Bigger than Blatter

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The problem of corruption in sport transcends FIFA and is too serious to ignore

SO THE stubborn septuagenarian resigned from the tiddlywinks committee. Why all the fuss and headlines, some eye-rolling observers have been wondering? What does it matter who runs FIFA, football's abstruse governing body, or where its tournaments are held? All these shenanigans, like the furores that occasionally erupt in other sports, are absurdly overblown. Football belongs on the back pages, not the front.

That view, common among sports non-enthusiasts, rests on the mistaken notion that corruption in sport is also a sort of game, in which rubicund rogues harmlessly siphon off gate receipts. Even many fans, perturbed by the disruption of their hobby, miss its real gravity. Because at bottom this is not a recreational issue but a criminal one. Neither harmless nor victimless, sports corruption is perpetrated by crooked officials, abusive governments and gangsters, sometimes in concert. It matters—and, welcome as Sepp Blatter's demise is, the problem goes well beyond him, FIFA and football (see article).

Sepp Blatter's exit is a necessary but insufficient condition for reform at FIFA

Corruption in sport has four main, related drivers. One is the needlessly pharaonic scale of mega sporting events. For kleptocratic regimes such as that of Russia—venue of last year's ludicrously costly winter Olympics and, on current plans, of the football World Cup in 2018—these are superb opportunities to embezzle public funds. The victims are the host country's short-changed taxpayers, pensioners and public services.

Second, top-level sport is now a global commodity, eliciting vast sums from marketeers and broadcasters (real-time sporting drama is one of the few remaining draws for live audiences). As the American inquiry that helped topple Mr Blatter suggests, kickbacks sometimes lubricate the fat contracts that arise. Thus sports corruption is inextricable from the wider scourge of corporate graft. A third factor is the under-regulated globalisation of gambling, and its exploitation by match-fixers and money-launderers. Dodgy betting is hardly new: the rigging of baseball's World Series of 1919 is immortalised in "The Great Gatsby". But worldwide fan bases and the internet have made it more rife and much more lucrative, attracting serious mafiosi from Asia and eastern Europe.

Last, the governance of too many sports is opaque, juicily monopolistic, badly monitored—and wholly unsuited to the big-money age. Some sports (such as professional tennis) and places (such as Finland and South Korea, which have cracked down on match-fixing in football) have caught up. Others have, like FIFA, proved ill-equipped to combat predation and too hospitable to unscrupulous officials. Football is not the only vulnerable game; scandal has struck pastimes as obscure as handball. Villainous politicians, such as some of the many involved in Indian cricket (a swamp of fixes and backhanders), are often in on the act.

Jail time, not yellow cards

In many ways globalisation has been a boon to sport, and not just for well-paid players and the car dealerships they patronise. It has produced higher standards, better stadiums and slicker spectacles. But to cope with the concomitant risks, sports need to be run as transparent, rigorous businesses. In some cases their rule-setting and game-nurturing functions should be split off from their marketing and event-organising roles. Corporate sponsors should be quicker than they have been in FIFA's case to dissociate themselves from thievery.

Yet because sports corruption is a reflection of wider problems—sport merely being an organism to which criminal succubi attach themselves—it is too formidable for sporting organisations to tackle alone, even if they are inclined to. Precisely because it is a nexus for broader crime and malpractice, more governments and law-enforcement agencies should emulate America's

Justice Department (and India’s Supreme Court, which is trying to clean up cricket) by pursuing the embezzlers, bribe-payers and money-launderers, and dishing out serious punishments to those they catch. Too often the authorities have shared the misconception that corruption in sport is essentially benign. Worried about appearing killjoys, they have let it be. FIFA’s shame should mark the end of such naivety.