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# Deconstructing match-fixing: A holistic framework for sport integrity policies

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## Abstract

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2019, the Council of Europe Convention against the Manipulation of Sports Competitions took a forceful swing at reducing corruption. This official mandate appears to confirm the significance of the issue on the political agenda. For sports governance bodies, the problem is one of the biggest threats against the integrity and sustainability of their industry. Despite this political-institutional situation, the phenomenon still remains understudied in the academic world and several authors have emphasized the need for more and better empirical research to verify the premises (sometimes unfounded) on which the official preventive narrative of the problem is built. This special issue, *Deconstructing Match-fixing*, addresses these issues. Systematizing the evidence presented along the contributions, this introductory article attempts to dispel some ‘myths’ in the official preventive narrative, offers some lessons for a better understanding of the phenomenon, and promotes recommendations for establishing more evidence-based public policies and educational campaigns.

## Key words

Match-fixing; corruption; public policy; educational campaigns; betting-market; sport; narratives.

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## **Research involving Human Participants and/or Animals and Informed consent**

Authors have conducted their research in accordance with principles detailed by professional associations and treaties other than the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki such as the International Sociological Association's (ISA) Code of Ethics.

# Deconstructing match-fixing: A holistic framework for sport integrity policies

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## Key words

Match-fixing; narratives; public policy, educational campaigns, betting-market, sport, corruption

## **Why a special issue on this topic?**

In recent years, it has become increasingly common to hear that match-fixing is one of the greatest threats to the integrity and sustainability of professional sports (Lastra et al. 2018; Carpenter 2012; Tak et. al 2018a; Hill 2015). Accordingly, sports governing bodies (such as the International Olympic Committee -IOC-, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association -FIFA- or the International Tennis Federation -ITF-), international institutions (such as European Commission, Council of Europe, United Nations), law enforcement agencies (such as Europol and Interpol), gambling regulators, and governments have embodied a supposed “zero tolerance” narrative in which fighting against match-fixing and the infiltration of organized crime in sports, and preserving the sports’ integrity have become a major concern (Moriconi & Almeida 2019).

September 1, 2019 marked a milestone for the European fight against the phenomenon: this is the date when the Council of Europe Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions entered into force. The so-called Macolin Convention has been considered the most effective political initiative for combating the problem as it calls for cooperation among all the relevant stakeholders and establishing a set of practical and political recommendations for the creation and promotion of institutional, legal and criminal structures to combat the scourge.

However, although the institutional framework for political intervention is clear, some authors (Moriconi 2018; Spapens & Olfers 2015; Tak et al. 2018a) have emphasized the need for more and better empirical research to verify the premises (sometimes unfounded) on which the official narrative of the problem is built. The diagnoses on which policies are based and executed often lack substantial evidence. Several aspects and supposed characteristics of the phenomenon are transformed into axiomatized premises without compelling empirical data (Spapens 2017). This is a cognitive limitation for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and for promoting effective and coherent countermeasures (Moriconi 2018).

Situating their analyses in the context of Asia, Europe and even the cyberspace<sup>1</sup>, and using different methodological approaches coming from sociology, political science, social psychology, and criminology, the contributions that make out this symposium (Caneppele et. al. 2020; Tak et al. 2020; Barkoukis et al. 2019; Moriconi and De Cima 2019; Visschers et al.

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<sup>1</sup> The selected cases are, of course, not a representative sample. Rather, the selection is based on the editor’s interest in providing fresh perspectives on different issues of the phenomenon such as betting and non-betting related match-fixing in different (collective and individual) sports, manipulations related with legal and illegal betting markets, mixing analyses of historical scandals with studies on perception and attitudes of sports actors, and match-fixing on professional and non-professional sport.

2019; Han 2020; Moneva & Caneppele 2019) show the social, economic and political impact of betting and non-betting-related match-fixing, provide multi-sport empirical evidence on different facets of the phenomenon, and fill the gap of robust evidence-based scientific studies on the subject.

Based on the findings presented in the contributions, and dialoguing with previous studies, this introductory article deconstructs some “myths” in which the major official preventive narratives are anchored, presents a holistic view of contemporary match-fixing, and provides some recommendations to guide the policy-making process. The article is divided into three parts. First, the official preventive narrative is presented, describing the key premises on which it is based. The second part deconstructs the official diagnosis, showing some cognitive limitations of the problem and provides five lessons for a better understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, some conclusions on match-fixing are offered.

### **The conceptualization and the official preventive narrative**

According to the Macolin Convention, the manipulation of sports competitions is:

“an intentional arrangement, act or omission aimed at an improper alteration of the result or the course of a sports competition in order to remove all or part of the unpredictable nature of the aforementioned sports competition with a view to obtaining an undue advantage for oneself or for others” (Council of Europe, 2014, Art. 3.4).

Given that the Convention is the main political instrument created to harmonize the fight against the problem (Spapens & Olfers 2015, Serby 2015), the concept stipulated by the norm is important. But at the same time, it is confusingly broad, because under its umbrella one can include practices as diverse as bribing a referee to favouring a team, or a *Hand of God Maradonian* goal, which is an intentional act that alters the result unduly.

Beyond this broad conceptualization and despite the usual division between betting-related and non-betting-related match-fixing (Visschers et al. 2019; Tak et al. 2020, all in this issue), in practice, both public policies and prevention programs have been revolving around betting-related manipulations. In fact, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) clearly

states that “Match-fixing is normally referred to as competition manipulation related to betting”<sup>2</sup>:

“It means any improper alteration of a competition to win money through sports betting or to ensure that a bettor (who may have offered a bribe) wins their bet. Betting-related competition manipulation can affect the result of a competition, but also other minor and marginal occurrences during its course, which is often referred to as spot-fixing”.

The package of measures agreed and implemented under the narrative of zero tolerance is comprised of three pillars: prevention, regulation, and monitoring (Boniface et al. 2012; Moriconi & Almeida 2019). This last pillar indicates that one of the main factors of the problem is its negative effect and disruption of the betting market. Some threats that have little influence on the betting market and go unnoticed to the monitoring, seem to be placed out of the hegemonic prevention programs.

Consequently, it is possible to establish an official preventive narrative about the scourge (Moriconi 2018). In this official narrative, the political problem of the *manipulation of sports competitions* is mostly related to the infiltration of organized crime in sports (Hill 2009; The Economist 2018, Marchetti 2019). By bribing, threatening or coercing (FIFPro 2016) sports actors (i.e., athletes, players, coaches, referees), the criminals fix results of competitions (or at least particular events within them), thus, making profit from the (illegal or unregulated) betting market and laundering money from other criminal activities, such as drug, human, or weapon trafficking (SportAccord 2013; DFL & DFB 2012; for a critical review of the official story see Moriconi 2018). Even the profits made in the betting market would be used for re-investing in these illegal activities.

The new environment that creates the context for this criminal practice is the complexity of the transnational online betting market, in which, for example, a person can bet in real time from Asia on any aspect of a match played in Europe (Moriconi & Almeida 2019b; Tak et al., 2018b). These bets can be made on licensed, unlicensed, or illegal operators (IOC & UNDOC 2013).

Following this logic, the Macolin Convention emphasizes that the global threat of match-fixing becomes notorious and important because of its links with fraud, organized crime,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.olympic.org/prevention-competition-manipulation>

and corruption (Serby 2015). According to Spapens (2017), two assumptions have developed into axioms in the political and social debate on match-fixing: (1) the problem is mainly the work of organized criminals from the outside that ruthlessly target inside sports actors; and (2) the phenomenon is mostly related to Asian illegal gambling operators. However, there is a lack of robust empirical evidence for these axioms, though the official narrative has been shared, reproduced, and legitimized (Moriconi 2018) by all the stakeholders whom the Convention calls to work together (from sports governing bodies and federations to international organizations, and from gambling regulators and operators to law enforcement agencies). Moreover, the unattested premises constitute the main contents of the educational training and campaigns carried out by sports governance institutions.

According to the official preventive narrative premises, sports actors fall into the trap of match-fixing because they are unaware of how the fixers operate and the dangers that follow (Tak 2018; Moriconi & De Cima 2019b; Moriconi 2018). These dangers are not only related to the sanctions that athletes may face, but also to the personal and physical consequences they may suffer from interacting with criminals. And it seems that, in the official narrative, fixers are dangerous, unscrupulous criminals willing to hurt, seriously injure, or even kill athletes who are not compliant (SportAccord 2013; FIFPro 2016). According to FIFA and INTERPOL, a fixer might also “*try to get you addicted to drugs or gambling*” (Moriconi 2018). In short, the official discourse uses fear as a key component for prevention.

Furthermore, deviant behaviour and match-fixing tend to be regarded as asymptomatic of a moral failure of those individuals inside sports courts and competitions venues (players, coaches, athletes, and referees), while executive authorities and federations, along with other non-sport stakeholders (such as betting regulators and operators), are more often likely to be more associated with integrity and sport ethics (Tak, 2018; Villeneuve & Aquilina, 2016).

In this vein, sport governance bodies and political institutions assume that if sports actors were better informed, they would refuse to participate in match-fixing because, according to this narrative, sports actors strongly defend the integrity of sport and the love for the activity. Consequently, the establishment of awareness and prevention campaigns have become key elements in the integrity packs of sports governance bodies and sport federations (Council of Europe 2014).

Those campaigns, codes of conduct, legislations, and codes of ethics frequently have been created in a top-down approach. Thus, athletes, players, referees, and coaches are ethically educated and guided to undertake attitudes and behaviours imposed on institutionally, often determined and promoted by honest officers, consultants and stakeholders out of the sports’



courts (Moriconi & Almeida 2019). This conjuncture has developed an enormous “integrity industry” that makes profit from the betting market, while players, coaches and referees are obliged to become the target of betting without directly profiting (Hill 2019).

Across Europe, and all sports (individual and collective), educational and awareness campaigns have been developed following the scheme of the 3Rs, by which sports actors receive practical tools and information to recognize (what is the problem), resist (every proposal) and report (every attempt, offer and/or case of match-fixing and wrongdoing). This disciplinary imposition is supported by the premise that there is a strong code of silence or omertà within sport areas. According to Europol, the code of silence decreases the ability to stop illegal activities (Moriconi & Almeida 2019). To combat this situation, as Moriconi and De Cima (2019) explain in their article for this issue, the obligation to denounce any match-fixing proposal, offer, or knowledge of a match-fixing case has become compulsory in all sports, while in some countries, as is the case in Portugal, it has been incorporated into criminal legislation.

### **Lessons (from the contributions) for a better understanding of the phenomenon**

Despite the proliferation of educational formations and awareness campaigns, sports actors continue to practice or tolerate deviant behaviours (Moriconi & De Cima 2019b), questioning the contents of prevention campaigns and the logic through which countermeasures are created and implemented. Ergo, it is imperative to develop studies aiming to verify the veracity and usefulness of the legitimated official narrative.

In fact, in this issue, Caneppele et al. (2020) show that anti-match-fixing actors seem to have only a fuzzy idea of match-fixers’ characteristics but, they appear to know how games are fixed. The authors describe the ecosystem of match-fixing with a focus on three groups of institutions engaged in protecting the integrity of competitions: a) sport institutions, b) regulatory and law enforcement agencies, and c) betting industry and related services. Through interviews with actors of those institutions, the researchers analyze the perceptions about the characteristics of match-fixers, the known processes of match-fixing, and the interactions among the entities that conform the phenomenon’s ecosystem.

The contributions of this special issue allows for a holistic view of the phenomenon and, based on the evidence presented, deconstruct the official narrative and confirm the lack of support and/or likelihood of some of its basic premises. The overall result can be summarized in five lessons to promote a better understanding of the phenomenon and improve the policy-making process.

### ***Lesson 1: The nature of the problem***

Neither manipulation of sports competitions nor the incentives for corruption created by the betting market are new in sports. The first cases of manipulation date back to the Antiquity Olympic games (Chappelet 2015). The scandals of betting-related and non-betting-related match-fixing in several sports were present in the media throughout the 20th century. As Huggins (2018) stated, match-fixing “has been a major and substantial long-standing historical continuity in sports usually but not always is linking to gambling and sporting materialism”. Even players have warned about the naturalization of the phenomenon. For instance, when he was still an active football player of the Spanish club Getafe, Adrian Colunga noted that “match-fixing has been always around; anyone who say otherwise is lying” (Moriconi 2018).

Indeed, despite match-fixing appearing on the political agenda as a current terrible threat, there is no solid evidence to show that, whatever the propose and the drivers are, there are more fixed matches today than decades ago. The data from betting monitoring systems also fails to show that the problem is increasing. On the contrary, the IBIA’s last report (2019) indicates that alerts in the regulated markets they control have decreased.

There is also little or no evidence and concrete data to support the idea that betting-related manipulations promoted by organized crime is greater than that promoted (both by sports and economic factors) from within the sports world without the intervention of outsiders<sup>3</sup>. In the K-League scandal, for example, presented in one of the contributions, the players involved in the South Korean football match-fixing were recruited by brokers, who used to play in the same league. The former players mobilised active players using school ties and personal networks.

In short, what does exist and is shown by several contributions, is a worrying recognition by actors that match-fixing is a constant practice in the world of sports. For instance, Visschers and colleagues (2019) present the results of a survey of 595 referees belonging to the Royal Belgian Football Association about their attitudes towards match-fixing and their personal experiences with the phenomenon. According to the participatns, match-fixing is a serious problem in Belgian football and approximately a quarter of the referees state they have already witnessed (or at least suspected) match-fixing. However, the levels of condemnation are low.

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<sup>3</sup> Logically, placing the blame for the problem on outsiders of the sport world is a useful rhetorical turn to legitimize the internal actors of the sports world, mainly those international sports bodies that present themselves as victims of the problem and promoters of integrity measures.

Although the official preventive narrative continues to place the emphasis on betting-related match-fixing, the researches and investigations based on perceptions or biographical data of athletes, players, coaches, or referees demonstrate not only that the (suspicion, offers or confirmation of) manipulation of results has been constant throughout their careers, but also that this situation creates cultural norms and incentives to naturalize and/or tolerate certain deviant practices. Consequently, the importance of paying more attention to non-betting-related manipulations should be emphasized.

### ***Lesson 2: The importance of understanding non-betting match-fixing***

As Moriconi and De Cima (2019) show in their article, the culture of sport would include the recognition and awareness of manipulation as a practice inherent to the sports world. Around this idea, informal institutions that are key for socializing sports actors into deviant behaviours are generated, consolidated, and naturalized.

Han's (2000) contribution follows a similar paradigm. The roles of culture, personal ties, and socialization rules internal to sports appear as key factors to generate incentives and attitudes in favour of manipulation. Hence, these perceptions about and socializations into deviant behaviour have little or nothing to do with violent coercion and organized crime agents operating in sport. The main promoters would be insider sports actors and technically, there would be freedom and options to accept or reject the proposals.

Tak and colleagues (2020) examine existing incentives for high-performance athletes and coaches to accept engagement in non-betting related manipulations of sports competitions. Focusing on the South Korean case, the authors illuminate the excessive motivations built within the bureaucratic sports development system. The article demonstrates why the in-depth study and comprehension of non-betting related match-fixing rationales can be useful for a better understanding of betting related manipulations and the promotion of integrity. As the authors emphasise, unlike betting-related match-fixing, that is sometimes likened to criminal/illegal elements, non-betting-related match-fixing is embedded in a sporting culture in which members of the community can take such practices for granted and even become part of them. The authors warn that “the fact that risks can be inherent within the sports development system itself further stresses the significance of non-betting-related match-fixing as a policy issue”.

In the same direction, Barkoukis' contribution finds that “athletes who perceived match fixing as socially approved and endorsed among referent others were more likely to report stronger intentions to engage in this behaviour”. Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour,

Barkoukis and his colleagues (2019) examine the psychological factors associated with athletes' intentions to engage in match-fixing. Approximately 30% of those athletes surveyed reported that they have been engaged in a match they believe was fixed, and intentions to engage in match fixing was significantly associated with perceived social approval of match fixing among referent others. Social norms, according to the authors, might have crucial implications for a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Thus, in order to improve the understanding and prevention of manipulations of sports competitions, it is important to further the understanding of the role of social norms and informal institutions in the decision-making process towards the phenomenon.

### ***Lesson 3: The emergence of the policy problem***

An important issue for interpreting official narratives is to understand how, when, and why a social practice becomes a public problem. This step towards political intervention is frequently determined by sectoral interests and its definitions are typically arbitrary and political.

In the same way that the manipulation of results has been present throughout history, there has also been constant frauds in bets and criticisms of the existence of certain types of bets that could distort the spirit of sports. Mafias have been linked to illegal gambling even before the Internet existed. According to Huggins' (2018) work on British sports over the last three centuries, in all sports where there has been a gambling market, match-fixing has been almost as common as left-handedness. Already at the beginning of the last century, Pierre de Coubertin (1973 [1908]), the father of the modern Olympic Games, emphasized that "fair play" was in danger due to the development of a "cancer" called gambling. And he warned that the expansion and growth of the betting market was due to institutional recklessness.

Then, should the blame go to the gaming industry? Betting itself is not the problem, but it is necessary to pay attention to the indiscriminate way in which the betting market has expanded and its new features.

Given the sports actors' recognition of the historical existence of manipulation practices, it is clear that the liberalization of betting markets has expanded risks, incentives, and structures for crime. This area is crucial because betting is available not for the final result of the competition and for each of the events that occur during the competition. Moreover, the technological development has made it possible to place bets from almost any countries on sports competitions all over the world.

In short, human beings (players and athletes) have been transformed into betting objects, and that means they are now targets of new ethical and economic expectations (Moriconi & Almeida 2019: 218). These animated betting objects also are aware of the situation and, according to lesson 2, they develop their activities (target of betting) in a social and cultural context where certain manipulations and wrongdoings have historically existed and are tolerated. Meanwhile, as previously noted, these human beings (players, athletes, coaches and referees) cannot reject their role of betting objects and are the only ones in the sports ecosystem who do not directly profit from this situation (while sports institutions at all levels do). Thus, the incentive to continue and spread those historical practices keeps growing.

Following the work of Tak (2018), just as sports generate a positive market around triumph and good sports performance, the betting market can create a profitable parallel market around losing and low performances. In a market society (Sandel 2012), where wealth building and capital maximization are central social values, it would be incoherent and naive to think that people (individually and collectively; criminally and legally) are not going to take advantage of the opportunity structures that are within their grasp. Moreover, in a world where around 20% of the international trade is related to criminal activities, and where the flow of dirty money is high and constant, it is not surprising that the global online sports betting market has become a means to easily laundering money with little risk, as Moriconi and Almeida (2019) have warned. As a result, the new sports ecosystem requires a new sports ethic and disciplinary rules functional to the sustainability of the betting market, that is defended and legitimated through the official preventive narrative. And this objective is one of the bases upon which anti-match fixing programs are created. As Tak et al. (2018a) emphasised, countermeasures against sports match-fixing have ideological purposes with ethical implications: educational programs contribute “substantially to redefining today’s sports ethics not only by posing threats of sanction, but by delivering new codes of conduct that are aligned with the demands of betting.” In such cases, the value of fairness serves “as a utility for securing financial gains from the sports betting industry.”

Therefore, although the official preventive narrative has revolved around regulatory, unregulated or illegal markets, it is also appropriate to promote studies and analyses on what the types of positive bets could be for the sustainable development of sports competitions and which types of bets can jeopardize the sporting spirit, multiplying the incentives for deviant behaviours.

***Lesson 4: Every betting market has their own opportunity structure and incentives***

Even though the official preventive narrative ensures that fixers choose mainly the illegal Asian market to generate economic profit from manipulated competitions, the truth is that no market is immune to the scourge. In a recent article on betting practices among professional athletes, Moriconi and De Cima (2019b) demonstrate how athletes use different strategies to put bets on regulated or unregulated markets. Despite being aware that it is a prohibited practice punishable by disciplinary codes, and receiving training in this regard, athletes continue placing bets. They consider that the regulatory framework is incorrectly defined. Also, they perceive that, in practice, there are few controls or there are different ways to evade controls.

Each betting market presents its own opportunity structures and incentives for fraud. In this special issue, Han's (2020) article explores the characteristic of the 2010 K-League affair, a match-fixing scandal developed under a state monopoly sports betting system. The results of the investigation show how different betting markets affect the methods, motives, and characteristics of fixing. For K-League match-fixers, the illegal online sports betting market was an unreliable place to invest because of its low stability despite its higher pay out rates. The author, however, notes that although the scandal targeted Sports Toto, the legitimate sports betting provider, the campaigns developed shortly after the scandal seemed to have attempted to create the idea that the K-League scandal was carried out by illegal sports betting sites, as it happened with other previous South Korean match-fixing scandals.

In order to combat the problem of fraud in the betting market, it might be essential to look beyond the betting market. The new sports betting ecosystem generates the creation of sub-markets that must be incorporated into the diagnosis of the problem in order to establish more effective prevention and punishment measures.

In that sense, in their contribution, Moneva and Canappele (2019) extend the criminal links of the phenomenon to the cybertrade of information about fixed matches. Through environmental criminology theories applied to cybercrime, the authors examined websites that sell information on allegedly fixed matches. These sites claim to be capable of selling tips about manipulated sports events and, thus, allow punters to place 100% sure bets. This innovative research on cyberspace informing supposed fixed matches describes a risk area that, so far, has not been considered in the policy-making process to combat the phenomenon of the manipulation of sport competitions. The authors list a series of recommendations to pursue and prevent the proliferation of these sites.

***Lesson 5: The need for real diagnosis and coherent counter measures: the example of the supposed code of silence and the obligation of reporting***

Moriconi and De Cima (2019) present a pioneering contribution about how the supposed code of silence among sports actors works. Through the analysis of official discourses, ethnography and interviews with key informants, their article demonstrates that despite the formal norms that have established the legal and disciplinary obligation of denouncing any match-fixing offer, reporting wrongdoings in sports is dangerous and can have serious consequences for the athletes' career. For the same reason, the participants in Visschers et al.'s study also recognize they would not be willing to expose match-fixing incidents.

Moriconi and De Cima criticize the concept of a code of silence and show that what really exist within sports is a series of public secretcies that deliberately recognize the existence of informal institutions that create and materialize opportunity structures for corruption and manipulation of results. Some of these informal institutions lead sports actors to accept manipulations and/or to keep silent about irregularities arising from the failures of sports governance.

According to the authors, the sports bodies responsible for promoting codes of conduct and policies in favour of integrity are aware of the existence of athletes who suffer reprisals for reporting, but nevertheless there are no measures to punish those who materialize those reprisals. Ironically, being aware that few people would protect whistle-blowers, they continue demanding that athletes report.

At the same time, the authors emphasize that anti match-fixing policies are created without considering the technical, economic and human resources available. In the case of Portugal, where they place their study, law enforcement institutions acknowledge that, because of the difficulties in carrying out the investigations, in many cases those who suffer the punishments are those who denounce and collaborate with Justice. Consequently, the fight against the scourge is delegitimized, being understood by many sports actors as a hypocritical process rather than an educational process.

### **Concluding remarks**

Overall, there is still much to do to gain a full understanding of both the phenomenon of the manipulation of sports competitions and the individual and collective interests underlying the policy-making process to fight against it.

As some contributions of this issue demonstrate, several prevention programs are failing to produce the expected results:

- 1) professional fixers adapt their processes and modus operandi in response to harsher countermeasures,

- 2) wrongdoing and illegal practices, such as betting on their own competitions continue among sports actors in spite of the educational programs,
- 3) disciplinary and legal obligations are stipulated, such as the obligation of reporting, but integrity officers recognize that the conditions to protect those who blow the whistle to avoid retaliations are not a guarantee,
- 4) legal and disciplinary frameworks are created and imposed but, subsequently, they are not effectively implemented due to a lack of human, economic and/or technical resources, and,
- 5) corruption continues to affect several sports entities that present themselves as leaders of the fight for integrity.

A misdiagnosis of the problem can rarely generate efficient prescription or, in our case, public policies. In the case of sports integrity, not only is there still much to do to address the problem, but also a need for appropriate diagnoses. This special issue was born with the intention of advancing a deeper and holistic understanding of the subject and, thus, contributing to the policy-making process, as well as the implementation of the Macolin Convention recommendations.

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