

TAKING SOCCER BACK

Breaking the corruption scheme has been hard for honest Kenyan soccer leaders – but there is hope

By Marcus Hoy

Imagine if officials from your national football association regularly siphoned off gate receipts, bribed match officials, appointed biased referees, failed to supply audits and even stole official computers. It may sound incredible, but these and other offences were routinely perpetrated by officials of the Kenyan Football Federation (KFF) between 2000 and 2004.

According to Bob Munro, Chairman of one of Kenya's top football clubs, the election in March 2000 of former marketing executive Maina Kariuki as KFF Chairman ushered in an era which set new standards in mismanagement, incompetence and corruption.

In his address to Play the Game, Munro described in meticulous detail how a combination of complacency and criminal intent led to a "culture of corruption" in Kenyan football which spread to all levels of the game. However, his message was ultimately one of hope, implying that with enough determination, anti corruption campaigners can successfully defeat those who seek to exploit sport for their own ends.

Fighting bribes with a camera

Munro has lived in Africa since 1985, working in recent years as a senior adviser on environmental policy. During this time he has always tried to indulge his passion for football – a passion which led to his appointment as Chairman of Mathare United football club in his adopted homeland of Kenya.

After its foundation in 1994, the club surprised many by climbing rapidly through the lower leagues and winning promotion to Kenya's second-best tier, the National Super League, in 1997.

As Munro related to his Play the Game audience, the club's promotion heralded a rude awakening. No matter how well the team played at their new level, it was almost impossible to win a game away from home. Local referees showed such blatant bias in favour of the home side that there could be the only logical explanation – bribery.



Time for change in Kenyan football: When corruption became too much, Mathare United and eleven other clubs resigned from KFF and formed their own league. Photo credit: Lasse Sørensen

"An unforgettable experience... In 23 years as a journalist I have had the possibility of taking part in five World Cups, and four Olympic Games. But never something like Play the Game that now is a part of my history."

Roberto Alfredo Ruiz, TV and radio reporter, Estadio W, México

FROM THE THIEVES

However, in the 1998 season, United tried a new tactic. The coach started taking along a large video camera to away games, and conspicuously pointing it at match officials as the game was in progress. Soon, Mathare United's dismal 'away jinx' became a distant memory, and promotion to Kenya's Premier League was assured. As Munro later revealed to Play the Game, the club's biggest secret was that the camera did not work.

Plundering football

However, promotion to the top flight exposed the team to new and more pervasive forms of corruption, much of it involving the KFF.

After his March 2000 election, Munro told Play the Game, new KFF Chairman Maina Kariuki immediately set about enriching himself and his cohorts. In July 2000 an estimated Ksh 1 million (\$14,000) vanished from the gate receipts of the Kenya vs. Swaziland match, heralding the start of a string of international fixtures which took place without a single penny in gate receipts being banked by the KFF treasurer.

While national officials plundered the national KFF and FIFA funds, many local officials pocketed the KFF share of gate receipts from the matches in their areas, including those involving Munro's Mathare United.

Other KFF misdemeanours included the failure to pay clubs, players and referees, the involvement of top KFF officials as unregistered agents selling players abroad, and the exclusion of clubs, coaches, players and honest officials from any say in the decision-making process. Kenyan football was in disarray.

11 clubs resigned from KFF

Such blatant profiteering could not continue indefinitely, and on September 20, 2003 eleven Premier League clubs - including six of the eight quarter finalists of that season's cup competition - resigned from the KFF.

The clubs formed their own company, the Kenyan Premier Football Group Limited (KPFGL), registered it under the Companies Act of Kenya, and took steps to ensure financial transparency

and shareholder accountability. A joint public statement entitled "New Inter-Clubs Partnership for Improving Kenyan Football, National Development and Unity" was issued.

Sanity may be returning

Kariuki's term in office finally came to an end in March 2004, and he was arrested and charged with theft of funds shortly afterwards. Despite his removal, however, the chaos continued.

Mathare United wants the game to be played fairly in Kenya and at some point pretended to film the behaviour of referees to prevent match fixing.
Photo credit: Lasse Sorensen

The process of choosing a new governing body led to more in-fighting, with two separate leaderships both claiming legitimacy - the FIFA-recognized duo of Alfred Sambu as National Chairman and Prof. Moni Wekesa as Secretary General, and the government-supported duo of Mohammed Hatimy as Acting National Chairman and Dan Omino as Secretary General.

Millions of Kenyans, said Bob Munro, were confused by this 'sad game of musical chairs' in the KFF executive.

More recently, however, there have been signs that sanity may be returning. FIFA president Sepp Blatter endorsed football federation elections held in January 2006, in which Alfred Sambu was selected as the chairman of the KFF. After FIFA

officially recognised Dan Omino as the KFF's Secretary-General, hopes were raised that both factions were willing to work together.

The honest Kenyans

In his closing remarks, Munro paid tribute to another Play the Game attendee, John Githongo, former adviser to the President of Kenya, who was forced into exile in early 2005. It was due in part to Githongo's tireless efforts, said Munro, that

Bob Munro explained how Kenya's football clubs fought back against corruption in the Kenyan Football Federation.



Kariuki' and other former top KFF officials were charged in July 2004 with the theft of over Ksh 55 million (\$740,000).

Despite the evidence of appalling fraud that has come to light over the past six years, Bob Munro was at pains to point out that the vast majority of Kenyans are scrupulously honest, and among the most hardworking and hopeful people he has ever met.

That, he stated, is why he has lived in Kenya for the past 20 years and intends to remain there for the rest of his life. Hopefully, with an honest governing body running football.