

DON JULIO, THE MAN BEHIND BLATTER

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Play the Game has invited me to talk about who is behind Joseph Blatter. It is Argentine Julio Grondona. FIFA's Vicepresident to remain longer in power. The great Godfather of South American football.

Grondona is the President of the Argentine Football Association (AFA) since nineteen seventy-nine. The clubs elected him. And a cruel dictatorship that was governing the country at that moment approved his name. Grondona proudly remembers that his mandate began almost together with Woytila's papacy and Diego Armando Maradona's successful international career. But Maradona left the field in nineteen ninety-seven and John Paul the Second died this year.

In his twenty-six-year mandate, not only did Grondona survive John Paul the Second and Maradona, but also four de facto Presidents and eight democratic Presidents in Argentina. He also survived seventy-nine supporters who died victims of the endless violence that rules football in my country. He survived almost forty cases of doping, eight strikes by players and three strikes by referees. Grondona also survived about fifty legal raids on his own offices, the AFA offices and those of his partners.

In a few days he will be seventy-four years old. His age is not an obstacle. Grondona has already warned that in two thousand and seven he will begin his eighth mandate, that it will last until two thousand and eleven and that he will be thirty-two years at the head of the AFA.

Thirty-two years with "DON Julio". He likes people to call him that way. DON Julio could mean respect. But who would forget the wonderful DON Vito Corleone interpreted by Marlon Brando? In fact, the other nickname given to Grondona in Argentina is "the godfather".

As President of FIFA's Finance Committee -one of the most powerful industries of world entertainment-, Grondona lived his first nine years in a

room in Sarandí, in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. In this same room, without even a refrigerator, he lived together with his parents and his five brothers.

Today, Grondona, the grandson of Italian immigrants, is master and boss in Sarandí. He has built buildings, offices and an asylum, sustained with his own money. On December two thousand and four, he also donated half a million dollars to build a sports complex. But the money belonged to the FIFA, to the Goal Project, managed by his friend Bin Hamman, from Qatar. We know FIFA's Goal Project sponsors the development of football in the Third World. This aid means works and money. And votes in the assemblies. Well, Grondona decided that the FIFA's help should be granted to his neighbors in Sarandí. "Who wouldn't like to be Santa Claus?", said the Godfather when he inaugurated the works.

Grondona, who does not speak English, no longer lives in a room without a refrigerator. He spends most of the year in the Savoy Hotel, in Zurich, in a six-hundred-Euro room. Obviously, it is the FIFA who pays. For every day he spends outside Argentina, he gets seven hundred dollars as travelling allowances. Not to mention the one hundred dollars annual salary as a member of the FIFA's Executive Committee.

"Don Julio" inherited "Lombardi and Grondona", a hardware store and a deposit from his father. So, for the friendly media, he is a simple ironmonger. But on September fifth, nineteen ninety-eight, he was unveiled by an investigation done by the Argentine magazine Noticias. Crucecita, Batco, Baprisud, Conenar, Genaversa are some of the companies in which "Don Julio" is either a partner or the owner, together with his family or friends, such as Eduardo De Luca, secretary general of the South American Football Confederation. The scope of business goes from construction to gas stations. From an undertaking company to a motel. From bovine cattle to crop fields. A huge and amazing patrimonial increase if we take into account that Grondona has never received a salary during his twenty-six years as President of the AFA.

What did he do to amass such a fortune? "I have not invented anything", said the Godfather. "I just imitated Joao Havelange". His master Havelange spent twenty-four years as FIFA's President. At the head of the AFA, Grondona has already spent twenty-six. What does he mean by imitating Havelange? Signing deals with Coca-Cola, Mastercard, TV. Without any bids, but with endless guarantees. The AFA's contract with TV is a world record. It started in nineteen eighty-six and ends up in two thousand and fourteen. Twenty- nine years of partnership with a producing company called Torneos and Competencias (TyC). A partnership that has made TyC rich and football very poor.

Today, TyC belongs to an unknown Swiss fund based in the Virgin Islands, and to American capitals. With the profits they received from the

football, its first owners bought TV stations, magazines such as El Gráfico and a financial newspaper called Ambito Financiero. They built an extremely modern building for the company and opened sports clothes shops, among many kinds of business. Once, they even rented Argentinos Juniors, Diego Maradona's first club. In the nineties, the annual income by a star journalist working for TyC was over one million dollars. More than what TyC paid to many of the First Division impoverished clubs of Argentine football. Today, these poor clubs owe the extremely rich AFA forty-three million dollars.

TyC became partners with the owners of cable television, which managed to have five million subscribers in Argentina –a record figure in Latin America during last decade. As a consequence, TyC was at both sides of the counter. It sold itself the football rights. Daniel Lalín, the controversial President of Racing Club, one of the most powerful clubs in Argentina, denounced it: the AFA should control its partner. Lalín was expelled from football, Racing went bankrupt and the club's controller, Liliana Ripoll -who had threatened to denounce the "illegal" contract between AFA and TyC-today works for the AFA. What about Racing? Racing went on bankrupt and now it belongs to a stock company with Ethiopian capitals, based in a tax haven.

In the year two thousand, an Argentine judge investigated the contract between AFA and TyC. He ordered a raid on the AFA's and TyC's offices. A TyC employee admitted having personally given Grondona an envelope containing eighty thousand dollars, without any receipt, in his house in Sarandí. And that other leaders of Argentine football stepped by at TyC offices to get some envelopes with money. This judge, Juan Mahdjoubián, even succeeded in processing Grondona and other managers. But a TV program of a TV station associated with TyC investigated the judge with a hidden cam. It discovered that the judge demanded illegal money in some of his cases. The investigation on the AFA and TyC, obviously, didn't get anywhere.

The story of Carlos Ferrer, another judge who also investigated the TV contracts, was similar to that of Mahdjoubián's. A hidden camera unveiled him as corrupt. And the same happened to Carlos Branca, a third judge who also investigated the AFA, in relation with its anti-doping controls. The three judges were victims of the hidden cameras belonging to the same TV program, and the three of them were removed from office. One must be extremely clean to investigate the football business in my country.

What about TyC? TyC today pays about thirty million dollars a year to broadcast the Argentine championship on TV. Grondona also helped it with the rights to broadcast the Argentine national team matches. It wanted to broadcast the matches through the pay-per-view system. The Congress did not allow for it. Next, it unluckily tried to transfer the rights to a ghost company based in a tax haven. But it did not matter. The Argentine national

team is a big business anyway. The South American qualifying matches are held throughout an extraordinary long period of time: eighteen rounds during two years. Eighty-two matches with just ten national teams. The European clubs complain. Their players are always on the road. But Grondona is convinced that the South American qualifying will keep its fabulous business running even for the two thousand and ten World Cup. No matter what Real Madrid, Juventus and Barcelona have to say. No matter what Blatter has to say. This is power indeed.

TyC and its partners also have rights on championships organized by the South American Football Confederation. Grondona is also Don Julio in the Conmebol, as the South American Confederation is known. Its President, Nicolás Leoz, is from Paraguay. But Leoz is too docile to Grondona's power, as well as to that of Ricardo Teixeira, the President of the Brazilian Confederation since nineteen eighty-nine. Teixeira reached this position thanks to his former father-in-law, Joao Havelange.

The point is that mandates in South American football last for decades. Leoz has been the President of the Conmebol since nineteen eighty-six. Imagine what the scope of their power is like that, some years ago, these men decided that elections are not necessary in the Conmebol. TyC from Grondona's Argentina and Traffic from Teixeira's Brazil share the TV business of South American football. Long live Leoz.

And journalists? What do they say about Grondona? Do they investigate contracts, balance sheets, partnerships? Some of them do, like Víctor Hugo Morales or Gustavo Veiga. But it is impossible to investigate Grondona on TV. Almost all football programs, directly or indirectly, depend on TyC. As well as their journalists. And it is known that no guarding dog bites the hand of he who feeds him. Fan crowd or Watchdogs, asked Play the Game this year. Neither fan crowd, nor watchdogs. Just partners.

The Godfather also discriminates. It was during a very kind interview in a program on TyC Sports cable channel; that is, TyC. He ate beef, he drank wine and he told many anecdotes. When the program was reaching the end, the journalist asked why there were no Jewish referees in Argentine football First Division. "To be a First Division referee", answered Grondona, "is something very difficult and Jews have never liked difficult things".

Grondona was accused of discrimination, there was a public reaction by the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Grondona was forced to apologize. Shortly after, TyC gathered its main men. The order was quite clear: "Gentlemen, the sports confederations are our partners. We must take care of them, specially of Grondona".

Grondona is also protected by other media. One of the main partners of TyC is Grupo Clarín, the most powerful multimedia in Argentina:

newspapers, radios and TV all over the country. However, Grondona is not concerned about journalism. When in the year two thousand, a journalist told him that he would write a book on his life, Grondona met him for a few minutes and immediately introduced him to his lawyer. "My lawyer will definitely read everything you write", warned "Don Julio", the name given to the book by the journalist who wrote it, Ariel Borenstein.

Grondona also bases his power on another key factor for somebody who knows about football. It is a factor also used by Blatter's FIFA. Have we forgotten the controversial referee performances in the last World Cup? Uruguay expelled this year its number one referee, Gustavo Méndez, under charges of corruption this year. Brazil was forced to annul and replay eleven matches in his current championship after corruption by two referees was confirmed. What about Argentina? Aren't there any corrupt referees in Argentina? Didn't International Transparency say last month that Argentina takes one of the worst positions in its ranking of corrupt countries, with almost three out of ten points? In Argentina, even Grondona boasted on TV about having created a Referee Union to undermine the power of the existing union. Some weeks ago, justice condemned him for discriminating one of the two unions with economic purposes. One must pose the inevitable question: what kind of links and relations could the AFA establish with the referees it favors?

There are no legal denouncements. But there is astounding evidence: is it by chance that River Plate, the most winning club in Argentine football, has only been granted a penalty in its last forty-one matches? River threatened to go to the ordinary justice. After this, in his next match, River was granted two penalties. In River, there are elections at the end of the year. Its President, José María Aguilar, has not kneeled down, as many others have, before Grondona. Even worse, Aguilar is the Argentine football manager that is closer to the G-14, the body that gathers the most powerful clubs in Europe, and that is opposed to FIFA. Fernando Miele, a former President of San Lorenzo, was pretty clear when he said the following in Sport Business magazine two years ago: "Without Grondona's consent, nobody becomes a champion in Argentina". Miele, who was Vice-president of the AFA and has been expelled from his club under charges of corruption, has also declared in El Gráfico magazine that "Argentine football is a mafia".

Andrés Ducantezeiler, a former President of Independiente, publicly admitted on the radio that in two thousand and two his club won the championship because referees played to its favor. What did the AFA do? Did it investigate the self-denouncement? No, it barely removed Ducantezeiler from his position for two years.

Do you know who is Independiente's President today? Julio Comparada, a partner of Grondona's family in Surcos, the AFA's insurance company. Comparada, as was published by Un Caño magazine last month, is

also linked to Grondona's family through Puntogol, the company in charge of the AFA's marketing. Puntogol used to be ISL before, FIFA's marketing company until it broke. The President of ISL Argentina was called Rogelio Riganti. Riganti was a supplier of "Lombardi and Grondona", the company still owned by the Grondonas in Sarandí. The AFA and its members, as you can see, are a great family. Remember Havelange lessons.

And one more thing about Independiente. The team didn't received any penalty in more than 30 matches. But when Comparada began a new championship as the president of the club, Independiente, former Grondona's club, was beneficiated with 7 penalties in the seven first rounds of the current championship.

Javier Castrilli was the only referee that in nineteen ninety-eight dared to denounce that the AFA ordered the protection of certain clubs. He accused Jorge Romo, the referees' director, but who did not know anything about referees when Grondona appointed him in the AFA. Romo, let it be said, shared the same requisite with Riganti, that of ISL. Romo was also a supplier of "Lombardi and Grondona". Today, Romo is a member of the FIFA's Referees Committee and one of his sons works in TyC. What did Grondona do to stop Castrilli, the referee who dared to denounce him? He attended a referee assembly, yellingly demanded support and managed to leave Castrilli alone. Today, seven years after, Castrilli airs his opinions about the referees' tasks on TV. On which channel? On TyC Sports, of course.

Something else on referees. Arsenal is a modest club playing in the First Division. More than attacking, Arsenal must know how to defend itself. However, in its last a hundred and twenty five matches in First Division (until last October twenty-eighth), Arsenal only had seven players expelled. The other small clubs that also tend to defend themselves were not as fortunate: Olimpo had thirty-one expelled players in a hundred and twenty-five matches. Instituto, thirteen players in fifty-one matches. Quilmes, twenty-one players in eighty-seven matches. And what about the powerful River Plate? Twenty-two expelled players in a hundred and twenty-five matches. Three times as much as Arsenal.

Oh, I almost forgot to tell you something: Arsenal was founded by Julio Grondona in nineteen fifty-seven in Sarandí. Today, its President is Julio Grondona Jr., who has already started his career: he told the media that he feels capable of replacing his father in the AFA. And a month ago, Grondona's AFA appointed Grondona Jr. as the President of an AFA delegation to Uruguay. Another Havelange lesson.

The journalists only knows how to criticize, the establishment of football usually said. Well, but what can we do? What do you prefer? To be partners? We are just just witnesses of the battle between what we can

describe as an old mafia, Blatter, Grondona and his friends, and a new mafia as it seems to be with Abramovich in Chelsea, the Iranian Kia Joorabchian in Corinthians and globalised money in many clubs all over the world.

Grondona is the most important leader in Argentina's sport history. He defended football's autonomy. He once refused to fire a national team's coach in spite of the government's pressures. And he resisted pressures to force clubs, which in Argentina perform important social functions as well, to become mere stock companies. He now fights against powerful European clubs that try to buy young talents of South American football at despicable prices, without complying with existent rules and laws. Blatter also says that he won't permit the victory of European clubs' greed. But, as we all know, the FIFA, the AFA, Blatter and Grondona do not work for the Foundation of Mother Teresa of Calcuta. In fact, the AFA will receive over one million dollars for a friendly match against England, next Tuesday in Geneva.

With Grondona, Argentine football also won International Cups, imposed anti-doping controls, had many modest clubs become champions and powerful clubs go down to the B Series. But something must be said: for the big clubs to keep on winning titles, he invented two championships per year. And for the big clubs not to go down to the B series again, he adopted a system that makes an average of the scores obtained in the last three years. A big team can have a bad year, but not three bad years in a row. Grondona never imposed the AFA's rules to punish clubs and managers who are accomplices of violent supporters. I insist: Argentine football experienced seventy-four fatal casualties throughout Grondona's twenty-six-year mandate. Nowhere in the world there exists FAVIFA, a body of relatives of football victims. Except in Argentina.

Grondona has not imposed its rules to punish those Presidents accused of keeping the money resulting from the sale of players for themselves, and of defaulting clubs, such as Eduardo López, President of Newell's Old Boys. He was condemned by justice under charges of clandestine betting operations and accused of writing more than a thousand and four hundred bad checks. He owes seven monthly salaries to his players. López is the AFA's International Relations Secretary. Grondona says that he just complies with the clubs' mandate. But everybody knows that the AFA and Grondona are the same thing. "To vote against him is to put an end to one's career as a manager", said Miele, San Lorenzo's former President, some time ago.

"What time is it?", asks Grondona when he starts the meetings of the AFA's Executive Committee. "What time do you want it to be?", reply his aides. And when he wants debate to come to an end, Grondona uses one of his favorite phrases: "You have to choose: either chicken with rice or rice with chicken". I must also say that for the first time in 26 years Grondona will have a serious opponent in the AFAs 2007 elections. He is Raul Gamez,

president of Velez Sarsfield, the last champion in Argentina. No matter, everybody in the Argentine football said that at the moment, Grondona is invincible.

South America was the first Confederation to support Blatter's nomination, when he was elected FIFA's President in France in nineteen ninety-eight. Blatter won after a vote that included supposed payments of bribes. Blatter welcomed Grondona's support by naming him "Leader of the year" in the Versailles Palace. Grondona was also a key element in Blatter's reelection in two thousand and two. His friends use to tell that immediately after this last victory, Grondona ordered Blatter to fire Michel Zen-Ruffinen, the man who dared to denounce corruption within FIFA.

Grondona knows the world of football very well. He almost played in River Plate's First Division. He played and he founded Club Arsenal. He was President of Independiente and is the head of its national federation. Few know it, but when in nineteen seventy-seven he was admitted in the AFA's Executive Committee, "Don Julio" could not be incorporated right away. He had to wait until a two-month suspension for intimidating a referee while being President of Independiente was over. A decade before, when he was President of Arsenal, he had been removed from his position on four occasions. During two years and nine months. One of the reasons was that he intimidated and insulted referees.

Those who are close to him say that if Blatter leaves the FIFA, Grondona does not dream of replacing him. Bin Hamman, said this sources to me, is a solid candidate to succeed him. In the meantime, Grondona goes on and in his golden ring it reads "Everything goes by". Everything, it's true, except him.

There are those who say that power wears one out. But Grondona is among those who believe in what former Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, famous for his links to the mafia, once said: "Power wears people out. It is true, but it wears out those who do not make use of it". And Grondona not only uses power. He abuses of power as well.

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