



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:

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 Shahlaei, 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,” Shahlaei 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,” Shahlaei 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 5th. 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.