

Wanted: REAL TRANSPARENCY in world soccer

By Kasper Lindberg and Play the Game

Though Swiss authorities have proven that international soccer leaders took bribes, FIFA refuses to answer important questions about its financial matters



FIFA rejected debate with these investigative reporters: From the left Andrew Jennings, Ezequiel Fernandez Moores, Ian Hughes and (separate photo) Jens Weinreich.

Since 2001 a three-letter-word has caused much anxiety in the top of world soccer. It is spelled: I-S-L. The three letters indicate the world's once so dominant marketing and tv rights holders ISL, which went into bankruptcy in May 2001, leaving football's world governing body in a struggle for survival.

The liquidation procedure has disclosed some facts that are indeed troubling for FIFA:

Swiss authorities have proven that leading soccer officials took bribes, but the highest court in Switzerland has decided to protect the names of those involved.

And when ISL collapsed, it still owed FIFA around 75 million Euro from rights sold to Brazilian TV company O Globo. This money had seemingly disappeared. As a result, FIFA lodged a criminal complaint against the ISL. Five years later, top executives from ISL are to stand trial in 2006, charged with fraud, forgery, and embezzlement. If convicted they face up to 10 years in jail:

"Their only hope of reduced sentences would be to volunteer information about who they paid bribes to," sports editor Jens Weinreich from Berliner Zeitung explained.

Together with British reporter Andrew Jennings – persona non grata in FIFA and banned from their press briefings – Weinreich is one of the most notable journalists uncovering FIFA financial affairs.

"In February 2004 it came to a mysterious arrangement between the ISL senior official Jean-Marie Weber and Mr Bauer, the ISL liquidator. An amount of 2.5 million Swiss francs was transferred to the liquidator's account," Weinreich said.

This deal ensured that some of the bribes were paid back to the insolvent estate of ISL. It also made the liquidator abandon some of the charges against the ISL.

Surprisingly, it also seemed to influence FIFA that in June 2004 secretly tried to stop its own criminal case against the ISL.

"But meanwhile so much evidence had been unearthed that FIFA's plea had to be ignored," Weinreich said and asked: "Why has FIFA withdrawn the complaint? Why was it done in secret? I do think that everybody can judge the facts and is able to make his own conclusions."

Put minutes on the website

The love that investigative reporter Andrew Jennings has thrown on FIFA over the past five years has not been returned.

To FIFA's regret, Jennings has insisted on knowing for instance the size of Sepp Blatter's salary and pensions, and – amongst many other issues – has looked into vote rigging at FIFA congresses, nepotism and irregularities in World Cup ticket sales:

"Some people – football officials in football blazers – are making hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars from every single ticket," Jennings said.

He drew a picture of widespread corruption and pointed the finger directly at the top: Though the Swiss authorities in 2002 decided not to take FIFA's president Sepp Blatter to court after many of his allies in FIFA's Executive Committee had reported him to the police, Blatter could not claim to be acquitted of any wrongdoing, Jennings said. He quoted the responsible magistrate for saying:

"I have not concluded that Herr Blatter is innocent. He is innocent of certain things. That is not to say that nothing has happened. It simply means there isn't sufficient proof."

At Play the Game, the English journalist made a plea to Sepp Blatter and his fellow leaders:

"FIFA are always telling us how transparent they are. Let's see real transparency. It's time to start using modern information technology. Why shouldn't they put the minutes of Executive Committee meetings on their website? Why not add an audio link? Let's hear them working, as they claim, for the Good of the Game. They are spending billions behind closed doors. There's no justification for the secrecy."

FIFA under fire

Football's international governing body FIFA came under heavy fire during Play the Game 2005. Four investigative journalists directed heavy criticism towards FIFA and its top leaders.

Regrettably, FIFA declined the invitation of the organisers to let its voice be heard in the debates. On these pages we offer small excerpts of what the reporters from Antigua, Argentina, United Kingdom and Germany told. Their full reports can be found at: www.playthegame.org

Antigua's field of gold



A graphic illustration of corruption: Animals grazing peacefully at a field that should have been the site of a US\$ 400,000 soccer centre. Photo credit: Jens Weinreich

"Follow the money". This old motto lead journalist Ian "Magic" Hughes of Antigua Sun straight to FIFA's Vice President Jack Warner, one of FIFA president Sepp Blatter's most loyal supporters. Hughes told how large amounts of FIFA money disappeared inside the national football federation of his home country, Antigua and Barbuda.

According to Hughes, the main culprit was former Secretary General of the Antigua And Barbuda Football Association, Paul "Chet" Greene, who was kept in his position through his personal friendship with FIFA Vice President Jack Warner of Trinidad and Tobago.

Along the way, \$400,000 donated from FIFA's GOAL project – a development fund inside FIFA – was lost. Ian Hughes brought a photograph of the empty field in which the federation's headquarters and training facilities should have been built. FIFA's response to the disappeared fortune was to turn the blind eye and send fresh money, and to this day, the federation has not made an investigation of the alleged corruption.

Antigua's government, however, did react. But its efforts to clean up soccer led to FIFA banning Antigua and Barbuda in June 2003. The ban cost the under-23 national team their chance to qualify for the Olympics. Later in the same year, the suspension was lifted, but according to Hughes the situation was never normalized:

"FIFA, as in Jack Warner, the Vice President, what they have done, is to safeguard his good friend, Paul Chet Greene. (...) So basically, the FIFA programme, rather than being used for the development of football, I say it is used to buy votes."

Don Julio in full control

He likes to be called "Don Julio". And after more than 26 years at the head of the Argentine Football Federation, Julio Grondona has become a real "Godfather of South American football" according to sports editor Ezequiel Fernández Moored of the Italian news agency ANSA in Buenos Aires.

In FIFA, Grondona has the important position of Vice President, chairing also the strategic Finance Committee, and Blatter can count on him as one of his most loyal supporters.

His grip on power, according to Moored, has been kept firm since 1979 by a combination of financial power, control of the media and "friendly favours" to those who criticise him.

A key factor for Grondona's long reign is an unusually long-lasting contract between AFA and Torneos y Competencias (TyC), a broadcasting company that has held the broadcasting rights of all Argentine football for all this time and continues to do so until 2014!

This partnership that "has made TyC rich and football very poor," in the words of Moored.

Through TyC and their exclusive rights, Grondona has been able to keep other national media under control.

Moreover, the working relation between Grondona and the country's referees extends so far that it is said no team can even win the Argentine Championship without the consent of "Don Julio". Moored presented several examples of the number of penalties and red cards granted to clubs seems to vary considerably according to currents in soccer politics.

To Grondona's credit Ezequiel Fernández Moored listed his ability to defend Argentina soccer against influence from the government and the wealthiest European Clubs. But Julio Grondona is not like Mother Teresa, Moored stressed.

Though now 74 years of age and facing opposition, Grondona will run for another term as AFA president from 2007. He also plays a key role in Conmebol, the South American Football Confederation, but here he will never fear resistance.

"Mandates in South American football last for decades. The Paraguayan Nicolas Leoz has been the President of the Conmebol since 1986, and Ricardo Teixeira football president in Brazil since 1989. Some years ago these men decided that elections are not necessary in Conmebol. Imagine what their scope of power is."