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Abuse of power dirtier than the worst tackle

By [Søren Mikael Hansen](#)

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The book 'Foul!' draws a depressing picture of the decay taking place outside the fields in the world's most popular sport, writes sports editor Søren-Mikael Hansen in a review of Andrew Jennings' new book.

Andrew Jennings

: Foul! Harper Collins Publishers, May 2006

Football is a dirty sport. Too violent tackles, blows and clots of spit in the opponents' face plus more or less successful attempts to get an edge and obtain advantages are by now implicit parts of the elitist and commercial part of the game loved all over the world.

But the dirty tricks carried out by the men in shorts on the fields encircled by white lines are nothing compared to the dirty tricks used by 'the suits' in the power struggles behind the scenes.

The award-winning British journalist Andrew Jennings, who has earlier exposed the corrupt part of the Olympic movement, draws a greatly detailed picture of the power struggle and manipulation during the last 30 years in the International Football Federation, FIFA – with special emphasis on the latest eight years.

The story about vote-rigging, nepotism and extensive abuse of the organisation's funds and business connections is so appalling that it ought to be forbidden for all the children who display innocent enthusiasm in their playing with the ball and are driven by the dream that one day they will be taking part in one of the World Cups that FIFA so effectively has developed into a billion dollar show.

The large amounts of money that flow in and out of FIFA headquarters in Switzerland are the pivotal point of what could be called a documentary novel with Sepp Blatter in the dominant role as the villain.

As Secretary General in FIFA in 1994, Sepp Blatter mounted a political attempt trying to bring down the elected president of the organisation, the ageing Brazilian Joao Havelange.

The ambush failed, but not only did Sepp Blatter keep his job, he succeeded in establishing himself in such a dominating role on the international sidelines that nobody had any objections four years later when the Swiss spent large amounts of the 'football communities' money on a personal campaign that in the end led to an outmanoeuvring of the European candidate, Swedish Lennart Johansson, in the battle for the office as president in FIFA.

Sepp Blatter has repaid the necessary votes with fees of 50.000 dollars each year to the voluntary officials in the Executive Committee, all travel expenses paid plus 500 dollar allowances per day to about 300 committee members. Not to mention promises to developmental help to third world countries with gentle control that the million dollar amounts are distributed to the right purposes.

Since 1998 the FIFA president has taken advantage of his position to secure his nephew lucrative counselling jobs, he has set up a shadow Cabinet in order to be able to manoeuvre without the knowing of the official staff, entered dubious television rights- and marketing contracts, kept the accounts with creative and doubtful methods to avoid the federation's bankruptcy, manipulated with host-cities' bids for the World Cups and built up a web consisting of mutually binding deals to make sure that nobody with a strong say in the world of football will be able to object against the outrageousness displayed in football's rear area.

All of it on the assumption that Andrew Jennings can be trusted.

And I suppose he can.

Certainly, an index in the book shows a comprehensive, thorough and year-long research of organizational and financial corruption in a magnitude that is underlined further in the last chapter of the book about FIFA's persistent but failed attempts to ban the publishing of the book.

Nevertheless it is aggravating that the author obviously has difficulties controlling his disdain for the central players in the book.

He speaks ironically about how apparently the presidents of FIFA can turn a blind eye to the actions of South American military juntas and African dictators, when they are not dealing with football.

He claims to be able to quote directly from the saying of a glance.

And he feels called upon to publish allegations, rumours and unnamed sources' alleged knowledge about bribery, officials' visits with prostitutes and other ingredients in the mud high-ranking FIFA officials appear to be steeped in.

Too bad - because they are superfluous tricks, which only undermine the journalistic depth that is the actual strength of the book.

It is in certain passages as exciting as a crime novel, and the reader is at risk of forgetting for a short while the disturbing fact that what Jennings describes is actually a grim part of reality.

But it is.

That abuse of power and corruption exists where great financial interests and international prestige are at stake – like in top level football – can hardly take anybody by surprise.

But that it is allowed to take place in front of – and assisted by – freely elected delegates from countries building on a democratic foundation is on the other hand always surprising.

May they read the book and take the necessary steps for further action.

[Read an extract](#) of Andrew Jennings' book

[Go to website](#) for Andrew Jennings' book

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