

4.1 Why sport is losing the war to match-fixers

Declan Hill¹

The war against match-fixers is being lost. Part of the reason for the defeat is that the anti-match-fixing industry is drowning in nonsense – nonsense that is being propagated by a mixture of commercial agendas, professional conflicts of interest and ignorance. This article will do two things: first, it will show the *real* situation of current-day match-fixing; second, it will explain some of the key mistakes in contemporary research into match-fixing.

Methods

This article is based on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research techniques. The author conducted over 400 interviews with players, referees, coaches, team managers, league officials, policemen, prosecutors, bookmakers, gamblers and match-fixers who have direct experience in match-fixing. Along with the interviews, there has also been a text analysis of a ‘confession databank’, consisting of documents (over 450,000 words) gathered from 30 jurisdictions.

The research has also been shaped by behavioural observation, when the author directly witnessed match-fixers attempting to corrupt matches at major international football tournaments. In addition, there is a quantitative analysis from the construction of several databases. The two key databases relate to fixed/non-fixed games and fixing/non-fixing players.²

Match-fixing explained

There has always been match-fixing in sport. If you had gone to the stadium of the ancient Olympics in Greece, you would have found a row of statues. These statues had been built with fines paid by athletes who had fixed a result or cheated thousands of years ago. Fixing has a long history and has touched many sports.

We of this generation are facing an almost entirely new form of match-fixing, however. It is as if someone had taken fixing and injected it with the steroid of globalisation. This new form of match-fixing is sweeping through sport. It has destroyed many Asian sports. It is now threatening tennis, cricket, football and a host of other sports based in Europe. This wave of corruption is also lapping at the doors of North American sport.

In the last five years over 1,000 sports events – 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, which reaches from dingy bookmakers on the streets of Asia to some of the largest stadiums in the world.

The essential issue of this new wave of match-fixing is the globalisation of the sports gambling market. A generation ago it was not worth fixing many events in relatively minor sports leagues. Nowadays, though, three factors drive the profitability of modern-day fixing:³

1. the liquidity of the sports gambling market has grown and become unified;
2. it is now possible to bet money on more games in more leagues; and
3. international broadcasts are bringing sports to new audiences.

Contemporary match-fixing

In the early 1990s a group of match-fixers based in Malaysia/Singapore and Indonesia began to travel to international football tournaments to corrupt teams and games. In interviews with these fixers, corroborated by football officials, referees and players, their presence was confirmed at the women's World Cup, the Under-17 and the Under-20 World Cups, the Olympic football tournament and the men's World Cup itself between 1991 and 2014.⁴

By the early 2000s these fixers were also working as brokers for corrupted players/referees and team officials in dozens of countries in five different continents. Their essential modus operandi was that the players/referees/officials would do the actual fixing of the game. Then they would pass the information to the Asian-based fixers, who would fix the gambling market in a series of manoeuvres to conceal the fix from bookmakers.⁵

Despite the publication of an international best-selling book that revealed the existence of these gangs and a series of successful prosecutions led by German police investigators in Bochum (2011) and Finnish police in Rovaniemi (2011), the fixers continued almost unabated until 2013, when the Singapore authorities finally arrested key leaders of the group.⁶ The fixing gangs continue to work in this region, however.⁷ Worse for sport, the match-fixing has now spread to a variety of different criminal groups in Russia and China.⁸

The red flags of nonsense

Much of the research into this new form of fixing has been hampered by a series of commercial agendas, conflicts of interest and ignorance. In this section some of these problems are examined.

‘Illegal betting’

A few members of the gambling industry have misdirected the debate by emphasising the issue of ‘illegal betting’ rather than match-fixing. One potential motive for this misdirection is that it helps bookmakers gain a commercial advantage over their rivals if they can declare them ‘illegal’.

Despite contemporary match-fixing being driven by the globalisation of the sports gambling market, the discussion of ‘illegal betting’ is a side issue in the debate on fixing. Almost all bookmakers are legal, wherever their headquarters are located. What they are doing is providing a commercial service that some members of the public want. A senior Asian bookmaker from a company that his European rivals declare to be ‘illegal’ said in an interview, ‘What is “illegal” gambling? What I do is legal on this side of the street. On the other side of the street, it is illegal.’

The real issue is match-fixing. Fixing defrauds bookmakers whether they are regulated by governments, are private European companies or are located in an Asian tax-free zone.

‘The police are not fighting match-fixing’

Sports authorities have an inherent conflict of interest in reporting corruption in their own industry. Their position is akin to that of the owner of a sausage factory who discovers a tainted product: he may try to stop the bad meat being sold, but he also does not want his customers to find out about it.⁹

Accordingly, many sports associations tend to emphasise two flawed concepts when speaking about match-fixing: first, that the police and the government authorities are not doing anything to help them;

second, that fixing is largely the preserve of ethically challenged players or referees, who can be educated back to morality.

Even the normally sound researcher Kevin Carpenter may have been swayed by this myth in his ‘key framing article’ for *Transparency International’s* Corruption in Sport Initiative when he argues that police generally do little work in stopping match-fixing because it is not a priority.¹⁰ The facts are almost completely opposite to this view. Many people involved in official law enforcement actions against match-fixing speak of the difficulty of working with sports officials. This is an excerpt from a typical interview with a senior prosecutor involved in a European match-fixing investigation: ‘We [the law enforcement agencies] received no help from the football association. In fact quite the opposite, they closed ranks. They do not want to admit publicly that it [match-fixing] goes on.’ In 2013 this author did research on the question ‘Who began the investigations of match-fixing?’. This work showed that fewer than 2 per cent of cases were initiated by sports associations; more than 40 per cent were begun by the police, however.¹¹

In Europe alone there have been high-level judicial investigations into match-fixing in 27 countries since 2009. In 24 of them the prosecutors secured convictions of players/referees and team officials.¹² The trials have produced hundreds of thousands of legal documents on fixing. Almost everything evidence-based that is known about the fixers comes from these documents or researchers with first-hand experience of the fixers.¹³

The failure of education campaigns

In early 2015 the Cycling Independent Reform Commission (CIRC) released a report into the failure of anti-doping controls in professional cycling.¹⁴ In the anti-doping world during the 1990s and early

2000s the blame was often pushed on to the athletes rather than officials, who administered a system that covertly encouraged doping. Millions of anti-doping dollars were put into projects to ‘educate’ athletes. In particular, there was an attempt to portray doping in cycling as an ethical failure on the part of a very few cyclists.

The findings of the CIRC report are very explicit, however. The decision to dope in the 1990s and early 2000s was mostly a result of rational choice. In that era, if a young cyclist wanted to win, he or she was, essentially, forced to dope. Many cyclists who had other ways of making a living left the sport rather than cheat. The athletes who had few other career options stayed in the sport – and, to win, many of them doped.

There are similarities in match-fixing. Currently, there are groups of relatively well paid consultants and gambling companies giving lectures to relatively badly paid players about the ‘ethics’ of match-fixing.¹⁵ The ongoing Italian investigations of Serie C and Pro-Lega show the relative failure of the ‘education’ of players. The police allege that a fixing ring existed in over 30 professional teams in southern Italy. The investigators claim the fixing was organised by the team owners. National police forces in other European countries allege that similar conditions exist in their countries.¹⁶ Milan Sapina was one of the most successful modern-day fixers, with a network of corruption stretching across three continents until he was arrested by German police in 2011. He stated, in an interview in 2007 with the author, that there was a similar pattern. Hill: ‘Why is there fixing?’ Sapina: ‘Sometimes it is the clubs who are friends with each other. They may want to help each other. Sometimes it is the president who arranges with the other president. Or sometimes it is the boss of the club. The bosses then bet on the results. It happens a lot in lower divisions.’

These same team owners are, in some cases, the same people who help organise anti-match-fixing sessions for their players. This dynamic, whereby the corruptors may be in the room, effectively turns some anti-match-fixing education campaigns into lessons in hypocrisy.

A number of players who were interviewed claim that a similar phenomenon exists in Asian leagues.

This is one typical example:¹⁷

Our team was run by a group of top politicians and I am not saying they were fixing, but I am saying that there were very strong rumours and suspicions around them for several years. I can't accuse him. You have to get proof. These guys are untouchable. You are talking about corruption at the highest level of society. If there is corruption going on at the level that there is no hope, the game has absolutely no hope.

Conclusion

Match-fixing has taken on a new manifestation, linked to the globalised sports gambling market. It is threatening sports around the world. Much of the research on contemporary match-fixing has been misdirected, however; it is time for a return to evidence-based work. As the police investigations into the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in May 2015 have shown, there is a possible nexus between bad sports governance and match-fixing. An executive who commits commercial fraud cannot be expected to crack down on match corruption.

One potential example concerns the South African men's football World Cup in 2010, which was marred by fixers corrupting exhibition matches in the days before the start of the tournament (as well as approaching referees and, potentially, players at the tournament itself).¹⁸ They were helped by at least one person inside the South African Football Association, but there has been no official investigation based in South Africa. In the 164-page indictment released by the US Department of Justice in May

2015 in connection with the FIFA investigations, however, it was alleged, in part, that the South Africans had paid bribes to secure the World Cup hosting rights.¹⁹ If this is correct, it is a potential reason why there has been no South African-based investigation into the match-fixing.

There are similar cases in other football associations around the world. A recent confidential interview with a senior person involved with sports integrity revealed that, in their opinion at least half a dozen of the presidents of national soccer associations have been involved in fixing matches. If this is correct, then the sport needs new solutions in the fight against match-fixing.

One practical solution is to create an independent, anti-corruption agency for sport. Ideally, it would be akin – or even linked – to the World Anti-Doping Agency. It would be financed by arm’s-length sponsors and operate separately from sport governance control. It would give whistleblowers and people fighting against sports corruption a secure place to report corruption. If organised and staffed correctly, it would be free from the commercial agendas, professional conflicts of interests and ignorance that clog so much of today’s struggle against match-fixing.

Notes

¹ Declan Hill is an investigative journalist, academic and documentary-maker.

² For a more detailed examination of the research methods, see Declan Hill, *The Insider’s Guide to Match-Fixing in Football* (Toronto: Anne McDermid, 2013), pp. 14–27.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Declan Hill, *The Fix: Soccer and Organized Crime* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2008); Ralf Mutschke, interviewed in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (Germany), ‘Fifa-Sicherheitschef: “Kriminelle wollen WM-Spiele manipulieren”’, 12 January 2014, www.faz.net/aktuell/sport/fussball-wm/fifa-sicherheitschef-kriminelle-wollen-wm-spiele-manipulieren-12747485.html (accessed 25 June 2015); Wilson Perumal, Alessandro Righi and Emanuele Piano, *Kelong Kings: Confession of the World’s Most Prolific Match-Fixer* (New York: Invisible Dog Press, 2014).

⁵ Declan Hill, ‘How Gambling Corruptors Fix Football Matches’, *European Sport Management Quarterly*, vol. 9 (2009); Tribunale Ordinario di Cremona, ‘Ordinanza di Applicazione della Misura della Custodia Cautelare in Carcere’, 9 December 2011, www.invisible-dog.com/DOC%20FIX/LAST_BET_ORDINANZA_DIC_2011.pdf.

⁶ Hill (2008); Rovaniemen Toimipiste KRP, ‘Report on the Activities of Wilson Raj Perumal’, August 2011; Tribunale Ordinario di Cremona (2011).

⁷ See, for example, AsiaOne (Singapore), 'SEA Games football hit by fix claims', 20 June 2015, <http://news.asiaone.com/news/sports/sea-games-football-hit-fix-claims>.

⁸ *Il Messaggero* (Italy), 'Calcioscommesse nella Lega Pro, 50 arresti e 70 indignati tra dirigente e giocatori', 20 May 2015, http://sport.ilmessaggero.it/calcio/newscalcioscommesse_arresti_lega_pro_serie_d_giocatori_dirigenti/1362124.shtml (accessed 25 June 2015).

⁹ Hill (2013), p. 248.

¹⁰ See Kevin Carpenter, 'Why are countries taking so long to act on match-fixing?', www.transparency.org/files/content/feature/Feature_TakingLongMatchFixing_Carpenter_GCRSport.pdf. Carpenter's analysis is correct in a few jurisdictions, such as Canada, where the police and sports associations both claim that 'there is nothing they can do'.

¹¹ Hill (2013), pp. 250–252.

¹² In the other three countries – the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden – the investigations are still continuing (as at June 2015).

¹³ See, for example, Rovaniemen Toimipiste KRP (2011); Tribunale Ordinario di Cremona (2011); Preumal, Righi and Piano (2014); Hill (2008; 2013).

¹⁴ Cycling Independent Reform Commission, *Report to the President of the Union Cycliste Internationale* (Aigle, Switzerland: Union Cycliste Internationale, 2015), <https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://www.cyclisme-dopage.com/actualite/2015-03-08-circ-report.pdf>.

¹⁵ Some of the consultants giving these educational sessions have received funding from organisations that suffer from credibility issues on integrity, such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the Qataris.

¹⁶ See, for example, Fédération Internationale des Associations Footballeurs Professionnels (FIFPro), *FIFPro Black Book Eastern Europe: The Problems Professional Football Players Encounter* (Hoofddorp, Netherlands: FIFPro, 2012); Inside World Football, 'Greek corruption: Olympiacos owner charged in match-fixing ring round-up', 28 April 2015, www.insideworldfootball.com/world-football/europe/16904-greek-corruption-olympiacos-owner-charged-in-match-fixing-ring-round-up (accessed 25 June 2015); B92 (Serbia), "'Clubs Organize match fixing,' says Sports Minister", 16 June 2015, www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2015&mm=06&dd=16&nav_id=94455.

¹⁷ Hill (2013), p. 226.

¹⁸ Declan Hill and Jeré Longman, New York Times, 'Fixed Soccer Matches Cast Shadow Over the World Cup', 31 May 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/01/sports/soccer/fixing-matches-cast-shadow-over-world-cup.html?_r=0

¹⁹ United States District Court, Eastern District of New York, Indictment 15 CR 0252 (RJD) (RML), 20 May 2015, www.justice.gov/opa/file/450211/download.