

‘THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN?’: MATCH-FIXING IN GREECE

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Abstract

Football match-fixing in Greece has a relatively long history, however, from the late 1990s it has been considered as a serious problem for the sport in the country. Despite the history of the phenomenon, Greece has only relatively recently been identified as one of the hotspots for football match-fixing on an international level. Following the recent scandal exposure in 2011, also known as Koriopolis, detailed information about numerous matches played in the 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11 seasons that attracted UEFA’s attention, were brought into the public eye. Soon after, legal action was taken against individuals involved in the process, with a number of club officials facing lifelong bans from any football related activity, and football clubs either relegated or excluded from European competitions and the Super League itself for their involvement in the scandal. Following the aforementioned scandal exposure, a vast amount of information regarding football match-fixing was made available to the public. The aim of the current article is to provide an account of the social organisation of football match-fixing in Greece. Additionally, by examining the effects of the scandal according to the outcome uncertainty and league imbalance theories, the wider implications of match-fixing for the future of the sport are discussed. Our account is based on three main sources of data: the telephone conversations that were the result of wiretapping by the National Intelligence Agency in relation to the latest football match-fixing scandal (of 2011), published media sources, and interviews with informed actors from the realm of Greek football. In more detail, we will present: (a) the methods and data used for the study; (b) the actors involved in match-fixing (direct and indirect, key and secondary actors); (c) the process involved in matchfixing. Towards the end of the article we will attempt at discussing the findings by locating them within the contemporary football-related and non-football-related situation in the country. According to our examination, by the time the scandal was exposed, outcome uncertainty within the league had reached extreme low levels, causing significant competitive imbalance among the clubs. This imbalance did not only lead to the creation of ‘big’ and ‘small’ teams as Szymanski and Kesenne (2004) suggest, but also to the formation of ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ clubs. As Schmidt and Berri (2001) explain in their analysis, since the performance on the field in professional competitive sports has a direct impact on their financial income, the gap between these two groups is affected by the competitive balance or imbalance of the league or competition. Likewise, the minimised outcome uncertainty in Greek football led to high levels of competitive imbalance within the professional leagues of the sport, leading to the creation of ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ clubs, with the gap between these two categories being widened year after year. What our data has shown, is that in Greece the presence of ‘mafias’ or ‘mafia-type’ organisations in match-fixing

is far from the truth. Unsurprisingly, a view of these match-fixing activities as the result of robust, continuous and hierarchical predatory organisational structures is not accurate. What emerges from this study is that the entities involved in the business of match-fixing are networks i.e. fluid and dynamic social systems that consist of patterns of relationships among people/actors (Wasserman & Faust 1994). Football match-fixing does not require a great degree of sophistication, and management of resources or labour. Towards this end, match-fixing networks tend to have a naturally defined horizontal 'structure'. Participants on these networks many times act on improvisation such as in the case of the outcome of a match-fixing process not being pragmatized by the first half of the match. A number of individuals act as intermediaries who bring together disconnected parts (see Morselli & Roy, 2008) by controlling in a sense all the information asymmetries that make up the networks (see Burt, 1992). What merely exist are individuals or small groups forming temporary collaborations in order for their shared objective, making profit (or ensuring that a club wins which also has financial long-term implications), to materialise. Overall, the image of the business that emerges from our examination of a series of its aspects from the 2011 scandal does not vindicate the heavy emphasis that orthodox accounts of 'organised crime' place on characteristics such as rigid organisation, coordination, hierarchy and so on. Rather, our findings are consistent with views of match-fixing as an organised criminal activity being less robust from an organisational viewpoint, carried out by individuals or clusters of individuals that assemble on the basis of opportunity rather than authority.

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