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Foreword to the Symposium Issue: Corruption in International Sports

ALEXANDRA WRAGE[†]

International sports showcase the greatest athletes on earth, but they also harbor world-class criminals. These criminal elements threaten to take sport hostage, as highlighted in the outstanding symposium organized by the *Maryland Journal of International Law*. Once the bribers, dopers and match-fixers have done their work, the brilliance of sport is left tarnished. Even when the competition is clean, the sheer magnitude of the business can distort and overshadow the competition on the field. Major events like the Olympics and the World Cup can impose devastating costs on local communities—including, in the case of Qatar, the very lives of construction workers laboring in the summer heat. In many sports, racism, sexism and homophobia proliferate unchecked. The situation is not hopeless, but it grows more and more desperate as weary, cynical fans shrug off the extraordinary misconduct that has become commonplace.

My own experience with the dark underbelly of sports came during an eighteen-month *pro bono* stretch as a member of FIFA's failed Independent Governance Committee between 2011 and 2013. FIFA's decade-long parade of scandals had prompted a "reform initiative," launched with much fanfare but little underlying

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commitment. As a lawyer working in the field of compliance, I accepted the position after asking myself: “How difficult can this be? It’s a sports organization, without any of the competing incentives of corporations operating internationally.”

But the distinct nature of sports brings its own troubles. Sports organizations operate in a more permissive legal environment and don’t have the same interest in cleaning up their reputations and reducing their legal risk. FIFA demonstrated little appetite for change. After a series of arrests in 2015, an investigation began in earnest and we learned that the self-dealing went all the way to the top. Senior leadership cavalierly awarded themselves \$80 million in secret bonuses, then were indignant at suggestions that the conduct was inappropriate. They liked to say they preferred to “keep things in the football family”—a sentiment worthy of the mafia itself.

At FIFA conferences, luxury watches worth more than \$20,000 were routinely included in the welcome “goody bags.” At the Brazil World Cup, over a million dollars’ worth of watches were distributed, with only three out of the forty-eight recipients considering them “non-trivial” gifts requiring disclosure. Former FIFA Vice President Jeffrey Webb eventually posted eleven such watches as part of his \$10 million bail after his extradition from Switzerland to the United States to face charges of racketeering, wire fraud and money laundering.

The 2014 Brazil World Cup prompted widespread protests as locals came to realize that they—most of whom couldn’t even afford tickets—would bear an undue burden of the games’ expense. Former FIFA Secretary General Jerome Valcke was later banned from world football for, among other ethics violations, reselling his tickets at a profit. Apparently, no opportunity for self-enrichment is too small. At the peak of the Brazil protests, the remarkably tone-deaf FIFA leadership called a press conference and used it to announce that Taittinger would be the exclusive champagne of the Brazil World Cup.

The selection of scorching-hot Qatar, with no local fan base and medieval labor standards, for the 2022 World Cup gave rise to widespread speculation that the bid process had been rigged. FIFA has declined to rebid the event, even though eleven of the original twenty-two voters have been either suspended from world soccer, banned, fined, arrested, indicted or are currently under FBI investigation. A twelfth has been publicly accused by a parliamentary committee in his home country of accepting a \$1.5 million bribe to vote for Qatar, and another has been implicated in Russia’s extensive doping scandal.

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Two others were suspended *before* the vote after they were caught on camera offering to sell their votes for cash.

In 2016, Gianni Infantino replaced Sepp Blatter as FIFA's president. In his final campaign remarks, Infantino underscored his commitment to ensure that each of the 209 Football Associations—that is, everyone with a vote to cast for his presidency—would receive a record-breaking \$5 million distribution from the organization. That amounts to over a billion dollars scattered in a single fling of largesse. Infantino's election later that afternoon was nevertheless heralded as a fresh start.

The FIFA story is well known, but there are many other scenes of corruption in sport that should be known more widely. Readers are fortunate to have in one compelling volume articles by some of the luminaries in this field, who have contributed their energy and insight—often their whole careers—to this topic. Most have done so because they recognize that sport can be a powerful force for good, but only if it is taken back from those who distort it for personal enrichment.