

6.6 A player's perspective on the need for reform to enhance transparency and integrity in sports

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As demonstrated by the arrests of Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) executives in late May 2015 and the subsequent resignation of FIFA's president, Sepp Blatter, a lack of transparency can mean nasty surprises with all sorts of skeletons coming out of the closet. This can potentially involve offshore dealings, bribery, electoral fraud and agents and managers taking cuts from transfers. All too commonly, however, it is not until a major incident happens that people start talking about transparency and why the sports industry urgently needs to address the lack thereof.

The scope of the problem of corruption in sports

The scandal over the awarding of the 2022 men's World Cup to Qatar and FIFA's refusal to publish the full report prepared by Michael Garcia,² who was commissioned to look into the bidding and awarding of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, raised even more concerns that corruption was taking place within the organisation, yet the most severe allegations of corruption died off fairly quickly in the minds of many in the global football community.

Unethical agents and intermediaries are also a concern when discussing corruption and sport. These powerful individuals often benefit from payoffs that come about as a result of doing business in a 'hidden' and complex environment. This also creates a barrier to entry, as many find the functioning of these environments difficult to grasp. During transfer and contract negotiations, for example, players are not invited to participate in the discussions, and, as a result, they remain unaware of what the deal actually involves. Agents, club directors, lawyers, club chairmen, unions

and federations are the ones aware of the details. Ill-intentioned or not, they are following the ‘procedures’ that they must, in order to keep their jobs.

At the end of the day, football is a business, with fans as the main stakeholders. With a general trend towards companies and organisations becoming socially responsible and transparent, FIFA’s activities have run contrary to what is expected from ordinary businesses. More is expected from the organisation that is in place to uphold and protect the reputation of the ‘beautiful game’, which has billions of followers worldwide. Football’s age-old heritage and tradition are something to be proud of. In addition, there are many amazing football related projects around the globe, many of which help underprivileged children and families, which makes it disappointing that these initiatives are drowned out by the news of corruption and scandal in football governance and management.

The lack of transparency can mean unpleasant surprises for investors, sponsors, players and fans. It is crucial to bring the focus back to entertainment and positive sporting values. As a result of not prioritising the sport, however, decision-makers have lost the power to implement and enforce much-needed changes, and the industry will now have to look elsewhere to restore its well-deserved reputation. Unfortunately, as things have gone from bad to worse, to the point that people are focusing on money and arrests rather than actually enjoying the game, this is a call for the industry to change from its core.

Transparency as a solution

Transparency shows everyone that the ‘restaurant’ is clean. An open kitchen means a clean kitchen, a good kitchen. Surely that’s what we’re aiming for? As with any other business, stakeholders and investors should expect and demand transparency.

It is important to determine what we actually want to achieve through increased transparency, and who is responsible for demanding this, be it FIFA, players, club owners, agents, fans or civil society as a whole. It is critical for all these participants to be involved in an ongoing conversation, and not only when it is 'appropriate' to do so after major scandals. In a post-Blatter era it will be essential that FIFA implements both appropriate stakeholder engagement and audit systems, to ensure that cultural change within the organisation is driven by those involved in the game who so desperately want greater transparency, and that it responds to any suspicions of corruption promptly and diligently.

Promisingly, there are FIFA executives, such as England's David Gill, who are indeed calling for increased transparency.³ Encouraging transparency through detailed internal and independent audit and accounting procedures, reported in full and publicly, would allow for a better understanding of what's going on and would also create opportunities for more people to succeed in a fair and proper way. It would also prevent well-connected individuals from being prioritised ahead of others through corruption, nepotism and undue influence.

Taking the lead in engendering change

Like a bad illness, I'm fed up hearing about researchers nearly finding a cure. I want to hear about results. It's as though we've become numb, thinking that there's no point trying to change something we can't. Many believe that, if you want to continue in the game, the only option is to ignore it all, thinking that, although there is clear evidence of what is going on, nothing can be done to bring about effective change.

Footballers, and all sportsmen, should be the best possible role models, and take a greater stand in the fight against corruption by advocating the principles of fair play not only to those on the pitch but also to those who hold the balance of power off it.

Understandably, it can be difficult to do so within an industry that is based on confusion, lies and often illogical decisions. For me, a good step towards increased transparency would be to open up the voting system for the FIFA president to allow other key industry personnel, such as representatives from players' unions, to participate in the voting process. Although we have seen some positive steps being taken towards opening up the industry, such as Blatter's stepping down, much more needs to be done.

Reform of the processes and procedures will take time. In the meantime we can make a real difference by providing new tools and technology that will make the vetting and negotiating process much cleaner, easier to understand and completely transparent: a new way to bring about the much-needed restoration of trust. My new company, Axis Stars, aims to address many of these concerns, by bringing a once elusive clarity to the murky world of contract negotiations. By providing an online platform for professional athletes, we aim to make all business transactions transparent to all the relevant parties, so that sponsors, agents and players all receive a fair deal. As sports professionals, we hope that this much-desired increase in transparency will transform the situation for fans and governing officials alike.

Armed with the power of communicating with the masses through social networks and communities, we can now all help to make a difference by putting pressure on those at the top. Hopefully, this will help foster a clear and open business environment, in which the focus will be on the game, the players and the best interest of the fans.

Axis Stars has recruited established sportsmen such as Didier Drogba, Mo Farah, Boris Diaw and Gary Neville to break down the barriers regarding the lack of transparency in sport. It has established lists of companies that have been vetted and are trusted to provide advice and services,

with the aim of establishing a culture of fair play, on and off the pitch, for sports stars. Cultural change takes time, but Axis Stars is committed to ensuring that the athletes of tomorrow can do business in a protected environment, and that the only stories on them will be about success on the field, not a fall from grace off it.

Notes

¹ Louis Saha is a former professional and international footballer who played for the French national team as well as Manchester United, Everton and Fulham football clubs in the United Kingdom. He is the founder of Axis Stars, a social network that provides support to professional athletes and helps them manage their contracts, agent relations and post-football career planning.

² When FIFA published a summary of the Garcia report, there was international outcry that the full 430-page document was not going to be made available. Garcia said of FIFA that its 'investigation and adjudication process operates in most parts unseen and unheard. That's a kind of system which might be appropriate for an intelligence agency but not for an ethics compliance process in an international sports institution that serves the public and is the subject of intense public scrutiny.' See Fox (US), 'Chief ethics investigator Michael Garcia criticizes FIFA's culture of secrecy', 13 October 2014, www.foxsports.com/soccer/story/chief-ethics-investigator-michael-garcia-criticizes-fifa-s-culture-of-secrecy-101314.

³ *The Guardian* (UK), 'Manchester United director David Gill set to become Fifa vice-president', 22 March 2015, www.theguardian.com/football/2015/mar/22/david-gill-manchester-united-fifa-vice-president.