

We have to be a little careful about what we say. Quite many major clubs have been threatening us with lawsuits and they did that even before we had written even a sentence.

We are investigative reporters and have the last few years been looking into different aspects of trafficking of young players in international football. As journalists we are not specialised in sports, but in the world of finance. And what initially caught our interest was a Norwegian businessman who owned a club in the Norwegian premier league. We were investigating the financial structure of his businesses and during this work we found traces of him earning large sums of money on importing minor Nigerian footballers to Oslo. He paid nothing for these players, but -- as we later discovered -- was given them by the big English club, Chelsea. In a highly secret scheme the Norwegian club and its youth academy was paid to keep and hide them until they turned eighteen and could be brought to England legally. In a dramatic turn of events the Norwegian club sold the most talented of these Nigerian youngsters who then had just turned 18 to Manchester United, behind Chelsea's back, taking advantage of the shadiness of the initial deal, counting on Chelsea not being willing to out its questionable dealings in Norway. But what happened was that agents working for Chelsea went to Oslo and got hold of the player who was bought by Manchester United, and brought him London one early morning in May 2005. Crying, reports say. We should inform you that Chelsea has not admitted these agents working for the club. These agents, who hid the player in the English capital, represented one of the most renowned agent firms in international football -- and still do.

Manchester United was in a fury and wrote confidentially to FIFA demanding the international football association taking action. Manchester United wanted the agent banned for life, and they wanted Chelsea to be excluded from Champions League and -- for a year -- from the transfer market. The delicate controversy ended in a confidential, private settlement a year later, costing Chelsea approximately 20 million pounds. The Norwegian businessman got about eight of these millions. In return Chelsea got the young Nigerian player, and not the least they got the written promise of silence from every single one who had been involved in the transfer from the beginning. They were not to accuse anyone of any wrongdoing at any time in the future, or even comment on the transfer at all.

Due to the confidentiality of the settlement, FIFA never got to see it. Their investigation was closed down. No one was punished and everything was brushed under the carpet.

What was this, we wondered. The FIFA-article which seemed violated was article nineteen in the FIFA Regulation for the Status and Transfers of Players - the paragraph called Protection of minors. This article, or paragraph, was introduced in 2001, as a reaction to the incoming reports on the growing problem of trafficking of young footballers in international football. Everyone in the family of football talked warmly on the importance of protecting the youngsters, not the least the young boys coming from the poorer parts of the world such as Latin-America and West-Africa, but was it just talk? How widespread was this problem? How was it done? Who was involved in it?

During our work we have made close to 300 interviews regarding these issues, talked to club owners, club directors in small and big clubs, licensed agents, unlicensed agents, trainers, managers, hostel owners, police, NGOs - and of course the young players. We travelled around Europe gathering as much information we could get, collecting evidence, hard evidence, not just testimonies.

With the help of different national NGOs and police and UEFA we have made the estimation that as much as 20.000 young boys are living, or have been living, on the streets in different parts of Europe as a result of trafficking in football. The vast majority of these young boys have been lured to Europe by men calling themselves agents, bragging about their influential contacts in European football and promising the young boys and their families a bright future, a new life and a way out of their misery and poverty. All these men need is for the boys' parents to advance them some money, paying for the trip and a small fee maybe.

Unfortunately there are way too many examples of families selling their last belongings to finance their son's promising football career, when it is soon evident that it was all a scam. Some never reach Europe, just being left together with other children in a house on the way, some drowning on the overseas travel made extremely dangerous by the small boats often used. And the ones actually reaching Europe often find that the contacts in European football didn't exist, or they weren't interested and soon the boys are left to manage on their own, without a place to stay, without visas, often without identification papers, without money, sometimes in countries where they don't speak the language, some of them illiterates as well.

This, we found, is the part of the problem the family of football is most comfortable talking about. The fake agents are just criminals, not part of the family, so to say, and the licensed

agents, the real clubs, they say, can't be blamed for criminals griming football's good name. This is true, of course. But is the whole truth?

Our research showed the problem of trafficking in football being of a much more structural grade. The more we looked into it, the harder it was to see a clear divide between the "serious" and the "unserious" elements of the football industry. For instance licensed agents in many cases used local, unlicensed agents to do their ground work. Big clubs has smaller farmer clubs where they could put minor players on hold, waiting for them to get legal. And big clubs dealt with unlicensed agents, all though it was a breach of FIFA-regulations. If the player on offer was promising enough, the rules and regulation didn't seem to matter very much. People linked to the trafficking of women and the international drug dealing, could also be traced to involvement in the trafficking of young footballers. And this should not be surprising. The possibility to earn large sums of money is eminent. The accession of raw material is unlimited. And - as we will return to later - the danger of being caught is almost unexcitable.

Let us dwell a little upon what happened when FIFA introduced the article nineteen on protection on minors in an effort to stop the trafficking in football. Firstly the big clubs and influential leagues lobbied hard before the EU to make the regulation less strict than FIFA wanted. As a result of the power struggle there were made some exceptions in the article prohibiting the international transfers of minors. Two of these exceptions were:

1. If the transfer was made between two countries inside the EU, the player could be just sixteen.
2. If the transfer was mad as a result of the parents moving, for reasons not linked to football, for instance to start in a new job, it was ok.

What then happened was that clubs and agents in Europe started exploiting these exceptions - quite systematically - with the goal to keep the access to the cheap talents open and as undisturbed as before. We found both clubs and agents who admitted to us that they did offer parents work to get the players while they still were minors, to bypass the regulations, all in the fight to get the biggest talent - first and cheapest. One father was given work as a gardener at the stadium. Another was offered the position as a team bus driver.

Also, we found examples of fake passports, passports which were tampered with and made the players old enough, made by corrupt embassy-employees, on the initiative from sometimes a club and sometimes an agent but often in an unclear collaboration between the two.

We saw big clubs establishing former clubs in the European countries with the most open immigrant policy. Why was this? One reason could be that a young boy from Africa was much more sellable and movable if he got an EU passport. Then he just had to be over sixteen years old to be sold and bought, and another exception could be used and the intention of the regulation bypassed again.

The big clubs have used a lot of money to let their teams of lawyers locate the loopholes in the regulations, and find out exactly how far they could go. The main goal, it seems, is not to follow the intention of the article made to protect the minors, but to find a safe way around it. After introducing the new paragraph in 2001, one saw an apparent growth in the academies financed by big European clubs. This could be, and in many cases is, a good thing, a chance for underprivileged boys and girls to take advantage of these clubs expertise. But these academies represent a problem as well.

Unfortunately many clubs primarily use their academies as loopholes to find and secure young talent at a very young age. Some European clubs have renowned academies in Africa, run by men who have left their European home country as a result of involvement in match-fixing, corruption or trafficking cases here. Some have been banned for life by their national associations, but are put to teach and raise young boys in Africa all the same.

Other clubs start academies in Europe, or in Asia, and move young boys from their families and friends, hundreds of miles to another continent, to - maybe - become footballers. Arsenal Football Club from London, with their French manager, Arsene Wenger, is deeply involved in an academy located in the countryside of Thailand. Here young boys from the Ivory Coast are taken. The youngest, Edgard, was eight when he arrived. A small boy. Just weighing 31 kilos upon arrival. The policy of the academy is for the boys to have as little as possible contact with the earlier life, such as their parents. They are supposed to stay at this distant place in Thailand for seven years, preparing for European football. By supporting the academy financially, Arsenal gets to pick the two best players when the time is right.

Just a small minority of the young, African football players achieves success in Europe. 99 out of 100 fail to do so. There are also examples of really talented players who get their promising careers ruined by European agents, clubs and other people from the new world of football glory hunters and money dealers. One of them is a Senegalese youngster we met a few times last year. Let me introduce him this way:

In the village of Saloum, everyone knew that Mbaye Ba someday would make it big. The agents in the capital Dakar had heard about him. Ever since he was a little boy, they had driven the twisted road to Cap Vert, across the country, through towns like Thies, Diourbel and Kaolack, up towards the Saloum Mountains, just to keep in touch with him. He was the big hope of the village. His father was a bus driver and very proud of his little boy. His mother, who sold clothes at the village market, didn't want her son to leave home when he was so little. The visiting agents had enticed him with exciting trips and money. When Mbaye Ba was eight years old, he lost his father. Senegal is one of the world's poorest countries, and for a little boy from the countryside, schooling was not a matter of course. But Mbaye Ba, for a long time chose to stay at home, to take care of his mother and two sisters. When he wasn't inside of the house, he was playing football. Mbaye Ba grew up to be a tall and strong footballer, and even more agents and clubs started to get interested in him. They enticed him with Paris, Lisbon, Barcelona and big money.

In 2005, Mbaye Ba was 21 years old and one of Africa's most promising players. The tall forward had played his best season for his team, ASC Saloum, and become top scorer in the Senegalese top division. He was known for his strong headwork and his ability to create goal-scoring opportunities. The village boy also drew notice to himself with his calmness in tense situations. It wasn't a coincidence that he was singled out as a penalty taker, despite his young age. He had played for national youth teams for many years, and in 2005 he made his debut for Senegal's national first team, as the squad's youngest member. Autograph hunters and photographers gathered around the new forward at the national team's training camp at Dakar. He was now playing with the really big international stars, idols that he had only seen before on TV, from World Cups and the European Champions League. On team photos he was standing in the second row, right behind El Hadji Diouf, the people's hero from the last World Cup, and still Senegal's biggest star.

During a national team training camp in early May 2005, Mbaye Ba asked for directions to Hotel Novotel Dakar in the Senegalese capital. It was a great hotel with a cocktail bar by the

swimming pool and many Europeans in the lobby. This four star business hotel was also a rallying point for football agents and others who were in Dakar to study future stars.

Eventually, Mbaye Ba was introduced to a cheerful, friendly man with a round face and mid length blond hair.

The man said his name – John – and that he was an agent travelling across Africa looking for interesting players. They talked for a while, the man gave Mbaye Ba some pocket money and promised him a trial in a Norwegian club. His European dream was about to come true.

For Mbaye Ba, the most difficult thing with leaving his village, was having to bid his one year old daughter farewell. He had promised his mother to take care of himself, before he was picked up and driven for well over three hours to the airport in Dakar.

The top scorer from Senegal landed at Oslo Airport Gardermoen on an ice-cold Sunday in February 2006, equipped with a one month long tourist visa. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt and thin slacks. The 193 centimeters tall man was the top scorer in Senegal, but not only that: Mbaye Ba had now been named the top division's second best player.

There was no commotion at the main Norwegian airport when he arrived. The only one who was waiting for him in the arrival hall, was John.

John told Mbaye Ba that he was given a trial at club called Follo. That is an unnoticed club in the lower divisions of Norwegian football. As a Norwegian I can assure you that Follo probably isn't what the majority of young football players dream about.

For his first training session, Mbaye Ba was driven to the business park in the southern Oslo suburbs, past a shopping mall, a petrol station and a car dealer. Slightly secluded from the road was Follohallen, a cramped training hall with no heating. Mbaye Ba borrowed a woollen hat. Between the training sessions, he was living alone at Hotel Mastemyr, which you can catch a glimpse of from the motorway on the county border outside Oslo. Mostly he remembers that it was lonely and cold. And he had already begun to miss his daughter.

Mbaye Ba got to train with FK Follo for a week. Then the club's administration had already begun preparing the arrival of new African trial players. "If they're not good enough after three training sessions, they will have to leave," to quote a member of the administration.

After just a few training sessions, FK Follo told Mbaye Ba that they didn't want him.

He was driven to the airport again. According to the rules, players who don't get a contract will be shipped back to their homeland after the trial. That didn't happen with Mbaye Ba. He didn't want to give up his dream of playing football in Europe. Besides, he had

promised to send money to his home. Now he was skint. And it was unthinkable for the village's hero to return empty-handed after just a week, after the big farewell they gave him. John – who by the way is a non-licensed agent, agreed to send him to Italy instead, on the cheapest one-way ticket he could find. He isn't sure, but thinks it was a ticket to Pisa at 50 or 60 pounds. Then he disappeared.

Last year, three years after his disappearance, we found Mbaye Ba. He was living on the streets of Antwerp, Belgium. His football career was all but over. He still hasn't learnt to read or write. He has a few friends and helpers in the local community. And he still dreams of becoming a football star. His daughter is now five. Mbaye Ba has not seen her since she was one.

Four years ago he was one of the most talented football youngsters in Senegal, actually one of the most promising in Africa.

The modern system of football is making the rich richer, the poor poorer and is, as we see it, undermining the future of African football. What Europe maybe should do, is to give African football a lift. To build artificial grass pitches, donate money, help the national associations with building up an infrastructure that makes them better equipped for controls. What Europe is doing today is shameful. We're draining Africa of talents. Previously, 25,000 attended the top matches in Cameroon, but then all the best players were brought to Europe and the crowds decreased. Then the sponsors also lost interest, the TV rights went down in price, the clubs became even poorer, the wages even worse, and then the second best players, too, went to Europe. It's a vicious circle and we're in the middle of it.

Football has changed dramatically the last ten years. The most significant club to verify the new financial circus, which dominates international football today – is probably Chelsea Football Club of London.

When the 36 year old Russian oligarch Roman Abramovitch bought the club in the summer of 2003, it was relatively poor. Its trophy cabinet was also rather empty, and despite a few cup trophies from the 2000's, close to 50 years had passed since the club won its last league title. The Russian's wild consumption of money made sure that Chelsea won the league in 2005 and 2006, in addition to even more cup titles. Since he took over the club, Roman Abramovitch has used approximately 700 million pounds to buy success. How much of the money that's been given as a gift to Chelsea, and how much he expects to get paid back, has

been difficult to unravel. Earlier this year, it became known that large parts of the money transfers to the club are so-called interest-free loans.

No matter which instruments the Russian oligarch utilizes when Chelsea get to use his money, there's no doubt that his presence has made English football more loaded with money than ever. Chelsea are paying the world's highest players wages. Chelsea are shelling out fantastic amounts of money to buy the world's best players. The price means little or nothing if Roman Abramovitch has targeted a certain player.

When Chelsea's worst rivals also want to contend for the best players, there obviously won't be less money floating around. Football agents working for the most sought-after players in the world know that they anytime can use Chelsea as a reference for both transfer fees and wages.

Roman Abramovitch is not the only Russian or other foreign billionaire that has bought an English football club. Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal, Aston Villa, West Ham and Manchester City – the majority of the top clubs are in the hands of foreign capitalists. Most of them have incurred an enormous debt and created an economic fantasy world. Even UEFA director Michel Platini has pointed on that. It has all happened the last four or five years.

It might be okay to be reminded that traditionally, football's enthusiasts - in all contries and on most levels - have stayed away from the thought of going for the next big bucks. Something has happened, but it's happened rather recently. That's why it may not be so surprising that football's economy, as we know it today, especially in England, seems to be without any control. Some call it a Russian economy. Others call it a cowboy economy. Both are probably equally right.

Traditional values like communal spirit and moderation have had to yield for financial instruments of a more intricate nature. You can probably say many favourable things about the control authorities in both FIFA and the national football associations, but they're not very trained in supervising the advanced economic reality of our time. It's rather easy for the new operators, with their financial advisors, PR agencies and highly paid lawyers, to do what they want.

The steadily increasing wages and transfer fees in European football have given rise to a natural market logic: The clubs have started looking for cheaper manpower, and there are no places in the world where it's cheaper than in Africa. The benefits are many. Footballers from Africa are cheap to buy and operate, and there are so many of them that you can often pick

and choose. The new market is complex, and with *that* many agents, scouts and adventurers competing for the big clubs' favour, it's become a new industry.

This industry has created a few new millionaires. It has left thousands of young boys on the streets. And it has divided the world of football.

The problem with trafficking of young footballers is a global sports problem. Even though a considerable number of cases of human trafficking in football has been tried at different European courts of law, nobody has been convicted.