian whistleblowers represent extreme examples of the risk that insiders take when speaking out about sports governance in autocratic countries. But blowing the whistle on sports governance in democracies can have life-altering implications too.

In 2002, Mario Goijman, then president of the Argentine Volleyball Federation (FAV) and a member of the Board of Administration at the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB), raised questions about the reliability of the financial accounts published by the FIVB. Ten years later, he was personally bankrupt and psychologically broken, in large parts thanks to retribution orchestrated by the Mexican FIVB president Ruben Acosta, then a member of the IOC.

The story started when the FAV in 1998 was granted the right to host the Volleyball World Championship in 2002, and the FIVB declined to pay the advance costs of the organisation. Instead, the Argentine hosts led by Goijman decided to take up loans from financial institutes, knowing that the revenues for sponsor and marketing contracts were already available in the FIVB accounts and that future transfers to Argentina were secured in the contracts between the FAV and the FIVB.

The Argentine hosts relied on the rule introduced by Ruben Acosta that those who signed contracts for the FIVB would receive a 10 per cent commission. The FIVB would later reveal in minutes from a meeting in 2009 that this rule was exploited by Ruben Acosta himself who had earned at least 33 million US dollars himself.

But in 2002, Argentina was undergoing a huge financial crisis, and to grant the loans the financiers requested the personal guarantee of the FAV president Mario Goijman. These loans would later be a major reason for his personal bankruptcy.

Mario Goijman's troubles began in the lead-up to the World Championships when he spoke out about the deletion of a note from the FIVB auditors PricewaterhouseCoopers. The note criticised that the accounts concealed the fact that 8.32 million Swiss francs had been paid out as personal commissions to Ruben Acosta for contracts signed on behalf of the FIVB.

Furthermore, he raised questions about the FIVB acquisition of a mansion in Lausanne for 1.7 million Swiss francs. The FIVB Board of Administration had approved this purchase in 2001 but wasn't informed that the mansion belonged to Ruben Acosta's father-in-law who recently had passed away.

Two weeks after the World Championship in Argentina, Ruben Acosta suspended Mario Goijman from his functions at the FIVB and the FAV. Eventually, Mario Goijman ended up being held responsible for the non-payment of the loans that were taken to finance the 2002 World Championship.

Argentine teams and players with relation to the FAV were blocked from international competition which made it impossible for the FAV to fulfil its requirements related to existing sponsor and broadcasting contracts, let alone enter into future contract negotiations.



*In his 24 years as world volleyball president, Ruben Acosta (center, in turquoise polo), successfully developed the sport's business, but used the profits to enrich himself. Photo: Thomas Samson/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images*

In 2003, the Swiss authorities raided the FIVB headquarters, seizing documents that supported the claims that FIVB accounts had been manipulated and the real size of IOC transfers to the federation had been concealed. The discrepancies amounted to 4.8 million Swiss francs.

When the FIVB couldn't account for the money, the IOC Ethics Committee decided to recommend an exclusion of Ruben Acosta. But the Mexican moved quickly and decided to withdraw in 2004 before he was expelled, citing age and health reasons. And the IOC decided to keep their damning report confidential, now that Acosta was no longer under their jurisdiction.

In 2005, Mario Goijman received the Play the Game Award for blowing the whistle on corruption in the FIVB and substantiating his claims with solid documentation.



*One of the most impressive whistleblowers in the 21st century is the Argentine Mario Goijman who documented massive corruption by the head of world volleyball. Goijman's fight for good governance contributed to his personal ruin. Here he is interviewed at Play the Game 2011. Photo: Tine Harden/Play the Game*

### **Acquitting after fraud**

When the Police Tribunal of Lausanne in 2006, after more than three years of legal proceedings, confirmed that an objective falsification of the FIVB accounts was indeed carried out by Ruben Acosta and the former FIVB treasurer Franz Schmied, the judge declared that there was doubt about whether they had criminal intent and for that reason acquitted them. As the court only recognised the FIVB as the damaged part, Mario Goijman was not allowed to appeal the verdict.

Ruben Acosta went on presiding over the FIVB until 2008 when he announced that he would resign before his term expired. Mario Goijman was never compensated for the losses he had endured after personally signing the FAV loans for the 2002 World Championship.

At the beginning of 2010, following an appeal by Play the Game in a conversation at the Olympic Congress 2009 in Copenhagen, the new FIVB president Jizhong Wei made a confidential agreement with Mario Goijman to cover some of his losses, and according to Play the Game's information, 250,000 US dollars was paid out. In return, a desperate Goijman had to give up all personal claims against the FIVB, although the amount was only a minor share of what he thought the FIVB owed to the FAV.

In 2012, the Argentine whistleblower received a legal order to leave his house for compulsory sale, and after one year he was evicted by force. In 2013, his last belongings were put on compulsory sale. The former multi-millionaire is now living under precarious conditions on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

From here, Mario Goijman has continued his fight, but to no avail. The FIVB does not recognise any further claims.

### **Dealing with Mr. Clean**

Whistleblowers at the highest national and international level in sport are rare. High-profile sports officials who speak out about wrongdoings often risk their position or job.

In 2002, Michel Zen-Ruffinen was forced to leave his job as secretary general of FIFA after having produced a confidential report that raised concern about FIFA's corruption and president Sepp Blatter's dictatorial style and alleged mismanagement of the global football federation's finances.

Michel Zen-Ruffinen earned a reputation for being the most prominent whistleblower in the history of football. His report led 11 members of FIFA's Executive Committee to

bring a criminal complaint against Sepp Blatter in a Swiss court. Nevertheless, the prosecutor later dismissed the case due to lack of evidence, and at the 2002 FIFA Congress Sepp Blatter was re-elected as FIFA president.

“The Executive Committee will deal with our Mr. Clean. This is it. The latest negative comments from Zen-Ruffinen after my election put the nail in the coffin,” Sepp Blatter said, and the whistleblower, whom the president once described as “like a son to me”, knew he would be kicked out of the football family.

“I stand behind what I said. I will not step down, but I will probably have to leave,” Michel Zen-Ruffinen said more than a decade before an FBI investigation confirmed his allegations of FIFA corruption and brought Sepp Blatter to a fall.

In 2005, Michel Zen-Ruffinen attended Play the Game’s conference in Copenhagen claiming that all the problems of sports governance were well-known. The question was why it seemed impossible to make the problems disappear.

“There is only one reason for that, namely that there are too many personal interests involved. When a rule in whatever sport does not work, you amend the rules. What is valid for the sport itself is unfortunately not valid for the rules governing the organisations in question,” Michel Zen-Ruffinen said.

“From the moment you start to ask them to amend some rules under which or through which they could lose some of their privileges or which could endanger their own position, there is silent radio.”

However, to the former FIFA secretary general blowing the whistle was not enough to solve the problems of sports governance. More public demands were needed:

“The public should act as prosecutors on behalf of sport. The legislators should be helping more, the public opinion should be helping more. In sport, public opinion is not really concerned with all the scandals or the stories they hear about illegal governance. They are just satisfied with the fact that these organisations organise interesting competitions.”

### **FIFA’s breach of confidentiality**

Five years later, public interest in sports governance was slowly changing when Russia and Qatar were as elected host countries of the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cup. But although new allegations of corruption hit FIFA and the two autocratic host countries, the allegations didn’t change the governance of football.



*New York attorney Michael J. Garcia (left) and German judge Hans-Joachim Eckert were asked to investigate and sanction transgressions in the bid for the World Cups 2018 and 2022. When the latter published the report of the former, two female whistleblowers were easy to identify in spite of being promised anonymity.*

*Photo: Pressefoto Ulmer/Ullstein bild/Getty Images*

Two outspoken women involved in national World Cup campaigns to host the two events experienced how FIFA executives, to use Sepp Blatter's words, "deal with" insiders who blow the whistle.

In early 2010, Phaedra Almajid and Bonita Mersiades both lost their jobs at Qatar's and Australia's World Cup bid teams, respectively, and they decided to speak out in confi-

dence about concerns of serious corruption related to FIFA's 2010 election of host countries for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups.

Phaedra Almajid, a former international media officer for the Qatar 2022 bid team, lost her job after being accused of not handling the media competently. She became a whistleblower nine months before Qatar on 2 December 2010 was awarded the World Cup.

On the condition of anonymity, Phaedra Almajid told journalists that three African FIFA executives, Issa Hayatou, Jacques Anouma, and Amos Adamu were paid 1.5 million US dollars each to vote for Qatar.

At first, her allegations were not published by the media. But based on a letter from the Sunday Times, the British House of Commons select committee for culture, media, and sport took action, and soon the allegations of World Cup corruption were reported by the media citing "a whistleblower who had worked with the Qatar bid".

After the allegations were published by the media without naming Phaedra Almajid as the source, the whistleblower was approached by the Qatari bid team who persuaded her to sign an affidavit saying the accusations were false.

"I had no more legal representation. When the Qataris approached me, I was alone. I'm also a single mother of two children, one of whom is severely autistic and severely disabled," Phaedra Almajid later explained to the BBC, arguing that she was coerced into changing her statement.

In September 2011, the whistleblower was also approached by the FBI. Three agents told her that they knew that her and her children's security was in jeopardy and offered their help.

"It was terrifying. They asked me questions pertaining to my time in Qatar, what I had observed, what I had witnessed, and especially about the threats and the affidavit," Phaedra Almajid later told Sky News.

When New York attorney Michael Garcia in 2012 was appointed by FIFA to investigate the 2018 and 2022 World Cup bids, Phaedra Almajid agreed to give evidence on the condition of anonymity.

But in 2014, when a summary of Michael Garcia's report that cleared Russia and Qatar of serious wrongdoing was published by FIFA ethics committee judge Hans-Joachim Eckert, Phaedra Almajid claimed her condition of confidentiality was deliberately breached in the summary. And so did the Australian whistleblower Bonita Mersiades, who had given evidence to Michael Garcia on the same conditions.



### **“We were identifiable”**

Ten months before the 2010 FIFA vote, Bonita Mersiades was sacked from her job as a senior executive of Football Federation Australia (FFA) and the Australian 2022 World Cup bid team because she had raised concern over unethical conduct and the use of 15 million Australian dollars on European consultants Peter Hargitay, Fedor Radman, and Andreas Bold.

According to Bonita Mersiades, the unethical conduct also included a 500,000 Australian dollars football development gift given by the Australian bid in September 2010 to upgrade a stadium in Trinidad and Tobago owned by CONCACAF president Jack Warner, a voting FIFA vice president, and his family.

In November 2014, Phaedra Almajid and Bonita Mersiades both submitted complaints to FIFA about their treatment claiming assurances of confidentiality were breached in Hans-Joachim Eckert’s summary of Michael Garcia’s investigation report, and Michael Garcia complained that the summary misrepresented the facts of his report and his conclusions.

“Although not named in the report, we were clearly identifiable and within hours of its publication had been widely unmasked as the ‘whistleblowers’ in German, British, and Australian media. To compound this situation, Judge Eckert used his summary report to question our credibility. This is particularly puzzling as the summary simultaneously uses the same information, we provided, to form significant parts of his inquiry in respect of the Australian and Qatar World Cup bids,” Phaedra Almajid and Bonita Mersiades said in a joint statement.

One month later, FIFA’s disciplinary committee rejected the complaint by stating that the two whistleblowers waived their right to anonymity by going public with their “own media activities long before the publication” of the report summary. But FIFA’s ruling only caused Phaedra Almajid and Bonita Mersiades to speak out about FIFA’s wrongdoings more loudly than before.

In 2015, Bonita Mersiades was proven right when high-ranking FIFA officials were arrested in Zurich, and US authorities indicted over a dozen football officials, including Jack Warner, on corruption charges, while Swiss authorities announced a separate probe into the FIFA bidding processes.

The Australian whistleblower co-founded the campaign group #NewFIFANow that advocated for governance reform of world football. In 2018, she published a book entitled ‘Whatever It Takes – the Inside Story of the FIFA Way’ in which she details what she saw, heard, read, observed, and later learned about World Cup bidding practices in football.

### **Whistleblower arrested**

While threats, intimidation, and unemployment seem to be standard risks for insiders who tell the truth about crimes, discrimination, and exploitation in sport, some whistleblowers also risk imprisonment. If information revealed by whistleblowers is gained illegally, and they can’t prove in court that publishing the information is in the public interest, they risk being treated like criminals.

An example of this is Rui Pinto, a dedicated Portuguese football fan and autodidact computer expert living in Hungary. His revelations between 2015 and 2019 on the Football Leaks website of possible illegal conduct in European football raised the question of whether he was a whistleblower or a criminal hacker.

Rui Pinto saw himself as a whistleblower whose only motive was to save football from greedy and corrupt players and leaders. When Der Spiegel, a German news magazine and partner in the European Investigative Collaborations (EIC) network of journalists who analysed and published information revealed by Football Leaks, asked the Portuguese in 2019 what hacking means to him, he said:

“To me, hacking means breaking into a system with brute force and exploiting it. I never did stuff like that.”

To some of football’s most famous players, clubs, and organisations who had contracts, financial documents, and e-mails revealed by Rui Pinto in millions of leaked documents, the Portuguese was a criminal hacker. And the public prosecutor in Portugal agreed.

In January 2019, Rui Pinto was arrested in Budapest. Six weeks later he was extradited to Lisbon and accused of 147 criminal offences, including attempted extortion, cyber-crime, and breach of postal secrecy laws.

The charge against Rui Pinto for attempted extortion stems from a legal complaint filed by the sports marketing agency Doyen. In 2015, Rui Pinto allegedly demanded 500,000

euro not to disclose information related to players represented by the agency. But according to the Portuguese, he never intended to take the money.

“In my opinion, I didn’t commit a crime. I approached them to test the value of the information I gathered,” Rui Pinto told Der Spiegel in 2019, but he also later dismissed his action as “childish”.

Asked by the news magazine if his revelations, including financial information on top players such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi and top clubs like Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain, and Real Madrid, were all worth it, the Portuguese said:

“There have been some results. You had the tax cases against football superstars like Cristiano Ronaldo, José Mourinho, Radamel Falcao, and Angel Di Maria. There are investigations in Belgium and France. Ultimately, you’ll have to be patient to judge if it was all worth it.”

### **Suspended sentence**

One year later, Rui Pinto was negotiating with the Portuguese authorities about how he could help them investigate the cases he revealed. In appreciation of his help, he was moved from prison to house arrest.

In September 2023, a Lisbon court issued its verdict. Rui Pinto faced 90 charges but benefited from Portugal’s recent amnesty for some young offenders. At the end of the day, he was convicted of nine crimes, including attempted extortion and unauthorised entry into computer systems.

For this, he received a four-year suspended sentence. The man whom many football fans saw as a whistleblowing hero and whose hacking had undeniably disclosed deeply compromising information on the European football industry was convicted, but free.



*The Portuguese whistleblower Rui Pinto who leaked millions of documents about European football business, found support among fans but was convicted of nine crimes and got a suspended sentence. Photo: Catherine Ivill/Getty Images*



## Whistleblowing – the fifth pillar of democracy

*Bonita Mersiades does not wish to be defined only as a whistleblower, because she has done so much more in life and football than denouncing FIFA. At Play the Game conferences in 2013, 2015 and 2019, the former senior executive member of the Australian World Cup 2022 Bid team shared her experiences of the costs it has had for her to speak up about a corrupt World Cup bidding process. This is a part of her opening address to Play the Game 2015 in Aarhus, Denmark:*

The Australian Bid was entirely publicly funded at a cost of 50 million Australian dollars.

I wasn't happy with the three international consultants we had engaged, as I thought we were spending a lot of money on them and they didn't appear to be doing much that was useful. One of them was responsible for some key deliverables, but two of them operated in a different stratosphere to me. Their stratosphere was subterranean.

Some of these consultants came with baggage and history – a fact that was known inside the organisation. For example, when I was informed that one of them, in particular, was joining us, my boss took his copy of Andrew Jennings' 'FOUL', handed it to me, and told me to re-read the chapters on our new consultant.

I asked questions – many times – about what they were doing, why had we engaged them, pointing out their deficiencies, making note of when they said they would do things and they didn't. I didn't agree with giving \$5 million to Asia, \$4 million to Oceania, or allocating between \$4 and \$8 million to Africa for which one consultant, Fedor Radmann of Germany, had 'special responsibility'.

The joke in management meetings was that it was 'brown paper bag' money.

Our consultants made multiple visits to Russia, Qatar and China on our behalf for reasons that were not clear.

[FIFA ExCo member] Jack Warner must have thought it was Christmas every time he saw an Australian – pearls, trips for his U20 team, prime ministerial visits with bottles of fine Australian red wine ... and, finally, a \$640,000 payment just two months before the vote supposedly to upgrade a stadium in Trinidad and Tobago.

We didn't learn about this particular donation until more than two years *after* the vote because no one announced it. As it turned out, the stadium was owned by Jack's family, the money ended up in Jack's personal bank account, and the cheque was a generic Travelex cheque that circumnavigated the globe from Sydney to London to New York to Port of Spain.

But, according to the FFA [Football Federation Australia] president – one of Australia's most successful and powerful men – none of this was known to them. They thought the donation was a good idea to help out a nation in need; although they also sheepishly concede that perhaps we were a bit naïve.



*At Play the Game 2019, Bonita Mersiades presented the book she wrote about her experiences with the failed Australian bid for the FIFA World Cup 2022 and the consequences it had for her to blow the whistle. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

But I wasn't. It was clear to me that the consultants provided an essential service in the FIFA world. They knew which part of the machinery needed greasing. [...]

When I raised concerns about the lack of accountability over funding, I was told it was none of my business. When I asked questions about the consultants and what they were doing, I got no answers.

Instead, I was sacked from my job.

It took place in the head office of the global retail property empire built by the billionaire president of FFA. I was told I would never work in Australia again.

I wasn't even given a chance to go back to my office, pack up my desk and collect my personal things. I wasn't given a reason for losing my job, but I knew then that it was because the three consultants didn't want me around. Thirteen months after my sacking, my ex-boss confessed to me that I was the "victim of something much bigger than FFA."

### **Disparagement starts**

What followed in the days and weeks after I was sacked was an institutional and systematic discrediting of me.

The biggest selling newspaper in the country had their sports gossip columnist write that I was sacked because I was "bumptious". He had never met me. I had never even had a telephone conversation or exchanged an email with him.

Another sports journalist wrote that I was sacked because I had stuffed-up the relationships with the state governments, with whom FFA was negotiating over stadiums. I was never responsible for this and the journalist knew it.

In online forums, it was written by people who, again, had never met me that I was sacked either because I was no good at my job or having an affair with either my boss or the president of FFA or both. [...]

Only five weeks before I was sacked, I had received the maximum end-of-year bonus for a job well done. Prior to my departure, and after the international launch of all bids in Cape Town in December 2009, the Australian Bid was rated by *World Football Insider* as equal first of the nine bidders. Soon after, it slipped to 5<sup>th</sup>. By the end, it came stone, motherless, last. [...]

Immediately after we lost so badly, a prominent media personality in Australia, who was also a member of the FIFA Ethics Committee, interviewed his buddy, one of our consultants, who lamented that the reason we had lost was because Australia played it clean and Qatar had been dirty.

It was a cringeworthy, self-serving interview from a consultant who was paid \$1.5 million and got us only one vote. It was hypocritical because he and our other consultants attempted to play the same game. And I also thought it was racist to accuse Qatar of playing dirty when we were unwilling to admit we did the same thing – only, perhaps, not as well or with shallower pockets. [...]

But what I realised is that both Qatar – the winner – and Australia – the loser – were saying much the same thing: that is, they didn't break any rules, they played within the bidding guidelines.

And that is why my target has not specifically been Australia, except to the point that it is illustrative, but FIFA and football administration more broadly. [...]

### **Further intimidation**

In March [2015], I was invited to appear live on German television to talk about #NewFIFANow [a reform campaign led by Bonita Mersiades, among others].

What I was confronted with was a senior executive of FIFA wanting to talk about and exaggerate something from my past 31 years beforehand. The law of Australia, and many other Western countries including Germany, considers this matter so minor that it is officially a non-matter, is on no official records, and it is a breach of law to talk about it. So I won't.

But what it told me was that, if a senior FIFA employee, aided and abetted by the chair of the Audit and Compliance Committee, was so ready and willing to break the law of another country in an attempt to discredit me, I was obviously worrying them. [...]

In case that wasn't enough to intimidate me they went further.

On the flight home – 24 hours at 40,000 feet and heading into the Easter break – they published a website using my name, used some of my genuine blogs to make it look authentic, and created a Bitcoin account using my name to solicit donations towards the publication of my unpublished book.

It took three weeks and several thousand dollars to shut both of them down.

On at least two occasions, my computer has suffered massive external invasion, and websites I own have been spam-attacked to the point where the hosting company had to shut down all their sites for four days. These attacks have been traced to Zurich and Moscow.

### **Sport is a community asset**

As a woman who grew up in a generation and in a country where education, a career and family were all part of a package of a complete life, my career and my working life was taken away when I was still in my 40s. For all the wrong reasons; because I blew the whistle and took a stand.

The fact that 11 of the 22 men who voted on 2 December 2010 are now banned, suspended, indicted or under investigation shows what I knew all along – the decision-making framework was corrupt because the FIFA way of doing business is corrupt. It has been for decades. [...]

I have long held the view that sport is a community asset. It belongs to the people; those who run our sports do it as a privilege and an honour as custodians, not as some sort of right as owners. [...]

Just as the media is the fourth pillar of democracy, I see whistleblowers as the fifth pillar – auditors of accountability and guarantors for good governance. People who are willing to ask questions for no personal gain and invariably at great personal cost.

I am committed to the cause of reform of FIFA not because I'm bitter and twisted, but because I'm a football fan, parent and global citizen who values democracy, accountability, transparency and probity in our international institutions.





# ATHLETES BECOMING ACTIVISTS

When the Portuguese hacker Rui Pinto was arrested for creating Football Leaks, he argued that he only revealed wrongdoing in the interest of the common good and gathered data which contained evidence of crimes committed by powerful people in football.

From this perspective, Pinto claimed to be a democratic idealist whose acts served transparency in sport. But he was also one of many stakeholders in sport to whom speaking out about wrongdoing is not enough. In trying to change sports for the better they become activists.

While whistleblowers often prefer anonymity, activists seek publicity. But sometimes the two go hand in hand, and both serve the goal of inclusion. If all stakeholders in sport felt included and respected, there would be no need for whistleblowing and activism.

Although international sport brands itself as a celebration of humanity, freedom of expression has not always been a human right for athletes.

Some have avoided exclusion after making their statements heard or seen, like the Irish athlete Peter O'Connor who climbed up a flagpole at the 1906 Olympic Games in Greece and replaced the Union Jack with an Irish flag to protest that the IOC did not recognise Ireland as an independent nation. This happened during the medal ceremony in long jump, but O'Connor nevertheless took the gold medal in triple jump two days later.

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*Colin Kaepernick's decision to take a knee during the national anthem before a NFL game as a symbolic gesture against police brutality and racism made him a role model worldwide, but cost him his career. Photo: Ezra Shaw/Getty Images*



*US hammer thrower Gwendolyn Berry turned away from the flag during the national anthem at the country's team trials before the Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2021, explaining she finds a line in the anthem disrespectful to black people. She had earlier been reprimanded by the USOPC, but was not blocked from the Olympics.*

*Photo: Patrick Smith/Getty Images*

Others were not so lucky, like the black quarterback Colin Kaepernick from the American football league NFL. In 2016, he started kneeling during the national anthem that is regularly played before major team sports events to mark his resistance against police brutality and racial inequality, and it led US president Donald Trump to suggest that NFL

club owners should fire all players who protested during the national anthem. Since then, Colin Kaepernick has not been able to find a club owner who would offer him a job, even though his act later has been copied and multiplied by thousands of athletes of all complexions around the world.

### **The Olympic Rule 50**

In Olympic sport, freedom of expression is limited by Rule 50 of the IOC's Olympic Charter. The rule concerns advertising, demonstrations, and propaganda, and it states that:

*“Except as may be authorised by the IOC Executive Board on an exceptional basis, no form of advertising or other publicity shall be allowed in and above the stadia, venues and other competition areas which are considered as part of the Olympic sites. Commercial installations and advertising signs shall not be allowed in the stadia, venues, or other sports grounds. No kind of demonstration or political, religious, or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues, or other areas.”*

Rule 50 is rooted in Pierre de Coubertin's ideal of the Olympic Games as an apolitical arena. But the ideal was not written into the Olympic Charter until 1955, three years after Avery Brundage, an American businessman and president of the NOC in the US, was elected president of the IOC.

The text demanded that host cities “must state that no political demonstrations will be held in the stadium or other sport grounds, or in the Olympic Village, during the Games, and that it is not the intention to use the Games for any other purpose than for the advancement of the Olympic Movement.”

At the Olympic Games in Mexico in 1968, the IOC was challenged by several athletes who used their platform to demonstrate, including the famous black power protests of Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Peter Norman.

After the terror-stained 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, the IOC responded in 1974 by demanding that potential Olympic host cities should “guarantee that no political meeting or demonstration will take place in the stadium or the Olympic Village during the Games.”

And in 1975, further Olympic restrictions were implemented when the IOC decided to add “religious and racial propaganda” to the Olympic Charter’s list of forbidden acts.

### **Winds of change**

In recent years, a new wave of athlete activism has challenged the IOC’s attempts to protect its business model and Olympic ideals by silencing athletes who want to advertise for their personal sponsors during the Olympic Games and speak out about human rights and social injustice whenever they please.

Unlike before, modern athlete activists have managed to gain strong public support for their demands. And in some cases, the protesting athletes are even embraced by some of the present rulers of sport.

For example, two US athletes at the Pan American Games in 2019 only got a warning after using their platform at the medal podium to demonstrate against the government and the president of the US during the national anthem.

The white fencer Race Imboden took a knee in protest of racism, mistreatment of immigrants, and “a president who spreads hate”, a reference to the political rhetoric of then US president Donald Trump. The black hammer thrower Gwen Berry raised her fist in protest of social and racial injustice in the US and “a president who’s making it worse”.

Both athletes risked being banned from Olympic sport but were only given 12 months probation by the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee and a warning that they could face more serious sanctions for any future protests.

The changes facing the Olympic movement became even clearer when the German Cartel Office that same year stated that the IOC and the German Olympic Sports Confederation (DOSB) were subject to existing competition laws and would need to grant more possibilities for German athletes and their sponsors to advertise ahead of and during the Olympic Games.

“While athletes are the key figures of the Olympic Games, they cannot benefit directly from the IOC’s high advertising revenue generated with official Olympic sponsors. However, as the Games mark the height of their sporting careers, self-marketing during the Games plays a very important role,” Andreas Mundt, Germany’s Cartel Office president, said.

He explained that advertising activities planned by German athletes for the Olympics no longer needed the approval of the DOSB and that athletes were allowed to use social

media more freely during the Olympic Games.

The German cartel decision applied to German athletes only. But it was expected that more athletes from other countries, especially from the EU, would demand similar changes, even though the IOC noted that the German Cartel Office with its decision had also recognised that there are “legitimate reasons for restricting individual athletes’ advertising opportunities in order to ensure the ongoing organisation of the Olympic Games.”

Nevertheless, the German cartel case showed that the IOC’s restriction of Olympic athletes’ right to advertise is under attack, and so is the Olympic restrictions on their democratic right to protest.

### **Bravery, dignity, and morality**

Another example of the winds of change came in December 2020 when the Olympic sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos from the US and Peter Norman from Australia received the World Athletics’ special President’s Award 52 years after their protest during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympic Games.

Back then, the two Americans wore black socks without shoes to bring attention to black poverty and one black glove each on their fist. When they raised their fists in the air during the national anthem, their act was seen as a salute to the Black Panther movement in the US.

The Australian Peter Norman, who wore a human rights badge on the podium in support of his



*From sanctions to statues: The demonstration by Tommie Smith, John Carlos and Peter Norman was punished but achieved iconic status and is now put on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.*

*Photo: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images*

two black colleagues, was not officially sanctioned, but remained marginalised and largely forgotten until his death in 2006.

Carlos and Smith were expelled from the Olympics and met with harsh reactions in the US because of their protest of social and racial injustice, but they felt their gesture had been largely misconstrued:

“What happened in Mexico wasn’t done to hate the flag. I love the flag. It was the platform I had to make others realise we need love, joy, and not hate. We picked that direction because it was a needed direction, not only by the athletes, to do something everyone would see and understand. It was time for the athletes to stand up,” Tommie Smith told World Athletics when receiving the World Athletics President’s Award.

“We had been put in that position by society and by the need to withstand the pressure of a system that didn’t recognise everyone as equal. We did it from an athletic platform of courage and excitement and a need to provide an avenue for those who didn’t have one to go down this road, headed for that intersection where you had to choose,” John Carlos said.

Other Olympic athletes at the 1968 Games followed up. The American long jump champion Bob Beamon rolled up his pants to reveal long black socks ahead of his medal ceremony. When the national anthem ended, the long jumper faced the crowd and raised his right arm with a fist.

And Vera Cáslavská, a Czechoslovakian gymnast, looked down and turned her head away from the Soviet flag during the Soviet anthem in protest of the Soviet Union’s invasion of her country.

None of these two were punished, and Cáslavská even received the Olympic Order in Silver in 1991.

It took more than half a century for the rulers of athletics to repair the damage done to the three most famous athlete activists of the 1968 Mexico Games. According to World Athletics’ president Sebastian Coe, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Peter Norman were given the award because of their “bravery, dignity, and morality”.

In an interview with the National Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), the former British middle-distance runner and Olympic gold winner Sebastian Coe said that to him the protest represented “a seismic moment in our sport” that had inspired him to join an athletics club.

“But to be honest, I was too young then to fully understand the significance of their demonstration on the podium. I do now,” Sebastian Coe said and added that protesting

social and racial injustice to him is not a political statement but should be the standard of any civilised society.

### **New focus in the gender debate**

Today, not only World Athletics but also the IOC and the US NOC praise the acts of Tommie Smith and John Carlos. The Olympic Museum in Lausanne pays tribute to the two activists, and they are also inducted into the Hall of Fame of Olympic sport in the US.



*Social media is important for awareness raising, and some of the most followed athletes are female, says Paulina Tomczyk, general secretary of EU Athletes. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



But the athletes' fight to be heard and included is in no way over. Especially the rise of a new generation of female activists seems to have the potential to change the way sport is ruled today.

According to Else Trangbæk, the first female gymnast to represent Denmark at the Olympic Games and European winner of the 2020 IOC Women and Sport Award for her lifelong advocacy of gender equality in sport, a new generation of women in sport have changed the fight for gender equality in many different directions since she became an Olympian at the 1968 Games in Mexico.

"Our focus was primarily on the structure and the top management of sport. But since then, there has been only little change in these areas. The arrival of money in elite sport has resulted in some changes, even though there is less money in women's sport. Women raise new questions. Professional women in sport have new demands," Else Trangbæk said in an article about female athlete activism published by *Play the Game* in 2020.

"The role of the media has changed fundamentally too and can help focus attention on the significant women's problems. Earlier, there was a relatively narrow focus on equality in sport. Today, women in sport focus on many different issues that are related directly to their sport. To me, this is a clear tendency."

This new trend of female athletes using their platform in sport to fight for equality on all levels in sport was also observed by Paulina Tomczyk, a former member of Poland's national judo team and general secretary of EU Athletes, the European federation of athlete and player associations.

"For the past five years I have seen a change in the creation of organisations that represent women athletes and in the number of women asking for more equality and speaking out about their rights," she said.

According to Paulina Tomczyk, it can be quite challenging for a woman even to access sport and be a woman at the same time. To be a professional athlete as a woman can be seen by the public as entering a domain that is not really for women. Their performances can be neglected, and they can hear negative and disgusting comments about their bodies.

"Standing up to something like that and fighting for your own personal justice may empower you strongly to think that maybe you should also do something for the society at large. I think that since sport is an important part of society there are parallel trends that go hand in hand," Paulina Tomczyk argued.

“The Caster Semenya case happened at the same time as discussions increased in society about ‘non-normal’ people and everything that is related to that. One provokes the other. Generally, it is the same with issues like gender equality and pregnancy. Really personal stuff that women must fight for and then can bring forward in more general discussions in society.”

### **Social media opportunities**

In the same article, Paulina Tomczyk observed that the general trend of athletes being concerned with society probably is related to the increasing popularity of social media.

She noted that there is less coverage of female athletes in traditional media than of male athletes and that the reporting on women in sport often follows who they are married to or what kind of outfit they prefer. On social media, female athletes are free to create their own content.

“Some of the most followed athletes on social media are female. It is easy to use social media as an important tool to bring awareness to your case. Back in the old days, athletes mainly had the opportunity to protest at games, on the podium, or in media interviews. Now, they have an opportunity to reach millions of their followers.”

Paulina Tomczyk added that sports organisations in general expect athletes to be role models but only if what they say is not too controversial or makes the people in power uncomfortable. If athletes are speaking out against a sports organisation or a country, they are often met with repression and attempts to silence them.

“This is still very visible. But hopefully, the trend of athlete activism will make it less frequent. For many years, the approach of sports organisations to women’s sport was like ‘You are lucky to be allowed to play here and you are lucky that we are giving you the t-shirts for free’. Now, women have become much more aware of the fact that they have certain rights,” she said.

However, according to Nikki Dryden, a former Olympic swimmer and human rights lawyer from Canada, there is still a difference in athlete activism that is caused by the way male and female athletes are organised. While athlete activism on the men’s side comes mostly from professional male athletes who have the support of unions behind them, Olympic female athletes often do it without any union support.

“This means they need sport administrators and even coaches behind them who support what they are doing and empower them to speak out. The rise of female athlete voices corresponds somewhat to the rise of the increased involvement and promotion of female athletes on boards and other women in administration positions. The rise of women involved off the field and in coaching has naturally created space for female issues to be reviewed and raised,” Nikki Dryden said.

“The rise of the female athlete voice truly is a team effort. From women coaches and administrators to top female athletes and the human rights activists working off the field to support them, there is nothing to stop us now.”

### **From individual to collective acts**

The fight for inclusion of sportswomen goes back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But collective acts of protest seem to be stronger today than ever before. In the US, female WNBA basketball players have taken the lead by collectively speaking out against police brutality, racial discrimination, and social injustice.

According to Amira Rose Davis, a professor of history and African American studies at Penn State University, athletes protesting collectively is a new thing in the US where athlete activism has usually been individual acts of protest:

“When we go back to that long history of athletic activism in this country, we’ve seen all too often how disposable a singular athlete can be. We’ve seen athletes be blackballed. We’ve seen athletes be cut off from the team or ostracised. We’ve seen brands run away and scatter from the athletes they represent. So, what has been a source of protection is that collective action,” Amira Rose Davis told National Public Radio in 2020 when many NBA basketball players collectively joined already protesting WNBA players and decided to strike after the police shot Jacob Blake, a 29-year-old black man suspected of carrying a knife.

According to Amira Rose Davis, the collective power of the WNBA players’ protests is rooted in a necessity for women, especially black women, to fight for their right to be included in US sport:

“When the entire team is like ‘Yeah, no, I’m not with this’, then it’s a different ballgame. And I think that is a blueprint the WNBA has long abided by. The WNBA is a league that is gritty by necessity,” she said.



*The female basketball players in the North American WNBA league have been leading anti-racism protest in collective actions since 2016. Photo by Erica Denhoff/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images*

“It catches so much hate because it’s ‘too Black, too queer’. It’s full of women. And I think that it draws the ire of a lot of people. And so, they have always been fairly outspoken as a league, because it’s the only way to be. Their very presence on a court, their very insistence that they have the right to play and make a living by playing is a political act in and of itself. So, I think they were already kind of primed towards action.”

## **Sentenced to prison**

In Belarus, Yelena Leuchanka, a former WNBA player, became a national role model in her home country in 2020 when she was sentenced to prison after attending public mass demonstrations against the suspicious re-election of Belarusian president Aleksander Lukashenko who had been in power since 1994.

“I was born in the former Soviet Union where you couldn’t speak freely about what was on your mind, and everyone had to be the same. I grew up in a small town where you had to stand in line for milk and bread. Never did I think that basketball would help me to get to a point in my life where I can express my opinion, where I matter and can be heard,” Yelena Leuchanka told *Play the Game* in an interview a few weeks after she was released after spending 15 days in prison.

The Belarusian basketball player, who has been a part of her country’s national team and Olympic team, said she was inspired by athlete activism in both the US and Europe to use her platform in sport to stand up and speak out against the president of her home country.

“The difference for me is that in the US and other democratic countries, people can go out and protest and say what is on their minds. In Belarus, it is a totally different thing. Belarus is not a democracy. We are at a different level, we are North Korea,” Yelena Leuchanka explained.

The athlete activist said she felt honoured by the Belarusian people who regarded her as a role model for the democratic movement in Belarus and not just as an athlete. And she believed that athlete activism in Belarus and other countries is changing the position of athletes in both sport and society in general:

“We are changing the way athletes are viewed all over the world. Many people believe we only care about dribbling a ball. But I think many more athletes in the future will stand up for what they believe is right and use their platform in sport to fight for the good of the people.”

Yelena Leuchanka was the most famous Belarusian athlete to be sentenced to prison for using her platform in sport to fight for the good of the people. But she wasn’t the only athlete who spoke out against ‘Europe’s last dictator’ in collective acts of protest that put a bomb under the Olympic movement and forced the IOC to choose between supporting Olympic athletes or Aleksander Lukashenko who was also head of the National Olympic Committee of Belarus.

More than 900 athletes and sports administrators in Belarus, which is a country known for its strong ties between sport and politics, signed an open letter in which they demanded a new presidential election after Aleksander Lukashenko was accused of fraud after he won a sixth term as president of Belarus.

### **The time is ready**

One of Yelena Leuchanka's strongest supporters was Yegor Mesheriakov, a former basketball player and an assistant coach for the national basketball team, who had played as a professional in Italy, Greece, Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine.

"Two weeks ago, I was a vice president of the Belarusian Basketball Federation. When I heard that the federation would not try and help Yelena Leuchanka out of prison, I left the federation," Yegor Mescheriakov told *Play the Game* in 2020.

The Belarusian basketball player estimated that 95 per cent of all athletes in Belarus supported the demonstrations against Aleksander Lukashenko. But he also said that many athletes were afraid they would be kicked out of their national teams and clubs.

"After having been a part of the national Belarusian basketball team for 20 years, I never expected to end up in a situation like this. But when Yelena Leuchanka was arrested as the first sportswoman, many Belarusian sportsmen, including me, were ready to take her place," Yegor Mescheriakov said, adding that going back to the old state sport system in Belarus was no longer an option.

"When you look at the world of sport and see what happens, the time is ready for athlete activism. For many years, Belarusian politicians have used athletes to promote the country and their own political purposes. For some reason they still expect us to keep silent now. But that is not how it works anymore."

### **Athletes in exile**

The Belarusian swimmer Aliaksandra Herasimenia, a triple Olympic medallist, knew she was at risk of being prisoned when she became head of the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation set up to help Belarusian athletes who lost their careers and income after demonstrating against Aleksander Lukashenko's regime.



*The swimmer Aliaksandra Herasimenia was among the top athletes ready to sacrifice their privileges and risk imprisonment while opposing the Belarusian dictator Lukashenko. Photo: Adam Pretty/Getty Images*

In 2020, she was forced to close her swimming club at a state-owned school in Minsk and decided to leave her home country and move to Vilnius in Lithuania.

“I left Belarus because I understood it was only a matter of one or two days before I would be arrested. Now, I work from Vilnius with strong support from the national Olympic committee of Lithuania. And I hope that national Olympic committees in other countries will help us too. The national Olympic committee in Belarus has done nothing

to help. They are only interested in our medals.” Aleksandra Herasimenia told Play the Game from her exile.

“As athletes, we are used to fight and struggle to achieve our goals and that really helps us now. But nobody takes part in the street protests because someone has told them to. They all do it because they don’t want to be afraid anymore. Everyone is supporting each other. The people are motivated by the athletes, and the athletes are motivated by the people. It’s a good balance.”

For Aleksandra Herasimenia, the IOC holds the key to change in Belarusian sport and to stop the arrests of athletes using its platform in sport to speak out against the regime:

“We know the rules of the Olympic Charter. We are allowed to express our civic opinions and we should not be kicked out of our sport just because we criticise the regime. We are athletes, not politicians. When we see someone attack our girls, our moms, or our husbands, we just try to tell people that this is not normal, this is violence,” Aleksandra Herasimenia said and urged the IOC to declare the Lukashenko-controlled NOC illegal and give its financial support directly to the Belarusian athletes instead.

“If the present situation goes on for months, Belarusian sport will disappear. Some athletes will leave the country. Others will be forced to leave their sport. Nothing will change if the regime does not change.”

In 2020, Aleksandra Herasimenia took part in a demonstration in Lausanne where a group of Belarusian protesters marched through the Olympic capital with banners declaring that “Champions don’t play with dictators.” But to the IOC, the case was not that simple.

An exclusion of the Belarusian NOC headed by Aleksander Lukashenko could also hit back at the IOC. For decades, IOC leaders had turned a blind eye to national Olympic committees mixing sport and politics, as documented in 2017 in a survey by Play the Game that showed that one in seven NOCs had direct links to national governments.

### **Pursuing Olympic unity**

In an interview with the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, Niels Nygaard, then head of Denmark’s NOC and acting president of the European Olympic Committees (EOC), labelled Aleksander Lukashenko’s position as both head of state and head of the national NOC as “absurd”.



The Dane also explained why the Belarusian case was a ticking bomb that could explode if the IOC interfered in the Belarusian NOC's legal right to elect its own president.

“In Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev is the president of the NOC in his country. I doubt that the members of the NOC in Russia can elect a president that has not been approved by the Russian president Vladimir Putin, and I expect the same is the case with China.”

In late 2020, the IOC concluded that the leaders of the NOC in Belarus had not protected the athletes from political discrimination and decided to exclude all elected members of the NOC, including Aleksander Lukashenko, and to suspend all financial payments to the NOC.

But when the Belarusian NOC in 2021 elected the president's son Viktor Lukashenko as the new head of the NOC, the IOC only reacted by expressing its “great disappointment”. The Belarusian NOC was not excluded and still isn't, and the committee was still under Aleksander Lukashenko's control.

### **Neglecting duty of care**

To Rob Koehler, director general of the athlete-led organisation Global Athlete, the case showed that the IOC had neglected its duty of care by not fully suspending the Belarusian NOC.

“Athletes have been unlawfully incarcerated, removed from jobs, fined, intimidated, and kidnapped; yet the IOC continues to allow the Belarusian NOC to retain its good standing and attend the Games. For a year, Belarusian athletes and the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation have been pleading with the IOC to fully suspend their own NOC. The IOC's inaction has sent a clear message to athletes worldwide that their health and safety are secondary to the implementation of the Games and the preservation of a ‘global unity’ marketing strategy,” Rob Koehler told *Play the Game* in 2021.

Using the same argument for individual sanctions that the IOC used to not sanction Russian sport collectively for the nation's state-sponsored doping regime, IOC president Thomas Bach underlined the ideal of an autonomous Olympic world where all nations are included, regardless of the political actions of their governments.

“We will only sanction the people that are responsible for something. We will not sanction a national Olympic committee for the actions of its government, so long as the NOC's leading individuals do not support these actions. None of you should be held



*The IOC's inaction in Belarus has sent a clear message to athletes worldwide that their health and safety are secondary issues, says Rob Koehler from Global Athlete. Photo: Thomas Sondergaard/Play the Game*

responsible for the actions of your government. It is up to governments to deal with governments,” Thomas Bach said in a speech held at the Oceania National Olympic Committees General Assembly in Fiji.

While Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter was still in place to collectively restrict freedom of expression and advertising possibilities for all Olympic athletes, collective sanctions against nations led by dictators who had broken the Olympic Truce and for decades had misused Olympic sport to promote their own political agendas was not an option.

## Collective responsibility

If collective responsibility is never accepted, how is it possible to protect athletes and other stakeholders in sport against numerous crimes involving doping, corruption, match-fixing, sexual abuse, and human rights violations?

Though some individual sports leaders have begun embracing protesting athletes and fans, there are still no signs that sport will take collective responsibility for supporting athletes who take a stand in the fight for democracy, transparency, and freedom of speech in sport.

With WADA as a notable exception, cleaning up sport has mostly been a matter for individual athlete groups supported by individual whistleblowers, activists, journalists, researchers, human rights experts, advocacy groups, and public prosecutors in a small number of Western democracies.

But most countries in the world are not democratic. In these countries, it can be outright dangerous to blow the whistle, take a knee, raise a fist, or advocate human rights on t-shirts and banners. Even in democracies, most people still seem to care more about being entertained by sport than cleaning up the crimes it produces.

## Who killed the boxer?

Nearly 60 years ago, the later Nobel Prize winner and songwriter Bob Dylan came to almost the same conclusion in his song ‘Who Killed Davey Moore?’.

As a young songwriter who loved boxing, Dylan questioned who was to blame for the death of a former Olympic boxer who passed away in 1963 after a fight for the featherweight World Championship at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles. When the song was recorded during a live concert at New York’s Philharmonic Hall in 1964, Bob Dylan introduced his lyrics by stating:

“This is a song about a boxer. It’s got nothing to do with boxing; it’s just a song about a boxer really, and, uh, it’s not even having to do with a boxer, really. It’s got nothing to do with nothing. I just fit these words together, that’s all.”

In 2011, Sports Illustrated ranked his words as the best sports song of all time.

### Who Killed Davey Moore?

Who killed Davey Moore  
Why and what's the reason for?  
"Not I," said the referee  
"Don't point your finger at me  
I could've stopped it in the eighth  
An' maybe kept him from his fate  
But the crowd would've booed, I'm sure  
At not getting their money's worth  
It's too bad he had to go  
But the pressure was on me too, you know  
It wasn't me that made him fall  
No, you can't blame me at all"

Who killed Davey Moore  
Why and what's the reason for?  
"Not us," says the angry crowd  
Whose screams filled the arena loud  
"It's too bad he died that night  
But we just like to see a good fight  
We didn't mean for him t' meet his death  
We just meant to see some sweat  
There ain't nothing wrong in that  
It wasn't us that made him fall  
No, you can't blame us at all"

Who killed Davey Moore  
Why and what's the reason for?  
"Not me," says his manager  
Puffing on a big cigar  
"It's hard to say, it's hard to tell  
I always thought that he was well  
It's too bad for his wife an' kids he's dead  
But if he was sick, he should've said  
It wasn't me that made him fall  
No, you can't blame me at all"

Who killed Davey Moore  
Why and what's the reason for?  
"Not me," says the gambling man  
With his ticket stub still in his hand  
"It wasn't me that knocked him down  
My hands never touched him none  
I didn't commit no ugly sin  
Anyway, I put money on him to win  
It wasn't me that made him fall  
No, you can't blame me at all"

Who killed Davey Moore  
Why and what's the reason for?  
"Not me," says the boxing writer  
Pounding print on his old typewriter  
Sayin', "Boxing ain't to blame  
There's just as much danger in a football game"  
Sayin', "Fistfighting is here to stay  
It's just the old American way  
It wasn't me that made him fall  
No, you can't blame me at all"

Who killed Davey Moore  
Why and what's the reason for?  
"Not me," says the man whose fists  
Laid him low in a cloud of mist  
Who came here from Cuba's door  
Where boxing ain't allowed no more  
"I hit him, yes, it's true  
But that's what I am paid to do  
Don't say 'murder', don't say 'kill'  
It was destiny, it was God's will"

*Lyrics by Bob Dylan, 1963.*



## Athletes should not be gagged in exchange for Olympic dream

*Rule 50.2 in the IOC's Charter is a clear violation of the human rights of athletes to free speech and expression, argued the Canadian lawyer and former Olympian Nikki Dryden at Play the Game 2022. Though the IOC has introduced some improvements regarding human rights in its charter in 2023, rule 50.2 was not revised, and Nikki Dryden's 2022 proposals are still valid.*



*There is no transparent process for dealing with breaches of the Charter's restrictions on freedom of expression, Nikki Dryden told Play the Game 2022. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

[...] The Olympics are built on human rights principles used to market the Olympics as an idealistic, magical gathering of the world's people represented through each nation's most physically gifted. To execute that vision, the IOC goes to extensive lengths to protect their financial interests and preserve their exalted image. In some cases that means violating the human rights of the very athletes at the center of the Olympic Movement including their right to free speech.

The right to free speech is articulated in everything from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to supporting treaties protecting minorities and children. Regional human rights bodies that cover Europe, Africa and the Americas protect it as well as the domestic law of the 2020 Olympic host, Japan, the IOC host Switzerland, the Olympics' main revenue generator the USA, and most other countries. Even the IOC's own Athletes' Rights Declaration guarantees the right to freedom of expression.

Rule 50.2 of the Olympic Charter states in part, "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas," thereby curtailing the Olympian's universal human right to free speech and expression.

In January 2020, the IOC published additional guidelines to clarify Rule 50.2 in collaboration with the IOC Athlete's Commission. Unfortunately, like their attempts in 2014, they failed to provide a legal justification for this human rights breach.

Moreover, without any hint of irony, their examples of what constitutes a demonstration (signs, armbands,

hand gestures and kneeling) leave the IOC itself open to a Rule 50.2 violation as playing a national anthem and raising a national flag is in and of itself a political demonstration. [...]

Nothing can replace the moment of Olympic glory broadcast to over three billion people around the world. Nothing can replace a medal ceremony either. But Rule 50.2 gags Olympians from using these moments on live television (that cannot be edited by the media) how they choose.

However, the "dignity" of the medal ceremony is not "destroyed" because an Olympian exercises their human rights. It is destroyed if the world continues to stand by while Olympians are threatened and gagged in order to realize their Olympic dreams.

Whether you want to make the sign of the cross as you step to the podium, wear a hijab when you compete, make a lightning bolt when you win, take a knee, or weep as you struggle to sing the words to your national anthem, what you do in your moment of glory is your right and your choice. [...]

As I outline in a longer legal piece, for women and minority Olympians, the IOC also has an affirmative obligation to enable them to be heard. Grave violations of free expression, like the "counselling" and shaming of Australian boxer Damien Hooper at the 2012 Olympics for daring to wear a federally recognized Aboriginal flag t-shirt, must end.

The right to free speech appears unfettered in US law, and First Amendment protections form the backbone of the US Constitution. However, the US Supreme

Court limits free speech when it contains obscenity, fraud, child pornography, is connected to illegal conduct, and “incites imminent lawless action.” Under international law, speech that is intolerant of minorities or incites hatred or violence can be outlawed.

The problem with the IOC’s Rule 50.2 is that it fails to provide lawful justification for curtailing the fundamental right to free speech, and that the Olympic Charter more broadly fails to provide a fair and transparent process (remedy) for alleged breaches of the rule. [...]

The current Charter fails to outline the boundaries or provide lawful due process for an alleged breach. Instead, the Charter threatens athletes with temporary or permanent ineligibility, exclusion from the Games, disqualification, withdrawal of accreditation, loss of Olympic result including medals, and financial sanctions. Rather than using paternalistic words and idealistic language (peace, harmony and neutrality), the IOC should be focused on two things: Creating a framework for how speech will be viewed (rather than trying to define it) and creating a fair and transparent process for alleged breaches of Rule 50.2.

Suggestions for the IOC:

- Align Rule 50.2 to international law by removing generic language like “propaganda” and “demonstration” and inserting bans on speech that incites hatred or violence or intolerance to minorities.

- Define a transparent process and framework for determining an alleged breach, including timeline, cost, access to paid legal counsel for the athlete, and standards from the United Nations, international law and other guiding bodies.
- Create and fund an independent tribunal of diverse and inclusive free speech and human rights experts to sit during the Olympics and evaluate alleged breaches.
- Outline the penalties for an alleged breach. For example, if it is found that the speech is not protected, the penalty for a first-time offense could be a fine of 5,000 US dollars. A second time offense might include a penalty of handing all prize money to a charity, third time, removal from Olympic results. There could be different penalties for different situations: unprotected speech on the podium could be fined more heavily than unprotected speech made before or after a race.
- Define the penalties for the IOC when they bring a failed claim against an athlete.

[...] The IOC needs to stop its authoritarian treatment of athletes as infants without agency. It is time for the IOC to put the human rights of athletes at the center of the Olympic Games.

*Find the full text at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*

## SAPIS: Empowering the athlete voice in sport

Athletes are the beating heart of sport. Without athletes, sports organisations would lose the legitimacy they draw from the multitudes engaging in elite and grassroots sports. Stadia would remain empty, TV and tablet screens turn blank, and sport would stop generating large revenues from public and private sources. One of the world's fastest-growing industries would cease to exist. Millions of employees would lose their jobs, and hundreds of thousands of investors would go bankrupt.

Despite their importance to the industry, athletes rarely have a say. They are often excluded from the meeting rooms where important decisions are made.



*The former captain of the national Brazilian football team Raí Oliveira visited Play the Game in 2011 and 2017 to talk about the advocacy group Atletas pelo Brasil that he co-founded with other Brazilian top athletes. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

They are deprived of influencing decisions that affect their sport, their daily lives, and their future careers.

So, how can we strengthen the athlete voice? That was the question three athlete groups and a collective of academic researchers decided to answer in a project with financial support from the European Union. The project 'Strengthening Athlete Power in Sport' (SAPIS) ran from 2020 to 2023 and aimed to:

- create an overview of existing practices of athlete representation
- develop opportunities for athletes to participate in decision-making in their federation
- point to new ways of preparing athletes for a role in the governance of sport.

First, the SAPIS researchers identified three dimensions of democracy as central in forming the bedrock for sports organisations. Taken together, these principles offer a solid and legitimate grounding upon which to establish athlete representation in sport:

- Representative – those who govern should be accountable to the governed, usually achieved through free, fair, and open elections.
- Participatory – people should be able to contribute to collective decision-making.
- Deliberative – systems and processes should be established to enable the exchange of ideas and perspectives to promote reflection and better-informed decision-making.



These three types of democracy should apply not only to sports governing bodies but also to athlete representative bodies such as athlete associations and athletes' commissions, as well as to the interactions between sports governing bodies and athlete representatives.

The SAPIS project took a closer look at three types of athlete organisations:

**Athlete associations (unions)** are independent, member-based organisations owned and led by athletes with their own democratic structures. Athlete associations can offer an independent collective voice for athletes and engage in collective bargaining and negotiations on terms and conditions of employment. They can offer collective voices that sports authorities can trust to best represent the views of athletes given their independence and democratic structures.

**Athletes' commissions** (or athletes' committees) are advisory bodies within sports federations and Olympic committees established to represent athletes' voices and interests in decision-making. Some have a share in decision-making power through representation on the executive body of their federation, others act in a consultative role within the sports governing bodies.

**Athlete advocacy groups** range from informal groups with no member base to more formal groups with legal structures. They can influence decision-making via

## Strengthening Athlete Power in Sport

A guide to opening new ways in sports governance



You can find the SAPIS good practice guide and more about athlete representation at [www.athletepower.eu](http://www.athletepower.eu)

SAPIS was coordinated by Play the Game, and the partners included the European Elite Athletes Association, JPY - Football Players Association of Finland, NOC\*NSF - The Dutch Olympic Committee\* Dutch Sports Federation, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain, Swansea University, United Kingdom, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Moreover, assistance was given by ICERIS at KU Leuven.

SAPIS was co-funded by the Erasmus+- programme with a grant of approximately 250,000 euro.

social and mass media or by using athlete members' networks to spread messages. Their legitimacy depends on qualities like transparency, democracy, and accountability. Advocacy groups will often depend on a strong engagement from individuals and can be vulnerable if they do not secure a lasting commitment from members, sustainable financing, and good governance.

Based on interviews with these groups and officials from sports governing bodies, SAPIS made a checklist of recommendations for athlete representatives. Here is a selection:

### **Have the right knowledge**

- Know your rights as a representative and the duties of sports governing bodies to negotiate with you or to consult you.
- Know your mandate – who do you represent and how have you become a spokesperson – e.g., through election or similar democratic means?
- Know your constituents – make sure you know the views and interests of those you seek to represent and speak on behalf of.
- Know the issues – make sure you have researched and understand the issues you are speaking about to gain and maintain credibility.
- Know your sports governing body or employer – how are decisions made, who makes them and how can you influence them?
- Know your allies – who else might support your position and how can they help?

### **Get the right structures**

- Ensure that all members can access the association/ commission services on equal terms.
- Create a network of local athlete representatives to serve as a contact point between teams and the association.
- Ensure that active athletes are a part of the governance of the association or commission and that any elected or appointed officers are accountable to athletes.

### **Connect with your constituents**

- Report back to those you represent and speak on behalf of.
- Keep regular contact with athletes through regular team visits, general assemblies and other meetings as well as informal channels such as social media.
- Work proactively to ensure that all athletes are properly informed about their rights as members of your association.
- Gather athlete views and opinions through in-person meetings, but also via athlete surveys, and use them to define, amend or develop the associations' functioning and work.
- Stimulate discussion on the central issues with your constituents and be open to their criticism.
- Make clever use of social media as a space for dialogue with your constituents and communication about your work.



## Chapter 11

# PLAYING WITH DICTATORS IN A GAME OF WAR AND PEACE

“The case is that for us it is easier in dictatorships. Dictators can organise events such as this without asking the people’s permission.”

Few international sports leaders have exposed the soft spot that international sports leaders have for autocratic rulers as clearly as the late Gian-Franco Kasper, a Swiss member of the IOC and president of the International Ski Federation (FIS), did in the Swiss newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* in February 2019.

Although Kasper had to apologise for his remarks a few days later, they echoed a political reality that others have expressed only a little more subtly.

In 2013, FIFA’s then secretary general Jérôme Valcke said that “less democracy is sometimes better for organising a World Cup” because, he said, “when you have a very strong head of state who can decide, as maybe Putin can do in 2018, that is easier for us organisers than a country such as Germany where you have to negotiate at different levels.”

Democracy was never in the DNA of the IOC, which was founded in 1894 by members of the European aristocracy and upper-class bourgeoisie. But almost all international

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*Serdar Berdimuhamedow (right, in brown trousers) serves both as president and supreme sports leader of Turkmenistan, one example of the lack of sports autonomy that the IOC turns a blind eye to.*

*Photo: Merdan Velhanov/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

sports federations are – at least in theory – operating in a democratic structure that unites the little local club with the international federation.

Nevertheless, history is loaded – as shown in a previous chapter – with alliances between sport and autocrats, from the infamous Nazi Olympics in 1936 to the de facto selection of Saudi Arabia as host for the future FIFA World Cup in 2034. The events may vary in their cultural, financial, and political setting, but they all show that sport refrains from taking democratic values seriously.

Playing with autocrats is a risky game for a movement that wishes to be seen as a beacon of peace between nations.

This became obvious when the Russian Federation invaded their neighbouring country Ukraine on 24 February 2022, only two days after the closure of the Olympic Winter Games in Beijing.

The invasion happened during the so-called ‘Olympic Truce’. Claiming to repeat a practice from the Olympics in ancient Greece, this truce calls for countries to let the arms rest from the seventh day before the opening to the seventh day following the closing of each Olympic Games. The UN General Assembly regularly backs this initiative that was relaunched by the IOC in 1991 “with a view to protecting, as far as possible, the interests of the athletes and sport in general, and to harness the power of sport to promote peace, dialogue and reconciliation more broadly.”

But it is wrong to seek legitimacy for a truce in the Olympic Games, professor of sports history Hans Bonde argued in the Danish daily Politiken in 2023: “In antiquity, there was no general peace associated with the Olympic Games. There are plenty of examples of war between city-states and even war between states competing in the Olympic Games. The concept of pacifism simply did not exist in antiquity. A warrior mentality prevailed.”

### **Third violation of the truce**

Obviously, that mentality still thrives. It was for instance by no means the first time Russia ignored the noble intentions of the truce. In 2008, Russian troops started a war with Georgia during the Beijing Summer Olympics. In 2014, as the lights over the closing ceremony of Russia’s own Winter Olympics in Sochi faded, Russian-backed troops invaded the peninsula of Crimea which belongs to Ukraine.



*Queen Sofia from Spain signs the Olympic Truce wall in Athens in 2004. This IOC initiative is adopted by the UN General Assembly before every Olympic Games, but rarely respected. Photo: Milos Bicanski/Getty Images*

None of these previous invasions had triggered any response whatsoever from the guardians of Olympic peace, the IOC.

But the global outrage over Russia's third military aggression during the Olympic truce was so loud that the IOC had to respond. Most notably, Eastern European countries and their national Olympic committees, who had for years argued that Russia should not be punished too harshly for its systemic doping policies, realised that their national existence was put at risk.

The day after the invasion, the IOC recommended not to hold any international sports events in Russia and the country of its war ally Belarus.

A few days later, the IOC recommended excluding all Russian and Belarusian athletes from international competitions “in order to protect the integrity of global sports competitions and for the safety of all the participants”.

In a more symbolic action, the IOC stripped three prominent Russians of their Olympic Order in Gold, namely the president Vladimir Putin, the head of the Sochi Games and deputy prime minister Dmitry Chernyshenko, and Dmitry Kozak, deputy chief of staff of Putin’s office.

However, the IOC did not disallow Russian sports leaders to continue their roles in the international sports federations, nor did it touch its own Russian IOC members, arguing that they were representing the IOC in Russia, not Russia in the IOC.

The IOC qualified the situation as “a dilemma that could not be solved”.

### **Sport as an enabler?**

But could the world of sport have done more to avoid this dilemma? Had sport served to enable the growing nationalism and militarism in Russia over the two decades that Putin had ruled?

After placing major international sports events in Russia and Russian leaders inside many international sports organisations, the Olympic family business was accused of having fuelled the former KGB officer Putin’s dream of rebuilding the power of the former Soviet Union by military force.

Russia invested billions of dollars in hosting the 2014 Olympic Winter Games, the 2018 FIFA World Cup, and other major sports events in the hope of gaining soft power at home and abroad.

International sport had welcomed the money and the opportunities with open arms. Russian oligarchs with close ties to Putin had bought influence and powerful positions in numerous sports federations. Doping and corruption went hand in hand in some sports, and the international anti-doping movement had been in disarray because of the IOC’s relatively soft approach towards the Russian–international doping scandal.

According to the German investigative journalist Jens Weinreich, who has followed Olympic politics for 30 years, the sanctions of Russia were too little, too late.

“Olympic sport lags miles behind the actions of politicians,” the German wrote in a Play the Game commentary a week into the war in Ukraine, arguing that in addition to banning Russian athletes, the IOC should have suspended the Olympic committees of Russia and Belarus, who supported the Russian invasion, and FIFA and UEFA should have suspended the national football associations of the two countries.

“This Olympic system with the IOC on top has not only allowed itself to be taken over by Russia and Vladimir Putin. [They] wanted exactly that: Putin’s approval, the money of the Kremlin, the state corporations, and oligarchs,” Jens Weinreich stated.



*Only one person has access to the Soviet and Russian espionage files with intelligence from the Olympic movement, says German journalist Jens Weinreich – that person is Vladimir Putin who here opens the Sochi 2014 Olympics. Photo: David Goldman/Pool/Getty Images*



In this respect, the German journalist argued, international sports organisations were on the side of the Russian perpetrators.

“They have ignored all the warnings from whistle-blowers and the many media revelations of huge corruption, criminality, and doping over several decades. The entanglement of the so-called Olympic family with the Kremlin mafia in the past decades should be dealt with by independent international investigators, paid and supported by the European Union, and an international court.”

Jens Weinreich grew up in the German Democratic Republic during the Cold War when the Soviet Union dominated Eastern Europe. To him, the real dilemma for the Olympic family was how Vladimir Putin would react to the sports sanctions. Because, as the German journalist said, the well-documented Soviet and Russian Olympic spying activities by the KGB, FSB, and the military intelligence agency GRU span over a period of half a century.

Based on indictments of GRU officers in the US, the Russian hacking of anti-doping institutions such as WADA, but also CAS, the IOC, FIFA, and World Athletics as well as three dozen other organisations, and Russian cyber-attacks on the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, the 2018 Games in Pyeongchang, and the servers of the Olympic organisers of the 2020 Tokyo Games, Jens Weinreich concluded:

“There is only one person who has access to all the results of this Olympic espionage. There is only one person who, over the past two decades, has been at the hub of Russian sports politics, only one person who has snapped his fingers and set dozens of oligarchs in motion, who in turn have done everything they can to buy votes, to buy major events, Olympic Games, federations, and officials. That person is Vladimir Putin. The fear in the Olympic family is enormous.”

### **Putin in defense of Pierre de Coubertin**

Whether the fear is justified remains to be seen. The Russians have announced that they will stage the World Friendship Games in 2024 as an alternative to the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics, hoping to attract some world-class athletes from their geopolitical allies.

Russia took a similar initiative shortly after the invasion of Ukraine and the ban on their athletes. At a substitute event for the Beijing Paralympic Winter Games 2022 in the Sibe-

rian city of Khanty-Mansiysk, Vladimir Putin said at the opening that “it was an apex of cynicism” to ban Russia and Belarus from the Beijing Games.

“The damage was inflicted not only on innocent athletes but on our Paralympians, who are the ones to never break down, overcoming all of the most difficult obstacles in their lives to win global support and admiration.”

Hinting at the sanctions against Russia for systemic doping in the past decade, Putin presented himself as the true protector of Olympic values:

“In recent years, a lot of major international competitions have been marked by events that are incompatible with sports, its spirit and atmosphere. [...] We have seen how the ideas of Pierre de Coubertin are methodically falsified and distorted, and the once-sacred principles of sports become blurred.”

“Right before our eyes, equality turned into perverted tolerance, justice became double standards, and the fight for clean sport became a politically biased dictatorship of the anti-doping bureaucracy.”

And the leader of a nation, who more than any other has used sport to a political end, accused the IOC of violating the Olympic Charter, “including the key thesis that the Games are a competition between athletes, not between states.”

“What we are witnessing now is equality taking the shape of a perverted tolerance, and justice assuming double standards, while the fight for clean sports turns into a politically orchestrated dictatorship in the sphere of the anti-doping bureaucracy.”

Perhaps the Olympic ban on Russia for its war against Ukraine shouldn’t come as a big surprise to the Russian president. Although many nations go to war without being banned from sport, war has often been an IOC argument for banning a country.

In 1920, Austria, Bulgaria, Turkey, Hungary, and Germany were banned from the Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium, due to their involvement in the First World War. The ban on Germany was upheld at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. Germany and Japan were also banned from the 1948 Olympic Games in London because of their involvement in the Second World War.

Other IOC sanctions of nations include South Africa being banned from all Olympic Games between 1964 and 1992 because of UN condemnation of its apartheid system. Rhodesia was banned from the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich for the same reason.

In 2000, Afghanistan was banned from the Olympic Games in Sydney due to the Taliban regime’s discrimination against women, and the national Olympic committee of

Kuwait has twice been suspended by the IOC because of government interference. Ironically, the suspension was inspired the Kuwaiti sheikh Al-Sabah in a political move against his own country.

### **Athlete protests in Belarus**

Russia's war ally, Belarus, was for long another example of the global sports family doing Olympic business with dictatorships.

In the summer of 2019, Belarusian president Aleksander Lukashenko was accused of major human rights violations when the capital Minsk was hosting the second European Games, one month prior to the president's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as head of state in the former Soviet republic. For 23 of the 25 years, Lukashenko had also served as the head of the National Olympic Committee.

The European Olympic Committees (EOC) had granted this event to Belarus as a last option because no other country wanted it. In the former Soviet Red Army officer Lukashenko, the then EOC president Patrick Hickey seemed to find a soulmate, and he singlehandedly bestowed an Olympic award on him in 2008 – causing furore among more democratically inclined EOC members.

Lukashenko was and is infamous for ordering state authorities to repress political opponents, civil society activists, lawyers, rights groups, and journalists.

One year after the European Games in Minsk, thousands of Belarusians, including many athletes, were arrested after riot police cracked down on peaceful mass demonstrations against Aleksander Lukashenko's August 2020 re-election for a sixth term as president – an election which was widely regarded as fraudulent.

In the first year of the public protests in Belarus, thousands of activists including athletes were sent to prison, and the crackdowns inspired elite athletes to create the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation.

125 sports people applied to the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation for help in cases of discrimination and dismissals for political reasons. 98 of them had been arrested, eight were political prisoners, and 36 professional athletes and coaches were dismissed from national teams.

## IOC exclusion of Belarus

After months of pressure from Belarusian athletes, the IOC decided in December 2020 to exclude all members of the Executive Board of the Belarusian Olympic Committee, including Aleksander Lukashenko, his son Victor Lukashenko, and the national ice hockey president Dmitry Baskov, a strong supporter of the regime who had been involved in a violent street incident that led to the death of the Belarusian citizen Roman Bondarenko.



*Maryia Zhurava and Mikhail Zaleuski (bottom left) presented the work of the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation and brought home the Play the Game Award 2022. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

In a clear act of defiance, the Belarusian Olympic Committee elected Victor Lukashenko as its new president in February 2021 and re-elected Dmitry Baskov as an Executive Board member. The IOC did not recognise the new board of the national Olympic committee in Belarus and expressed ‘great disappointment’ but didn’t exclude the Belarusian Olympic Committee from the Olympic family.

The Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation received the Play the Game Award 2022 together with the former Afghan football player Khalida Popal for having “put their lives at risk by opposing violent, inhuman, autocratic regimes to protect fellow athletes”.

Mikhail Zaleuski, a former general director of the Belarusian football club Bate Borisov who now lives in exile in Poland, received the award on behalf of the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation and told Play the Game:

“When we use the word ‘solidarity’, it is not about revenue. It’s about the basic, fundamental values of sport. It’s difficult not to be in solidarity with people who are being repressed, detained, and tortured. It’s about humanity and that the image of athletes should not only include high performance but also the moral values of sport such as equality and unity. That is why we hope our fight will be followed up internationally. Together we could reform the world of sport.”

### **The outdated relic of autonomy of sport**

The Belarusian call for reform in world sport echoes what thousands of athletes, sports leaders, politicians, media people and NGOs have demanded for more than a decade.

However, reform from the outside is unlikely as long as a united Olympic movement continues to lean on the concept of the autonomy of sport.

This concept is rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when modern sport started as an activity marked by voluntarism, association life, and civic engagement. It was sport’s way of upholding association freedom, a well-established human right.

However, in the global billion-dollar entertainment industry that sport has become today, the concept of autonomy of sport has often served as a shield to protect corrupt practices without interference from society.

At the opening of Play the Game 2015, the then longest serving IOC member Richard W. Pound called the autonomy of sport “an outdated relic from an earlier era”, and asked:

“Why should a corrupt organisation be afforded deference by society? Why should a corrupt organisation be rewarded? [...] There is an easy answer – it should not.”

The IOC president Thomas Bach has also emphasised that sports organisations must abide by the law. However, many countries do not yet have sufficient laws to sanction corruption in private organisations, and sports organisations are often the first to protest and threaten to suspend the countries that wish to tighten their legislation in that area.

Such threats and suspensions have been issued against Nigeria, Kenya, India, Trinidad and Tobago, and also Italy, Montenegro, Greece, and Poland, among others.

It is surprising that the IOC and the most powerful federations only defend the autonomy of sport in countries where sports organisations actually do enjoy association freedom.

Olympic sport is never heard complaining over authoritarian regimes where the state and the sports apparatus can hardly be separated, like China, Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and the monarchies in the Middle East.

To help the IOC identify violations of autonomy, Play the Game made a ‘sports autonomy index’ in 2017 which showed that 14 per cent of the 205 recognised national Olympic committees (one in seven) were directly controlled by people with positions in government.

“Knowing the strict rules of the IOC and its frequent flagging of autonomy as an almost sacred principle, it is surprising that the IOC can allow no less than 29 NOCs to be directly controlled by government officials,” said Play the Game’s international director Jens Sejer Andersen in a comment to the survey.

With money from authoritarian states securing the revenues from the outside, and small countries receiving benefits for votes on the inside, there is little prospect of real, democratic reform in world sport presently.

In contrast, power may be further concentrated at the top hierarchy of sport thanks to a new source of incredible fortunes flowing in from the Middle East.

### **UAE as first movers in the Middle East**

The United Arab Emirates was one of the first countries in the Middle East to invest in sport. Since hosting its first powerboat race in Dubai in 1987, the state-owned airline company Emirates has been a sponsor of various teams and events across sports such as

sailing, tennis, football, motorsports, horse racing, golf, cycling, cricket, and Australian football.

Over the years, Emirates' sponsorships have included prominent football clubs in Western democracies such as Real Madrid, AC Milan, Arsenal FC, Olympique Lyonnais, Hamburger SV, Olympiacos FC, and S.L. Benfica, as well as the Asian Football Confederation and the English FA Cup. But the sponsorships weren't really questioned until 2008, when Sheikh Mansour al-Nahyan, a member of the family that rules the richest of the united emirates, Abu Dhabi, bought the English Premier League club Manchester City.

In 2013, 94 suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested in Abu Dhabi and allegedly tortured while in jail. 69 of them were sentenced to prison with no right to appeal for plotting to overthrow the government of the United Arab Emirates.

According to Human Rights Watch, the case showed that the ownership of Manchester City was used by Abu Dhabi to “construct a public relations image of a progressive, dynamic Gulf state, which deflects attention from what is really going on in the country.”

Five years later, the German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, based on information obtained from Football Leaks, accused Manchester City of having spent much of the past decade trying to get around European football's financial fair play rules with inflated sponsorship deals and hidden contracts using companies and trusts operating in tax havens. And in 2022, at Play the Game's conference held in Odense, Denmark, the English journalist Nick Harris provided evidence of how Manchester City managed to get around UEFA's Financial Fair Play rules.

“In 2014, after City's first punishment, an employee at Etihad, via an intermediary, alleged to me that Etihad's sponsorship department was only paying 8 million GBP a year of the 35 million+ money, and the rest was being paid in disguised – and banned – funding via other entities



*Etihad vs. Emirates? UAE vs. UAE? The sponsors of the English Premier League Clubs Arsenal and Manchester City are both rooted in the United Arab Emirates.*

*Photo: Stuart McFarlane/Arsenal/Getty Images*

controlled by Sheikh Mansour,” Nick Harris said.

“Later, I got documents that apparently showed it was true, and lots of more documents and correspondence published by Der Spiegel backed this up.”

But the accusations of human rights violations and alleged breaches of financial fair play rules have not prevented the Middle East autocracies from continuing to pour money into sport, and the Olympic family embracing their generosity.

### **The crown prince’s vision**

In 2016, Saudi Arabia launched its Vision 2030, a strategic plan to reduce the Kingdom’s economic dependence on oil by creating a more diversified economy and a vibrant society by promoting a healthy lifestyle. One of the goals was the creation of professional sports and a sports industry in the oil-rich country that represents the largest economy in the Middle East.

Since then, Saudi Arabia has hosted several international events across sports such as chess, tennis, golf, racing, and horseracing.

But it was only when the Saudis made remarkable advances into international football that Saudi Arabia’s sports strategy made the global headlines.

It caused worldwide attention when the English Premier League in 2021 approved the sale of Newcastle United to a business consortium led by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund chaired by the de facto Saudi ruler, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.



*The owner of Manchester City, Sheikh Mansour from Abu Dhabi, at the UEFA Champions League final 2023. The sheikh has only attended a couple of matches since his acquisition of the club in 2008. However, his access to immense riches has seemingly enabled the club to circumvent UEFA’s financial fair play rules. Photo: Michael Regan/Getty Images*





*It was not all human rights protests when the Saudi Public Investment Fund took over the English Premier League club Newcastle United in 2021 – here, some of the fans celebrate the announcement.*

*Photo: Michael Driver/MI News/NurPhoto/Getty Images*

In 2023, the Middle East powerhouse spent 907 million US dollars on buying some of the world's best football players, including Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar, to play for state-owned clubs in the domestic Saudi Pro League.

On 1 November 2023, Play the Game released research that maps the inner circle behind Saudi Arabia's sports endeavour and unveils more than 300 Saudi sponsorships in sport worldwide. The strategy has the objective to not only establish Saudi Arabia as the Middle Eastern sports hub but also to become a major player on the global sports and geopolitical stage.

The dark sides of Saudi Arabia's new soft power strategy have been highlighted in many human rights reports.

“Allowing Newcastle United to be sold to a business consortium led by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, an institution chaired by a state leader linked to human rights abuses, has exposed the farcical inadequacies of the Premier League's Owner's and Director's Test,” Yasmine Ahman, a UK advocacy director at Human Rights Watch, said in March 2022 when a consortium led by a Saudi media group expressed interest in also purchasing Chelsea Football Club.

“As another consortium with Saudi government links eyes acquiring Chelsea, the Premier League should move fast to protect the league and its clubs from being a fast-track option for dictators and kleptocrats to whitewash their reputations.”

In 2017, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman took control over Saudi Arabia's security forces which according to Human Rights Watch have been responsible for numerous human rights violations such as mass arrests, property confiscation without due process, torture, and unlawful attacks on civilians in Yemen.

Furthermore, a CIA report released in 2021 assessed that the crown prince personally approved the 2018 murder operation at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, where agents killed one of his strongest critics, the prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who had fled his home country one year earlier.

### **New human rights strategies**

Sport's alliance with autocrats has not gone completely unnoticed by democratic forces.

Under pressure from a growing number of human rights critics in Western democracies, both the IOC and FIFA have adopted new human rights policies. FIFA's Human Rights Policy, adopted in 2017, outlines its responsibilities to identify and address adverse human rights impacts on its operations, including taking adequate measures to prevent and mitigate human rights abuses. The policy states that FIFA will constructively engage with relevant authorities and other stakeholders and make every effort to uphold its international human rights responsibilities.

Furthermore, in the introduction to FIFA's key principles of its reformed bidding process, FIFA president Gianni Infantino writes that whoever ends up hosting the FIFA World Cup must formally commit to conducting their activities based on sustainable

event management principles and to respect international human rights and labour standards according to the UN's guiding principles.

But in early October 2023, FIFA undermined not only its own governance reform but also its human rights guidelines. Without any open discussion, FIFA's Council gave Morocco, Portugal, and Spain the rights to host the 2030 World Cup and as a consequence would accept bids from candidates in Asia and Oceania for 2034.



*A commitment to international human rights standards was first introduced in the Olympic Charter at the IOC session in Mumbai in 2023 – with the notable precondition that rights are to be respected “within the remit of the Olympic Movement”. Photo: IOC Media*

With a surprise demand that nations interested in hosting the 2034 World Cup would have only 25 days to prepare a bid that usually takes years to prepare, FIFA effectively played the hosting rights into the hands of the Saudis who seemed all prepared. Within hours of FIFA's message, Saudi Arabia declared it was bidding to host the FIFA World Cup 2034, and the only serious contender, Australia, renounced after a few weeks.

Fifa's manoeuvring allowed Saudi Arabia to capitalise on backroom deals, wrote investigative journalist Sam Kunti on Forbes in a comment piece that was later censored after objections from FIFA and then published in the Norwegian magazine *Josimar*.

"Contrary to claims of good governance, there was no debate, no democracy, and no transparency in the entire process," wrote Kunti, who was seconded by Minky Worden, director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch:

"The possibility that FIFA could award Saudi Arabia the 2034 World Cup despite its appalling human rights record and closed door to any monitoring exposes FIFA's commitments to human rights as a sham."

While FIFA put its human rights promises to rest, the IOC formalised some of its promises.

At its 141<sup>st</sup> session held in Mumbai, India, in October 2023, the IOC approved human rights amendments to the Olympic Charter. The approval of the amendments came after the IOC members received the first report from the IOC Advisory Committee on Human Rights which was set up in December 2022 as an outcome of the IOC Strategic Framework on Human Rights, which was approved on 9 September 2022.

The new human rights amendments to the Olympic Charter state that Olympism has respect "for internationally recognised human rights" and universal fundamental ethical principles "within the remit of the Olympic Movement".

The amendments also state that "the practice of sport is a human right" and that every individual must have "access to the practice" of sport, without discrimination of any kind "in respect of internationally recognised human rights within the remit of the Olympic Movement".

To which extent these new rules will be tested is hard to say. At the time of the decision, the IOC had appointed only Western-style democracies for the upcoming Olympic Games: France, the US and Australia for the summer editions until 2032, and Italy for the winter edition in 2026.

But challenges may come. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have previously shown interest in hosting the Olympic Summer Games, and Saudi Arabia might make the unlikely

hosting of the Winter Olympics seem more realistic when they host the Asian Winter Games in 2029.

### **Banning women from sport**

However, an actual testing ground for the IOC's human rights commitment has developed not too far from the Middle East. In Afghanistan, the Taliban regime has banned sport for women and girls since it came back to power in 2021. A policy that for decades has been a violation of the Olympic Charter, and now is even more so.

After more than two years of gender equality negotiations with the Taliban, IOC director James Macleod explained at the IOC session in Mumbai that it was “a very complex



*Girls attend Wushu training in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2022. The Taliban rulers have banned women from most sports since they came back to power in 2021. Photo: Bilal Guler/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

situation” but that there had also been “a tiny bit of progress” in the ongoing IOC negotiations with the Taliban, which made female Afghan athletes who fled the country ask why the IOC was negotiating with terrorists.

James Macleod referred to the recent Asian Games held in Hangzhou, China, where the Afghan delegation consisted of 83 athletes, including 15 female athletes and both male and female flag bearers.

For Friba Rezayee, one of the first female Olympic athletes from Afghanistan, the IOC’s troubles with the Islamic regime in Kabul were not complicated at all:

“It’s very simple. Ban the Taliban-run Afghanistan for violating the Olympic Charter like the IOC did in the 1990s. There is precedent. And it’s the same Taliban,” the Afghan Olympic judoka who lives in exile in Canada said to Play the Game.



*The IOC should ban Afghanistan from Olympic sport as they did when Taliban was in power in the 1990s, says Friba Rezayee, one of the first female Olympians from Afghanistan. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*

“What is the mystery behind the negotiations between the IOC and the Taliban? Why are the Taliban not banned from the Olympic movement for violating Afghan sportswomen’s human rights? Why are the IOC negotiating with a group of terrorists?”

To her, the Taliban is nothing but a militant group of Islamic men who have taken her home country and all Afghan women hostage.

“It makes me sad because there is no future for female athletes in Afghanistan. Sports-women will gradually be erased from the Afghan society. The female athletes who grew up in Afghanistan during the past two decades where they were allowed to follow their sporting dreams are now aging and losing interest in sport because of the Taliban.”

Since the Taliban retook control over Afghanistan, Friba Rezayee has written several letters to the IOC urging the committee to ban all Taliban-controlled sports in Afghanistan from the Olympic Movement.

In her latest letter to IOC president Thomas Bach dated October 16, 2023, she and another female Olympic athlete from Afghanistan, Tahmina Kohistani, call on the IOC to respect the rules of the Olympic Charter which says that the IOC is obliged to “encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures, with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women”.

For Human Rights Watch, there was still a tiny hope, according to Minky Worden:

“The Taliban understands a lot of things about sports. They understand there is money for the national Olympic committee. They understand the prestige. The Taliban loves to attend talks in Qatar. There are a lot of things that the Taliban want from the international community and that sport can help deliver for them.”

### **Democracies withdraw from events**

The international prestige linked to sports events that may be attractive to the Taliban and definitely is so to other autocratic regimes comes at a high financial cost.

That explains why democratic governments that must face voters and taxpayers over the size of the sports budget lag behind in the bidding processes – with the future series of Olympic Games as an exception.

At Play the Game 2017, Wladimir Andreff, a professor emeritus in economy at the University of Sorbonne-Paris, said fewer cities were bidding to host the biggest sports events because they were realising that the benefits are overstated and that massive cost overruns

are unavoidable. He pointed out that Paris and Los Angeles were the only candidates for the 2024 and 2028 Summer Olympics after Budapest, Hamburg, and Rome pulled out.

The Olympic Winter Games also experienced this trend.

In October 2014, a few days before a decisive vote in the Norwegian parliament about Oslo's bid for the Winter Olympics 2022, Norway's largest newspaper Verdens Gang released a document in which the IOC described how its members should be treated in explicit details down to flowers in the hotel rooms and smiles from receptionists. More controversially, the IOC demanded cocktails with the king of Norway, separate airport entrances and road lanes, free Olympic sponsor products such as Samsung phones and Coca-Cola, extra late opening hours at hotel bars, and meeting rooms kept at exactly 20 degrees Celsius.

“Norway is a rich country, but we don't want to spend money wrongly, like satisfying the crazy demands from IOC apparatchiks. These insane demands that they should be treated like the king of Saudi Arabia just don't fly with the Norwegian public,” said Frithjof Jacobsen, chief political commentator at Verdens Gang.

The public scepticism caused the conservative party, a member of the ruling government coalition, to abandon Oslo's bid to host the 2022 Olympic Winter Games, and the parliamentary majority for the bid was gone.

Thus, Oslo joined a group of five other planned bids for the 2022 Winter Games. Following public referendums, financial trouble, and political turmoil in Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Poland, and Ukraine, the cities of Munich, St. Moritz-Davos, Stockholm, Krakow, and Lviv all said no to the IOC, reducing the number of candidates to two: Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Beijing, China – with the latter as the winner in 2015.

Indicating that the Olympic family was forced to act on the democratic protests, the Norwegian IOC member Gerhard Heiberg said:

“I have not seen anything like this before. This is urgent. We need to sit down and discuss what is going on. We are at a crossroads here. We have an image problem. People in Norway say: We love the Games – but we hate the IOC.”

## **Russians in Paris**

When this book goes to print, it seems unlikely that the IOC will overcome its image problems in the Western public anytime soon, even if Paris – a symbol of Western cul-



tural splendour – is set to host the 2024 Summer Olympics. The French hosts have gone to great lengths to make the Games more sustainable and less extravagant, but like most other predecessors, the organising committee is investigated by the police for what may be corrupt practices.

The question that attracts the most attention worldwide, however, is once again the relationship between the IOC and an authoritarian regime.

In March 2023, one year after recommending a ban on Russian and Belarusian athletes, the IOC softened its position – with convenient timing, just as the qualifying competitions for Paris 2024 were starting.



*IOC president Thomas Bach and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy are at odds after the IOC has opened the door for Russian participation at the Paris 2024 Olympics. Photo: Yevhen Kotenko/Ukrinform/Future Publishing/Getty Images*

Team sports were still excluded, and so were athletes and support personnel who actively supported the war or were contracted by military or national security agencies in Russia and Belarus. Other individual athletes “with a Russian or Belarusian passport must compete only as Individual Neutral Athletes”.

Once again, the autonomy of sport and human rights became the focus of the debate, but this time with the IOC trying to use these concepts in their favour.

The IOC maintained that a complete ban of athletes from the two countries would be discriminatory and mobilised support from a United Nations rapporteur who wrote that “anyone has the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of their passport.”

Apparently contradicting itself, the IOC stressed that participation in the Olympic Games is not a human right and the Olympic Charter gives the IOC full authority to invite or not invite persons to the Games without giving any reason.

There were, however, experts who believed that the human rights of Russians and Belarusians must be interpreted in light of the human rights of the invaded Ukrainians whose homes and sports facilities were destroyed in great numbers.

“If Ukrainian athletes are at risk of being directly or indirectly confronted with the war in international sporting competitions, this can have a negative impact on their right to mental health, the protection of their dignity, as well as on their own right to undisturbed participation in cultural life and their right to work”, wrote Patricia Wiater, chair for Public Law, Public International Law and Human Rights at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg and advisor to the German Olympic Sports Confederation (DOSB) on the German Verfassungsblog.

With regard to the IOC’s commitment to peace, Wiater acknowledged the challenge, but concluded differently:

“In September 2022, the president of the Russian NOC, Stanislav Pozdnyakov, was quoted saying that it would be an honour for every Russian athlete if he or she could contribute to the success of the war. [...] According to this statement, Russian athletes support the war. Conversely, excluding Russian athletes serves the purpose of having a de-escalating effect on the conflict. For Posdnyakov, the athlete is an abstract instrument for war propaganda – regardless of whether he or she openly displays support for the war. It must be assumed that the abuse of international sporting events for war propaganda cannot be effectively prevented by Russian athletes competing under a neutral flag since the actual act of instrumentalisation refers solely to the human capital ‘athlete’.”

## **Using athletes as propaganda tools**

With this statement, Wiater added to the widespread scepticism that athletes appearing as ‘neutrals’ would be used by the Russian and Belarusian propaganda machines. Over three consecutive Olympic Games, in Pyeongchang 2018, Tokyo 2021, and Beijing 2022, Russian athletes have been forced to appear as neutrals as part of a sanction in the Russian-international doping scandal – but with very little effect.

Preventing Vladimir Putin and Aleksander Lukashenko from using the athletes for propaganda has been the main motive for a broad alliance of Western countries to continue to put pressure on the IOC.

Most lately, the alliance repeated their call for a ban at a meeting for sports ministers in UNESCO in Baku in June 2023, where 41 countries stated that:

“Russia should not be allowed to use sport to legitimise its illegal and unprovoked war on Ukraine, and Belarus should not be able to use sport to justify its complicity in the war led by Russia against Ukraine.”

The response from the IOC was held in an unusually sharp tone. IOC president Thomas Bach called the position of the democratic alliance “deplorable” and an expression of “double standards” – a language mirrored on the IOC’s website:

“It is deplorable to see that some governments do not want to respect the majority within the Olympic Movement or the autonomy of sport which they are requesting from other countries and are praising in countless speeches and UN and European Union resolutions.”

“It is deplorable that these governments do not address the question of double standards with which we were confronted in the consultation calls.”

“We have not seen a single comment from them about their attitude towards the participation of athletes whose countries are involved in the other 70 wars, armed conflicts and crises in the world.”

## **Values at stake**

The last argument was to be undermined by the IOC itself in October 2023, when war again broke out in the Middle East. Israel’s invasion of Gaza could not be compared with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, an IOC spokesman said, because the latter “is a unique situation and cannot be compared to any other war or conflict in the world.”

Although criticised for being lenient towards Russia and Belarus, the IOC should not expect gratitude from those that may draw advantage from the Olympic recommendations. Especially not after the IOC finally suspended the Russian Olympic Committee in October 2023 when the Russian NOC decided to include the regional sports organisations in the occupied territories of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia which are under the authority of Ukraine's national Olympic committee.

Commenting on the IOC's exclusion of the Russian Olympic Committee, the Russian minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, shamed the IOC for not doing the same to Israel after its invasion of Gaza.

"Once again we see an example of the bias and ineptitude of the International Olympic Committee, which time and again proves its political bent," Lavrov said on Telegram.

"[The IOC] actively supports everything that meets the interests of Western countries, primarily the United States, and tries to find wordings that generally prop up this policy."

When the UN General Assembly in late 2023 voted to adopt the Olympic Truce ahead of the Paris 2024 Olympics, Russia abstained from voting while Belarus voted yes expressing "hope that common sense will soon prevail" in Olympic circles.

The IOC recognised on its website in October 2023 that it cannot reconcile the positions, but seemed to find some comfort in its uneasy situation:

"The fact that both sides in this confrontation are not satisfied might indicate that the IOC has found some middle ground on which all sides can move forward to make a contribution to understanding and peace."

"The IOC navigates such an intractable situation through its values, which are its compass. This is why the IOC's athlete-centred recommendations address its core values of peace, unity, solidarity, and non-discrimination."

This conclusion leads to a fundamental question for the international sports movement.

Peace, unity, solidarity and non-discrimination.

Are these core values best guarded by democracy or dictatorship?



## An appeal from a sports sphere under destruction

*Every two years, sports ministers and high-ranking public officials from the 46 member states of the Council of Europe gather to discuss current issues in sports politics. Stakeholders in sport such as Play the Game are also invited. At the Conference of Ministers responsible for sport held in October 2022 in Antalya, Turkey, Play the Game heard the appeal by the minister for Youth and Sports of Ukraine, Vadym Guttsait, and asked for a copy.*

*At the time, the recommendation from the IOC was still to keep Russian and Belarusian athletes out of international sports competitions, but Guttsait – who is also head of his country’s NOC – demanded further bans:*

Dear Ministers, dear colleagues,  
On behalf of the Ukrainian sports movement let me thank you for the support provided for Ukraine in these hard times.

We assembled here to react to modern challenges and opportunities in sports: gender equality, inclusivity, and other important topics.

But today all Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian sports community are focused on other issues, vitally important for our survival.

At the very same moment, when I speak, Russian missiles continue shelling my homeland. Russian soldiers continue killing my compatriots.

Under such circumstances, I cannot be silent and must draw your attention to the current situation in Ukraine.

Every day of the war, the sphere of physical culture and sports in Ukraine suffers new losses.

After the start of full-scale Russian military aggression against Ukraine in violation of the Olympic Truce, our sports community has already lost 154 athletes and trainers.

The Russian army with the help of its Belarusian ally has destroyed 22 and damaged 113 sports facilities in all regions of Ukraine.

Despite this, Ukrainian athletes continue to represent our country in international sports arenas and win the highest awards in fair competitions.

Dear friends,  
In these dark times, you gave a hand to Ukrainian sports.

You helped our athletes to train, and Ukrainian NADO to retain the national anti-doping program. Ukrainian people will never forget this support!

Still, I truly believe that more can and should be done to resist Russian military aggression, save Ukrainian lives and restore justice. Thus, further sanctions should be imposed:

- to suspend Russian and Belarusian sport national governing bodies from international sport federations
- to remove all individuals aligned to the Russian and Belarusian states from positions of influence in international sports federations, such as boards and organising committees
- to prevent the broadcast of sports competitions in Russia and Belarus
- to prohibit the participation of representatives of the aggressor countries in any status.

Ukrainians strongly believe that it is inappropriate to have representatives of Russia and Belarus along with the representatives of the civilised world at all levels in sports – both in competitive arenas and in the decision-making process within the sports organisations.

We understand that next year will be a qualifying year for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. Therefore, the Russian and Belarusian athletes and their leaders are doing everything possible to return to international sport at least under a neutral flag.

At the same time, the president of the Russian Olympic Committee, violating the Olympic Charter, praises the unprovoked war against my country and states that Russian athletes, including members of the national teams, should be honoured to fight in this war.

It is unacceptable to us! We should not tolerate hypocritical Russian ‘neutrality’ while their bombs and missiles explode in the peaceful streets of Ukrainian cities!

I count on your support and solidarity with Ukraine.

By joining our forces, we become stronger in defending the Olympic values and sustainable peace for Ukraine and Europe.



*In October 2022, the Ukrainian sports minister called upon his colleagues in the Council of Europe to increase sanctions against Russia and for instance stop broadcasting of international sport to Russia. Photo: Play the Game*

## Mapping the Saudi sports power players

Research carried out by Play the Game in 2023 mapped the inner circle behind Saudi Arabia's ambitions in sport and unveiled more than 300 Saudi sponsorships in sport. The research identified 795 positions in 156 Saudi entities and exposed significant conflicts of interest involving influential Saudi statesmen, and not least a troubling relationship between the sporting and political spheres in Saudi Arabia.

In an intriguing fusion of power, politics, and sport, a select group of individuals was identified as being at the forefront of Saudi Arabia's ambitious venture into the global sports arena including a prince, a princess, a globetrotting Harvard-educated businessman, and a minister deeply involved in the military industry.

Together they formed the influential inner circle behind the Kingdom's sports initiatives and investments, all under the watchful eye of Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince and prime minister of Saudi Arabia.

Three of the most influential members of the group in 2023 are:

- **Yasir Al-Rumayyan**, a Saudi businessman and Harvard Business School graduate, who has emerged as a central figure in this intricate landscape. Al-Rumayyan is considered to be amongst the most influential people globally due to his roles as governor of PIF, one of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds, and chairman of Aramco, the world's biggest oil com-

pany, owned by the state. PIF is not only the driving force behind 'Vision 2030' but also the primary financier of the regime's many sporting investments.

A closer look into Al-Rumayyan's extensive involvement in golf reveals a complex web of conflicts of interest. He presides over both the Saudi Arabian Golf Federation and the Arab Golf Federation and he is chairman of the board of Golf Saudi. He is also a board member of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee.

All these different entities where Al Rumayyan plays a key role also act as sponsors or partners of the same two events: The Aramco Team Series, a five-events series held in five different countries all over the world, and the Aramco Saudi Ladies International held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Both events have prize funds of 5 million US dollars and are sanctioned tournaments on the Ladies European Tour.

The question that looms is the extent to which these affiliations and positions may influence or interconnect with one another. Which interests are Al-Rumayyan in fact serving?

- His **Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Saud** pulls the strings in the Saudi Ministry of Sport. The former Saudi racing driver, businessman, and member of the House of Saud was appointed as minister of sport in 2020, but his influence does not



*As a governor of the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) with 800 billion US dollars at hand for sports investments, Yasir Al-Rumayyan is considered among the most influential figures in global sport. Here with former US president Donald Trump at a golf tournament in New Jersey paid for with Saudi money. Photo: Rich Graessle/Icon Sportswire/Getty Images*



end there. He is also president of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee, which firmly anchors him at the epicentre of Saudi Arabia's multifaceted sporting pursuits.

This type of formal relationship between a leader of a National Olympic Committee and a national government raises critical questions about conflicts of interest, questions of allegiance, and the so-called autonomy of sport that the Olympic movement claims to promote.

Will Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Saud be willing and able to effectively uphold the autonomy of the NOC as a minister and government representative if a situation arises, where the interests of the government and the interests of the Olympic movement diverge politically?

- Another Saudi government official working in the corridors of international sport is **Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud**, a member of the House of Saud. She is the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, where she took office on 23 February 2019, becoming the first female ambassador in the country's history.

Beyond the role as ambassador, Princess Reema also serves as a board member of the Saudi Olympic & Paralympic Committee and the Saudi Sports for All Federation, the main body responsible for developing community sports in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, she contributes to the ambitious national sports academy, Mahd Sports Academy.

But it is her top position as a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that opens doors for Saudi Arabia in world sport. At the IOC, she operates in three commissions: Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (2022-), Sustainability and Legacy (2022-), and Coordination for the Games of the XXXV Olympiad Brisbane 2032 (2021-).

Princess Reema's roles give her the opportunity to serve the diplomatic, political and sporting interests of the state of Saudi Arabia, all at the same time.

### **A comprehensive strategy**

Saudi Arabia has poured vast riches into the sports world for years and captured most of the world's attention in 2023 after a significant influx of some of the highest-paid football players into the domestic Saudi Pro League (SPL) sent shockwaves through the sporting world.

Cristiano Ronaldo set the stage with his move from Manchester United to Al-Nassr in January 2023. In the summer transfer window that same year, Ronaldo was joined by many other football players, including Karim Benzema, the French winner of the 2022 Ballon d'Or, and the Brazilian star Neymar.

These high-profile transfers were made possible by Mohammed bin Salman's launch of the so-called 'Sports Clubs Investments and Privatisation Project'. Under this initiative, Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), took ownership of four SPL clubs – Al-Ahli, Al-Ittihad, Al-Hilal, and Al-Nassr, and through that manoeuvre, the clubs got

financial backing from a sovereign wealth fund with assets of nearly 800 billion US dollars.

This is just one facet of a comprehensive sports strategy initiated in tandem with 'Vision 2030', the Kingdom's national development plan launched by Mohammed bin Salman in 2016.

'Vision 2030' represents a comprehensive reform process of the Kingdom's economic, political, and social structures. Since then, Saudi Arabia has played host

to numerous international sporting events and poured substantial resources into the sports sector. Their objective is not only to establish themselves as the Middle Eastern sports hub but also to become a major player on the global sports and geopolitical stage.

*Read more about the Saudi power players in sport and get access to the database at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org)*



*Both the Saudi sports minister, his Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Saud (left), and the IOC member, Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud (right), exemplify how state and sport are intertwined in the new sports business superpower. Photos: Brad Barket/Getty Images and Mustafa Ciftci/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

## About the artist

The award consists of individually edited reproductions of rice paper paintings made by Danish artist, writer, musician, filmmaker, poet, philosopher and former professional tennis player Torben Ulrich (1928-2023).

Torben Ulrich made his paintings by first adding colours and shapes with a tennis racket, or by swinging a skipping rope. Then he added a poem, often inspired by Eastern philosophy. As a last step he would shoot a tennis ball marinated in paint onto the paper – not knowing precisely where the ball would leave its mark, but as a way to seize the moment.

In his presentation on ‘Sport, culture, and the good story’ at the first Play the Game event in 1997, the late Dr. Henning Eichberg from the sports research institute ‘Idrætsforsk’ characterised Torben Ulrich like this:



*The Play the Game Award consists of a piece of art produced by Danish artist, writer, musician, filmmaker, philosopher and former professional tennis player Torben Ulrich.*

*Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game*

“Torben Ulrich was a well-known Danish tennis star in the fifties and sixties, not far from the world’s best. From his professional career inside the system of competitive sport, he later turned towards making films and happenings, poetry, painting and other cultural manifestations. [...]”

By leaving the system of achievement sport behind, Torben Ulrich did not leave the world of sportive excellence – on the contrary. He began to work on its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions. In films, he showed the absurdity and fascination of the ball. Using body techniques of Tibetan tantrism, he ‘measured’ a long way through Copenhagen by his body, laying down and rising and laying down again ...

As a sort of Buddhist one-man show, this athlete – who is still playing, in his late sixties, on American tennis courts – philosophically deepens the understanding of the ball – giving thus a picture of life. The otherness – and sameness – of Torben Ulrich made him well-known in avant-garde circles as well as in local tennis clubs, in the critical sport research as well as in the Danish *folkehøjskole* (folk high schools). Torben Ulrich tells us in some respect the reverse story of McEnroe [...].

Health is more than fitness – it is cultural action. And for the journalist: There are good stories in sport outside the mainstream – but they are a challenge to established sport journalism.”

*Torben Ulrich lived most of his life in the USA with his wife Molly and their family. His works can be seen at [www.torbenulrich.com](http://www.torbenulrich.com)*

# THE PLAY THE GAME AWARD

The Play the Game Award pays tribute to an individual or a group of persons who in their professional careers or as volunteers in sport have made an outstanding effort to strengthen the basic ethical values of sport.

The award is presented at every Play the Game conference and consists of a piece of art and a speaker's invitation including free travel, accommodation, and board for the next Play the Game conference.

## Winners of the Play the Game Award

**2022:** Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation (Belarus/Lithuania) and Khalida Popal (Afghanistan/Denmark) for using their passion for sport and their athletic careers as drivers for social change and putting themselves at the forefront of struggles for democracy and basic human rights.

**2019:** Nancy Hogshead-Makar (USA), CEO of Champion Women, for being a tireless advocate for young female athletes and her efforts in trying to change the landscape for women in sport and their right to have their voices heard.



*Khalida Popal and the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation 2022. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



*Nancy Hogshead-Makar 2019. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



*Bob Munro and Mathare Youth Sports Association 2015. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game*



Mario Goijman 2005. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game



Laura Robinson 2002. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game

**2017:** Yulia and Vitaly Stepanov (Russia/USA) with journalist Hajo Seppelt (Germany) for their uncovering of the unprecedented doping conspiracy among Russian and international sports leaders.

**2015:** Bob Munro (Canada/Kenya) and Mathare Youth Sports Association (Kenya) for their efforts to create sustainable social progress and their courageous battle against corruption in sport.

**2013:** Richard W. Pound (Canada), IOC member and former WADA president, for his uncompromising efforts in the fight for a cleaner and more democratic sports movement.

**2011:** Journalists Andrew Jennings (UK) and Jens Weinreich (Germany) for their tireless work documenting and bringing the enormous levels of mismanagement and corruption in the world's leading sports organisations into public view.

**2009:** Journalist and PhD Declan Hill (Canada) for his groundbreaking research and documentation of the realities of match-fixing.

**2007:** Sandro Donati (Italy) for his courage and determination in revealing cases of doping and corruption in Italian and international sport and for his tenacity in researching the links between doping and international organised crime.

**2005:** Mario Goijman (Argentina) for his courage and commitment in bringing to light the theft and corruption that has taken place in the International Volleyball Federation during the reign of FIVB president Ruben Acosta.

**2002:** Laura Robinson (Canada), journalist and author, for her courageous uncovering of systematic sexual abuse in Canadian junior hockey.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

By 2024, Play the Game has held 13 conferences in seven countries:

1997: Vingsted, Denmark  
2000, 2002 and 2005: Copenhagen, Denmark  
2007: Reykjavik, Iceland  
2009: Coventry, United Kingdom  
2011: Cologne, Germany  
2013 and 2015: Aarhus, Denmark  
2017: Eindhoven, the Netherlands  
2019: Colorado Springs, USA  
2022: Odense, Denmark  
2024: Trondheim, Norway

This has only been possible thanks to the kind cooperation of countless partners around the world and financial contributions from:

Advantage West Midlands • Anti Doping Denmark • Anti-Doping Norway • Association of Danish Sports Journalists • Bikuben Foundation • Cintamani • City Council of Colorado Springs • City of Copenhagen • City of Eindhoven • City of Aarhus • City of Odense • Colorado Springs Convention & Visitors Bureau • Colorado University Boulder • Council of Europe/EPAS • Coventry University • Daniels Ethics Fund Initiative at UCCS • Danish Center for Culture and Development • Danish Council for Sports Research • Danish Federation of Company Sports • Danish Football Association (DBU) • Danish Foundation for Culture and Sports Facilities • Danish Gymnastics and Sports Association (DGI) • Danish Handball Federation • Danish Institute for Sports Studies • Danish Ministry of Culture • Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Danida • Danish School of Media and Journalism (DMJX) • Danish Union of Journalists • DGI Byen • DR – National Danish Broadcasting Corporation • DSB – Danish State Railways • Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports • El Pomar Foundation • Embassy of

the United States in Denmark • Federal Institute of Sport Science, Germany • FIFPro • Fontys School of Sport Studies • German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) • German Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) • German Research Foundation (DFG) • German Sport University Cologne • Idrætsforsk Sports Research Institute • International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) • International Sport and Culture Association (ISCA) • Knowledge Centre for Sport Netherlands • LEGOland Park • Media City Odense • Ministry for Family, Children, Youth, Culture and Sport of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia • National Olympic Committee and Sports Confederation of Denmark (DIF) • Nordic Journalist Centre • Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Equality • Norwegian Union of Journalists • Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) • Nykredit foundation • Partnership for Clean Competition (PCC) • Politiken • Reinenergie Foundation, Germany • SAS, Scandinavian Airlines System • Sport • SpareBank 1 • Sport Event Denmark • Sport eXperience • Sport Aarhus Events • Sports and Technology Cluster, Eindhoven • Sports Foundation Denmark • Stiftelsen den Nordenfjelske Handelshøyskole (foundation) • Sydbank-Sønderjylland Foundation • Team Denmark • The European Commission/Erasmus+ • The Sports Corp, Colorado Springs • The Year 2000 Foundation • U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) • Ungmennafélag Islands (UMFI) • University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCSS) • University of Southern Denmark • Utrecht University • Vejle Amts Folkeblad, regional daily • Vingsted Sports Centre • World Players Association • Aarhus 2017 – European capital of culture • Aarhus Stiftstidende Foundation.

A special thanks to Leif Mikkelsen, whose efforts as first president of DGI and later member of the Danish Parliament secured Play the Game's existence on more than one occasion.

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In 1997, 109 journalists, academics, sports officials, public servants, and other stakeholders from 34 countries met at the Vingsted Sports Center in the heart of the Danish countryside to take part in what would later be named Play the Game. The event turned out to be the first international conference providing an independent platform for open, unrestricted, and fact-based debate on the most important challenges facing modern sport. Since then, the global sports debate has undergone dramatic changes, and Play the Game has grown, but the essence of the conference remains the same.

This book offers a journalistic account of the major sports political developments since the turn of the century, with a touch of Play the Game.

