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The Insider's Guide to Match-Fixing in Football

Declan Hill

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**TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN THE GAME AND
ARE FIGHTING TO KEEP IT BEAUTIFUL.**

The Insider's Guide to Match-Fixing in Football by Declan Hill

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FOREWORD

The front gate of the Nafplio medium-security prison is one of the new faces of international sport. There is a set of gates embedded in high concrete walls topped with barbed wire. Behind these gates is an empty yard and then another heavier, thicker steel door. The prison is in the Peloponnese area of Greece. It is a region soaked in history. King Agamemnon launched the Trojan War from his fortress 20 miles up the Peloponnesian valley at the back of the prison. There are medieval castles that dot the entire area, along with classical theatres and ancient ruins. When I visited in December 2011, the orange trees were in full bloom. The fruit, like globes of golden light that lit up the trees, were largely unpicked. The economic disaster of the Eurozone crisis had hit and in most cases it was not profitable for the farmers to pick their own crop.

I waited for hours at the front gate while the prison governor contemplated allowing me into the jail. Behind the walls there were, presumably, phone calls going back and forth to Athens, but in front there was a large crowd of families waiting to see their loved ones. They were an international lot. A concerned Greek father whose grave, bearded face made him look like a Platonic philosopher strode up and down the road. Next to him Roma children played happily in the dust. While a family of worried Afghan refugees begged the guards to let them bring in food.

When I was finally allowed into the prison, the crowd had left and it was darkening into a frozen, wet night. I was searched and then let me through the first gate. A cold rain swept across the deserted yard. The guard from the inside doors signalled and I walked into the prison.

As the heavy steel door clanged behind me, I was brought into a typically warm Greek welcome. The prison had been built to house a few hundred

men, but it was now crammed with twice as many inmates. However, the guards and prisoners had all the usual Greek charm. They shook my hand, offered me coffees and apologized for the long wait. There was a labour action going on inside the prison, the warders were protesting about the conditions and that had played a part in the slowness of the governor in allowing me into the prison.

I was escorted past more heavy doors, down a dingy corridor and into a long interrogation room. The walls of the room were discoloured and peeling, there was a table in the middle of the room and across from me sat Achilleas Beos.

In the midst of their national bankruptcy crisis of the summer of 2011, the Greek anti-corruption bureau, aligned with the Secret Service and National Police Force — had moved into Greek football and arrested over sixty players, coaches and sports officials. The scandal dominated their political stage. At the centre of the investigation were three team-owners who were accused of fixing matches, sometimes in connection with Asian match-fixers.

Achilleas Beos was one of those owners. He is a large man, unshaven and untidily dressed: but deeply intelligent and furious for being in an overcrowded, dirty prison without a trial for six months.

I sat down. At that point, he had spoken to no other journalists. We shook hands and he began to speak.

Achilleas Beos is accused of being part of a revolution that is transforming the sports world. It is a network of crime running across countries and continents. If Beos were the only alleged corruptor in prison for sports related fixing, it would be bad news for the Greek league, but for few other countries. Sadly, however, the Greek investigation is only a very small part in a revolution that is threatening modern sport.

In the last five years, over one-thousand events in dozens of different sports — from top-level soccer games to Olympic badminton matches to international cricket competitions — have been fixed. Hundreds of athletes, coaches, referees and gamblers have been arrested. It is a revolution in sport that reaches from dingy bookmakers on the streets of Asia to some of the largest stadiums in the world.

This book is about that revolution.

This is an academic book. It is about the structure and function of the corruption that threatens sport. It is not about sensational scandals or new revelations of corruption. You will find many hints and details of those stories, but the main purpose of the book is to explain the motives, means and methods of the people inside today's match-fixing.

However, this is an academic book for non-academics. I have tried to write it clearly and simply. I come from a long line of professors going back several generations. The current academic world is swimming through a difficult tide, where it is often felt that the more obscure the language, the deeper the thought. My forefathers would be ashamed if I wrote in that fashion. My great-grandfather taught rhetoric or the ability to explain complicated ideas in simple words. This book is written in his spirit. Hopefully, there are no places in the text that someone, without a specific background in sociology, criminology or statistics cannot understand what is going on.

The first part of the book *The Nuts and Bolts of Corruption* is about definitions and explores the basic questions about this form of sports corruption. In this section, I lay out the reasons of why and how to study the subject properly. Then there is an examination of some basic definitions and concepts that can help give clarity to the phenomenon.

The second part of the book *The People of the Game* is about the people inside the corrupt deals: the players, coaches, referees and corruptors. This section is an examination of their work: how they put together fixes and why they take this action.

The third part of the book *The Systems of Corruption* is about the sports leagues where corruption has become normal rather than exceptional. It explores why those conditions come about and ends with the good news that there is much that can be done to stop this corruption.

The overall thesis of the book is that rational choice (or the idea that people mostly do things for their own self-interest) is one of the prime motivations for corruption. On the other side of the argument are people who claim that corruption is about culture. In their view, most Mexicans are likely to be more honest than most Africans, who in turn are likely to be more honest than most Afghanis.

It is an argument I have heard over many years from many different journalists who interview me to find out how *other* cultures are fixing their sporting events. I have received calls from Belgians, Canadians, Englishmen, Germans, South Koreans, Scandinavians and a whole range of other countries who tell me that their athletes would *never* fix matches and corruption is the problem of what Albert Camus (who along with being a French philosopher was also a very good goalkeeper) would call “the other” or some nameless, morally-challenged foreigner. I think this argument is, for the most part, racist nonsense.

I argue throughout the book that widespread match-fixing in sports does not depend on nationality or culture. Rather, it depends on a set of specific circumstances. Given those circumstances, some people in all countries will become corrupt. Remove those specific circumstances and levels of corruption will decrease.

The book is an attempt to identify what *are* those specific circumstances that lead to widespread corruption. They can be applied to other areas than football. Given similar circumstances, people in different cultures will act in similar ways. For example, one of the factors that helps corruption spread is not paying the workers their salaries. Rip off a group of English football players, and some of them will try to cheat just as surely as Mexican policemen or African customs officials would do. Pay a doctor relatively badly and they will be more likely to accept kickbacks from a dishonest pharmaceutical salesman be it in Afghanistan, Greece or Canada.

Much of this book was written at the University of Oxford at an extraordinary centre for research into corruption studies and what is called “informal governance”. This is a fancy term for how organised crime governs an area. For example, I was conducting research in the Mathare slum of Nairobi, Kenya in January 2007. Mathare is a tough place. It is full of many good people living amongst garbage, little proper sewage or other facilities. At the same time the *World Social Forum* — a meeting of international civic charities — was gathering in the city. The then-mayor of Nairobi, Dick Wathika, made a speech where he spoke about the challenges of governing the city of 3.5 million. What is striking is how little of that city the mayor actually governed.

There are two large slums in Nairobi — Mathare and Kibera — they have hundreds-of-thousands of people living in them and are largely no-go zones for government officials. The areas are ruled by a collection of organised crime mobs and mafias. Morally, it may be a dreadful thing that criminals govern so many people, but the question is *how* do they govern these areas? What are the rules and laws of living in a society controlled by organised criminals?

The research centre at Oxford was an attempt to analyse these rules of the mob. My fellow researchers were a fascinating lot. There was Peter Hill,

the James Bond of our department. Hill, a Scotsman, is an ex-paratrooper who was one of the world's academic experts on the Yakuza or Japanese mafia. Hill often began his day by practicing with other Karate black belts. He studied the Yamaguchi-gumi clan of the Yakuza and has written one of the definitive books on their structure. Another researcher was Heather Hamill. She is a glamorous redhead with buckets of Northern Irish charm (one of her coffee mugs read, "It is not gossip, but social networking"). Hamill is so ebullient that it would be easy to miss that her doctoral thesis involved interviewing young men who had had their kneecaps shot off by the ultra-violent wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) — on some of the less safe streets of Belfast. Federico Varese, whose work on the *Vor v zakone* or original Russian mafiya, has been extensively used by the great British writer John le Carré.

At the head of this small group was Diego Gambetta. Gambetta is one of the foremost academic experts on issues like the Sicilian mafia or suicide bombers. Together they were an intellectually formidable, but very friendly, group. Afternoon tea breaks, were times of chats about subjects like media manipulation by Belfast street-thugs, the existence of a medieval English martial art that was close to the fighting-style of modern-day football hooligans or how Japanese mobsters have a proclivity for Andean pipe music.

Achilleas Beos had been charged by the Greek police with conspiring with an unnamed set of Asian gamblers to fix games of his team. When we spoke, Beos indignantly denied any of these accusations. He claimed he had never worked with Asian fixers. "Who are these Asian people I am supposed to have communicated with?"

When I asked him specifically if he had ever fixed a game. He looked at me, shrugged, and said, "I have done what any owner of a Greek football team

would do for his club. You understand? But I have never done anything on the gambling market with Asian bookmakers.”

I was not sure if Beos meant that he had fixed games, but not to profit on the gambling market, or merely indulged in a benign form of creative accountancy. When I asked, he shrugged again and stated that he loved his team and would never do anything criminal.

There is no judicially-approved evidence that Beos fixed any matches. He was, finally, released on bail seven months later. At the time of publication, his trial has been delayed as neither he nor his accusers showed up in court, and all charges against him are unproven.

This is the danger for sport: that potentially innocent people and innocent matches will automatically be assumed to be corrupt. That no longer will the fans assume that they have witnessed unbelievable accomplishments, but they will simply not believe in sport anymore. They will give up on football. It will be abandoned as lacking in credibility to be replaced by a sport that has better protected its integrity.

In the years since I began researching this topic, much has changed. At the beginning of the work, it was difficult to get much attention to the rising danger to international sports. Now — world-wide — there are over thirty national police investigations into match-corruption: more than a thousand sports events are alleged to have been fixed and hundreds of players, coaches and officials have been arrested. More seriously, there have been dozens of suspicious deaths and a series of tragic suicides linked to this phenomenon. There is no sign that this tide of corruption is slowing. Rather it may be getting worse. The research for this book was, obviously, at times difficult and dangerous: but I hope it may help to prevent the spread of corruption and preserve sport for our children.