When Trinidad and Tobago’s football team, the Soca Warriors, qualified for the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany, the players were heroes on the islands. However, one year later, many of them were blacklisted from representing the national side the following year. Their crime? To stand up to the Trinidad and Tobago Football Federation (TTFF) and demand the share of the World Cup revenues they had been promised before the tournament.

As reward for qualifying for the World Cup, the players were promised 50 per cent of earnings generated by the TTFF. Much to their astonishment, this led to a payout of just 800 USD for each player, despite World Cup sponsorships that totalled millions of dollars. Within months, 16 members of the Trinidad and Tobago squad had launched a legal challenge to the figures. Government accountants backed up the players’ suspicions, putting revenues at approximately 28 million USD, suggesting a bonus fund of 14 million USD.

A very angry reaction
The reaction from Jack Warner was swift and condemning. Warner is Vice President of FIFA, President of the regional football association CONCACAF and a special adviser to TTFF, and he was not pleased about the player’s actions. Shaka Hislop, former goalkeeper for the Soca Warriors, told delegates at Play the Game that Warner in a press interview with the Caribbean Media Corporation accused the players of greed, and of holding the TTFF to ransom.

“He promised that we would ‘stay outside the pall of organised football!’ Those comments and threats prompted me to write to him personally in response, pointing to our human right to legal counsel and, particularly, that despite his position within the region’s football, he had taken leave of neutrality all together,” Hislop said.

The TTFF has later agreed to go to arbitration in London over the issue, and Warner’s ban on the sixteen players was lifted. The case will be heard in April 2008.

A troubled relationship
While the World Cup experience was a line in the sand moment for many of Trinidad and Tobago players, Hislop is no stranger to the internal wranglings of the TTFF, and in particular TTFF special adviser Jack Warner. In fact, it was not the first time he had faced exclusion from the national team after disagreeing with the game’s most senior administrator in the Caribbean.

“My relationship with Mr Warner started some 13 years ago,” explained Hislop. “I was in the third year of my professional life and the only goalkeeper on the books of modest second division club, Reading FC. I was being forced, by a curious TTFF mandate, to return to Trinidad for the anniversary ‘celebration’ of a game that we had lost some 5 years earlier. A game that had we won would have seen us qualify for World Cup Italia 1990. A strange thing to celebrate by anyone’s standards. Nonetheless, I resisted. A spell of 5 years in the international wilderness followed.”

When Hislop returned to the international fold in 2000, he was installed as captain of the national team, in recognition of his standing within the English game where he represented Premier League club West Ham United at the time.

Six years later, the island’s players managed to achieve what no other Trinidadians or Tobagonians had achieved before - to qualify for the World Cup - and later had the rare, but dubious pleasure of being excluded from representing their own country because they complained about broken promises from Warner.