Football players prop up autocracy in hunt for money

Players and fans should act as checks and balances for FIFA, says former top goalkeeper Shaka Hislop

by Michael Herborn

Money makes the world go around in professional football according to Play the Game speaker Shaka Hislop. Players have bought into a world of profit and loss that is distorting the culture of football. It is also concentrating power amongst the game’s administrators in an ever-more autocratic fashion, putting the autonomy of the game under constant threat from within.

Hislop retired from professional football in 2007 after a distinguished playing career as goalkeeper for Premier League clubs Newcastle, West Ham and Portsmouth, and international recognition for both England and Trinidad and Tobago (by virtue of his dual nationality). However, this has not dampened his long-held interest in the political side of football, an area of the game he believes has been forgotten by many of today’s professionals.

Their apathy has been paid for by the increasing wealth in world football, in which everything has its price, including players themselves.

“Footballers continue to ignore, turn a blind eye or be completely oblivious to our sport’s governing as we chase our boyhood dreams around the pitch. Our dreams neatly packaged and sold to the highest bidder,” Hislop told delegates.

“As the rewards of success grow even higher, we distance ourselves even further from anyone and everyone around the game. We’re only following everyone else’s lead though,” he continued. “Our indifference, our self-absorption, indeed our arrogant disregard is as a result of our recognition and acceptance of this fact of the modern day game.”

As more and more clubs and federations sign up to this new era of professional football where the ‘big business model’ rules, Hislop believes that the nature of the game has changed, losing its innocence and its ideals. The ‘big business model’ of football rewards those who keep quiet and play by the system. This ‘trickle-down’ system relies upon the unwavering support of the fans, who are bank-rolling world football, for the benefit of administrators and players for whom “bank balances have become far more important than medals won.”

The rise of Warner

The sport’s autonomy is increasingly under threat. Hislop believes that FIFA is increasingly being dominated by a select group of people, with the same names appearing on list after list of FIFA committees and sub-committees. Names like that of fellow Trinidadian, Jack Warner, Vice President of FIFA and a dominating figure in Trinidadian and Tobagonian football.

“Over the last decade Mr Warner has transformed himself into a larger-than-life character, based largely on his success in the rise to the near peak of football’s governing hierarchy. All this while navigating occasional run-ins with the FIFA Ethics Committee.” Hislop told Play the Game delegates.

Accusations against Warner include a world cup ticketing scandal, improper accounting and the hosting of international football tournaments on Trinidadian soil for his personal enrichment. Given that FIFA has been strident in its calls for a separation between government and sport, it may or may not come as a surprise that Warner is also chairman and co-leader of the opposition party in the Trinidad and Tobago parliament.

“Football in Trinidad and Tobago and indeed the Caribbean has become far more autocratic than autonomous. The pure autonomy I experienced as a child on my grassy Eden had given way to the forbidden fruit of autocracy and I was living its consequences,” believes Hislop.

FIFA is too insular

W ith people like Warner sitting in the upper echelons of FIFA’s hierarchy, one might forgive Hislop for giving up hope for the future. However, he believes there is hope for the future, against an increasingly autocratic world football. This hope lies within the game’s true assets, the players, and its lifeblood, the fans. Without either of whom, football’s business model would collapse.

“FIFA’s credibility problems, real or perceived, are of its own making,” says Hislop. “FIFA has become far too insular. With it next to no outside involvement or input how can FIFA hope to be seen as transparent or just?”

“It is here that both Players’ and Fans’ Associations hold the trump cards in this game of football governance. A fact that FIFA is now alluding to with their signing of a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ with FIFPro, the world body of players’ associations,” he continued.

But, this recognition should not be one-sided, Hislop warns. “With it comes a responsibility on the part of players to steer football back towards its roots. Players and fan groups have the power to act as checks and balances for FIFA. Through their joint actions, football can have an autonomous future.”

“The most impressive thing for me was that Play the Game is really the one and only conference I’ve been to so far which succeeds in making interdisciplinary debate and the theory-practice dialogue working at the same time.” Markus Kurscheidt, MSc and PhD Economics, Senior Lecturer of Sport Management, School of Sport Science, Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany.