



## 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

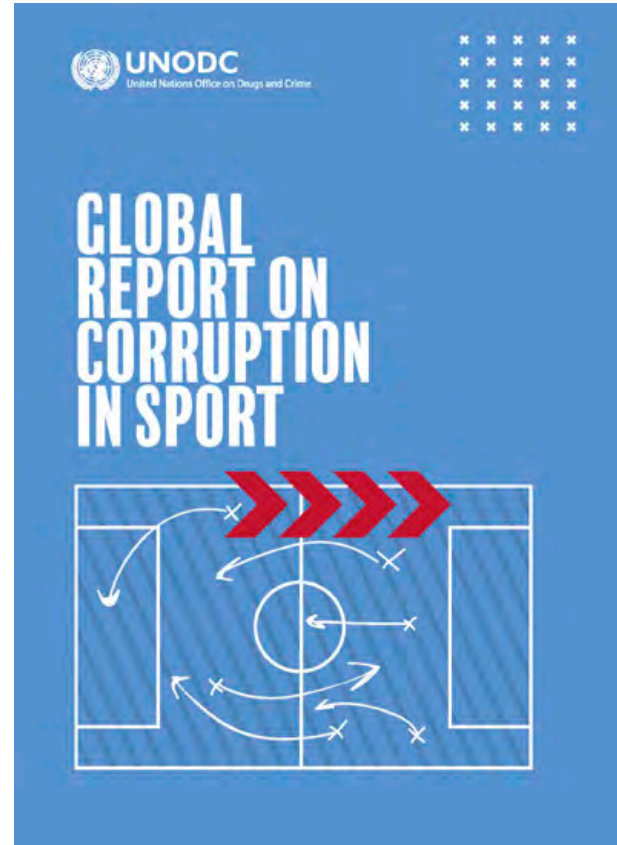
by selecting favourable operators and jurisdictions and disseminating the bets across them.”

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)