

Dangerous Liaisons

Links between top sport and criminality extend across the world. Even football heroes like Pelé cannot shake off allegations of links to corruption

By Steen Bille



»The flow of money in professional sport is so widespread that misuse of office, corruption and criminality are inevitable by-products – and the players are the losers every time.«

It was with this background that journalists from four continents provided some of Play the game's most dramatic presentations, giving the audience a vivid insight into a world rarely referred to by the media.

One of the most memorable accounts was provided by Canadian journalist Declan Hill, who documented the Russian mafia's iron grip on its countrymen playing professional ice hockey in the Canadian NHL.

»Their families in Russia are kidnapped and only released when high ransoms have been paid,« he says. »They are beaten up and blackmailed for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Other players become involved in gambling and money laundering – a business worth millions.«

Top of the crime league

Behind this organised criminality are a number of Russian mafia bosses who have secured influence in Canada, Germany and Russia. Among the best known is Alik Tochtachumow, who was involved in the skating scandal that marred the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. FBI documents reveal that he is involved in money laundering, drug smuggling, bribery and more. The same charges apply to the

Vice President of the Asian Olympic Committee, Gafour Rakhimov of Uzbekistan, a man also known as the 'Tashkent Godfather'. In the year 2000 he was refused a visa to attend the Olympic Games in Sydney, due to strong suspicions about his involvement in drug running and other criminal activities.

»The Russians are the most powerful gangsters in the western world: they own banks, they have easy access to weapons, and they are ruthless« says German journalist Jens Weinreich, who has charted organised crime's close contacts with Olympic sport for many years. »A lot of money is tied up with cities' bidding processes – in the form of holidays, cash and prostitutes for members of the IOC. At the same time, IOC members can use their visits to candidate cities to forge good business contacts and make extra profits.«

Weinreich adds that some five billion Euros is expected to be generated by 2004 – the proceeds of four years' marketing for the summer and winter Olympics.

Pelé accused

Ezequiel Fernandez Moores, Editor of the Argentinian press bureau Ansa, places a question mark against the squeaky-clean image of the football god himself, Pelé. He claims that Pelé's sports management firm at one time accepted over 70,000 Euros from UNICEF for a charity match that was simply never played. Moreover, he adds,

Brazil's links between sport and criminality are much stronger than this particular example might suggest.

It is scarcely 1½ years since the Brazilian Lower House of Congress published an 800-page report on football and crime, which named 33 football leaders as being involved in criminal activities. The report was initially ignored by those congress members with close links to the Brazilian Football Confederation.

»A similar Senate report totalling 1,600 pages asked for the indictment of 17 football leaders, and like in the former report, the list was headed by the president of the Brazilian Football Confederation, Ricardo Teixeira,« says Fernandez Moores. »The Senate found him guilty of forgery, taking out suspect bank loans, using his job to further his business interests, and paying out large sums of cash to his friends.« Despite these activities FIFA President Sepp Blatter recently appointed Teixeira to FIFA's Executive Committee and appointed him Vice President of FIFA's Committee for Justice, Security... and Fair Play.

In conclusion, Fernandez Moores quotes former Brazilian football star Sócrates, whose verdict on Brazilian football seems equally relevant when applied to the entire football world.

»Football has made us notorious for dealing in under age children, passport forgery, cheating, injustice, lack of ambition and stealing dreams. It is detestable to be represented by these people.«

Two extensive parliamentary reports have asked for the indictment of Brazilian soccer leaders, but they uphold their international positions, Ezequiel E. Moores said

