



Belgian senator, Jean-Marie Dedecker, has exposed massive exploitation of third world athletes.

THE MAN WHO TRACED 442 SOCCER SLAVES

In Belgium alone, a politician has uncovered 442 cases of illegal trade with young soccer talent. But the problem is widespread

by Kasper Lindberg

The international trading of football players is subject to very little regulation and young football players are being trafficked from Africa to European clubs on a large scale. A Belgian senator has investigated 442 cases of illegal trade with Nigerian players in Belgium alone.

The senator is Jean-Marie Dedecker, a seasoned fighter in the world of sports politics. Speaking at Play the Game he outlined some of his findings from years of investigating what has become an enormous problem.

Jean-Marie Dedecker pointed out that in addition to 30 legal football agents in Belgium there are around 170 illegal mavericks – many of them former football players – and he did not shy away from naming agents who work in Africa for major European clubs after being suspended in their home country.

Being so open about the illegal trade has had a price. Dedecker received death threats when he announced his plans to travel to Nigeria in order to investigate the roots of the problem. So after careful consideration he sent an agent instead who found compelling evidence of how young boys with potential are recruited with promises of riches and encouraged to travel to Europe.

The deals are usually made through an agency connected to the local football school. Amazingly, the agency and football school often scoop up the entire transfer fee while the boys get nothing.

Players are like cattle

Dedecker explained how this illegal arrangement works:

“When they sell them to the clubs, they make double contracts. They make an official contract because the contract must be shown to the Belgian Football Federation. And there is a second contract made with the boys. The only thing they get in Belgium as minors is food and lodging.”

The deals are often referred to as beneficial for both parties, but in most cases the victims are the young players who are seen and treated virtually as cattle.

In addition, Dedecker claimed that the practice of changing passport details is commonplace and secretly sanctioned by the Nigerian Embassy – under the protection of Belgian ministers. These and other facts were related to him by two young apprentices who escaped from their “captors”.

Dedecker also described the growing phenomenon of “football plantations” – nursery clubs

in Africa and elsewhere which are set up specifically to feed their richer European counterparts. He pointed to Lokeren, a medium-size Belgian club which now has five “satellite clubs” in Africa, each with an agenda of profit as opposed to social welfare.

Widespread corruption

The way to fight the exploitation could be more severe immigration laws or a tax on transfer fees which would be used to benefit those who have been exploited by the human trade. But Dedecker was pessimistic about how to spend the proceeds from such a tax arrangement as corruption is rife:

“I would not give it to the Nigerian Football Federation who are corrupt in the same way as the agents who are asking 150,000\$ as a transfer fee and give nothing to the player.”

Tax against muscle drain

The increasing demand for African football players amounts to Third World muscle drain, according to Professor Wladimir Andreff from University of Paris.

He has therefore proposed a tax on international transfers of players. The so-called Coubertoin tax would use a percentage of transfer fees to fund player's education and support sports training in developing countries.

“I am aware that my policy recommendation has a limited scope. The only long-term solution to muscle drain is an overall policy for economic and sport development in developing countries. The suggested tax can put a break on international transfers of very young players but is not likely to be a hundred per cent effective,” Andreff told delegates at Play the Game.

In Africa, football can be a way out of poverty. Unfortunately, many young players are exploited by unscrupulous agents and end up in slave-like conditions in European clubs.

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