

How the World Cup will be won

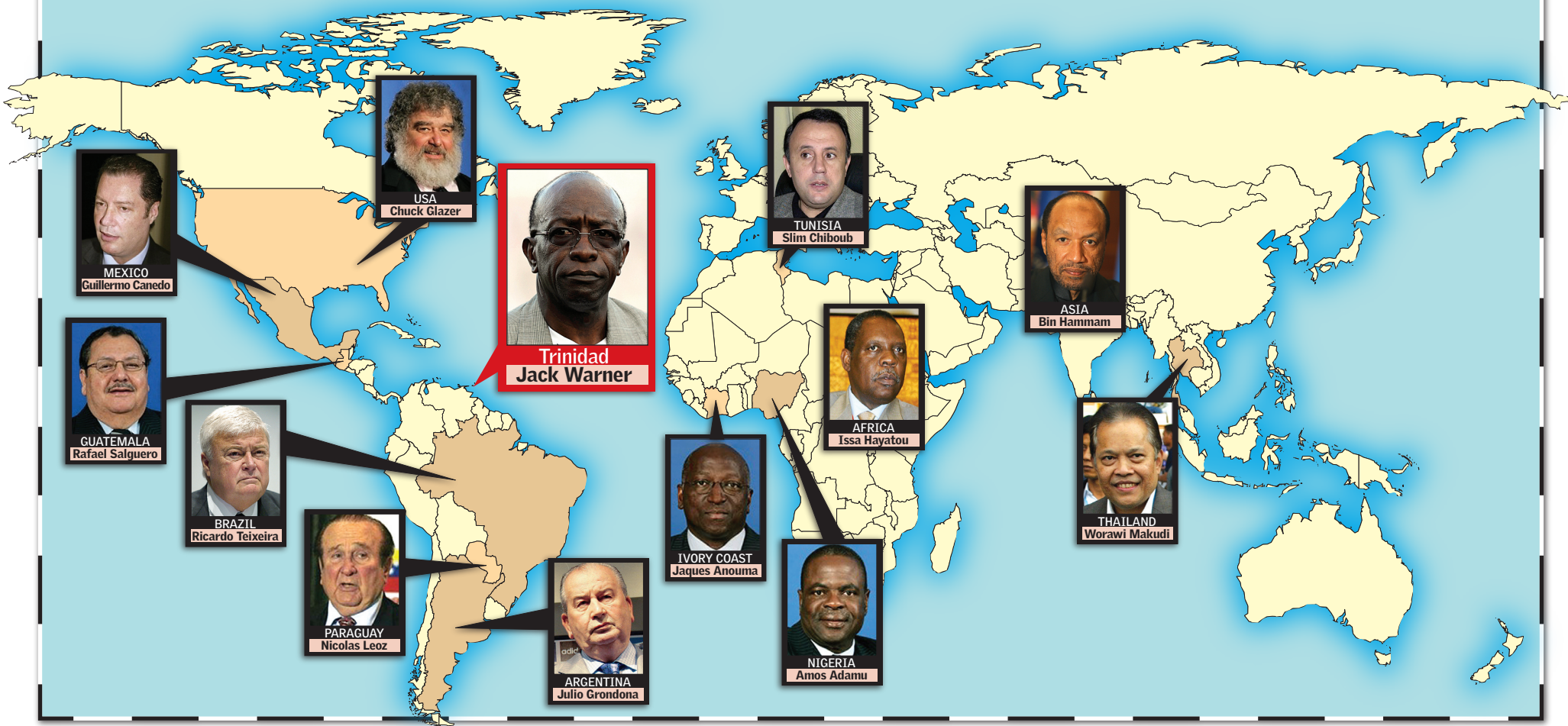


Illustration: Felipe Perez

THE INSIDER



Jack Warner is going to make sure Mexico gets the World Cup in 2018. Failing that, the US would do. **Andrew Jennings** explains why no-one else has a look-in

JACK Warner must have his World Cup. Fifa's serial kleptomaniac, now 65, knows that 2018 is his last chance to acquire the world's most lucrative sports event and, with his greedy family, loot it. Where does he want it? Mexico.

If anything goes awry, the USA is the fallback. Both countries are members of Concacaf, the regional Fifa franchise controlled from Trinidad by Warner.

It's unthinkable that the Warners would let a World Cup slip through their fingers. And, of course, they are well-practised as the biggest ticket racketeers ever.

When they staged Fifa's under-17 championship in Trinidad in 2001, I was there to see them snaffle fast food and beverage contracts in the stadiums, security, hotels, the IT business and, with the personal approval of Fifa president Sepp Blatter, their travel agency got all 15 teams' flight tickets. The construction contracts came earlier.

For the last few years Blatter has jerked football around, promising, then withdrawing, rotation around the continents. This obfuscation smells of a pact perfected in Fifa's shadows. What is that deal? Warner boasted in 2003: "I have told Mr Blatter that whenever he is running for election, do not come to campaign in Concacaf. He doesn't have to. Don't waste his time. Concacaf has 35 votes. He gets 35."

Blatter gets the Fifa presidency for life; Warner gets all the money he can bank, all the tickets he can tout. Ever noticed that when caught racketeering, Blatter inevitably protects him? And at last, his own World Cup in a country rarely troubled by business transparency. The downside with America is all that freedom of information – and picky business regulators.

Why so sure about Mexico? Drop by Warner's vast leisure club and convention complex in Trinidad – the Centre of Excellence – all paid for by Fifa. One

salon is named after Blatter. It should be. He provided the cash.

The other big one is the Guillermo Canedo Hall. Mexican TV mogul Canedo was a member of Fifa's ruling group from 1962 until his death in 1997. His understandings with president Joao Havelange brought the World Cup to Mexico in 1970 and again in 1986, and truckloads of dollars for Canedo's Televisa company.

Canedo's son, another Guillermo, became a vice-president of Warner's Concacaf in 2003, the same year he was appointed boss of Televisa International. He also sits on Fifa's Marketing and Television advisory board.

Can Warner pull it off? Mexico and the USA have the facilities. Rival bids, hobbled by the global financial meltdown, will struggle to find funding. So Russia's bid – as the oligarchs seek buyers for their yachts – may be as credible as the soon-to-evaporate bids from impoverished Indonesia, sweltering Qatar and confused Japan and Korea.

Blatter's banning of two-country bids looks part of the conspiracy. Holland/Belgium are out, with Portugal abandoned on the bench by Spain – which may stagger on to become, with England, one of Europe's two bids.

Uefa are likely to favour Spain. Their boss, Angel Villar Llona, is tight with Blatter and active on Fifa's refereeing committee. England's Geoff Thompson, who elbowed the moral John McBeth aside, is the only Fifa vice-president who never comes up on my Google searches. Invisible.

Australia? Billionaire Frank Lowy's bid may be diverted by a tax probe by the Australian and US authorities – his son Peter pleaded the fifth when questioned on Capitol Hill last year about the family's accounts in Lichtenstein.

The fantastical notion that England is front-runner has been invented by some London newspapers. The only way to know is to poll the 23 voting

members at Fifa – and they do omerta. Likely scenario: Spain and England bruise each other, America withdraws and Televisa pulls clear to win it.

TIPPED Warner to win seven months ago in these pages. A familiar voice assured me: "I hope you enjoy Mexico or the States, England isn't even being discussed in private." That was the weekend Fabio Capello dragged a tired team to Trinidad and Warner made a killing touting tickets.

As last weekend neared I worried; had my source failed me? Then, as deadline loomed, both countries declared. The Voice was back on last week. "Didn't I tell you? And they've given Wembley the Champions League Final, it's a sop."

Once you know the fix is in there's not a lot more for reporters to write. But that doesn't fill pages so we are inveigled into another fantasy: the whimsy that among the 23 voters are some waverers who might be seduced by lunch with Mrs Windsor at Windsor and bedtime cocoa at Claridges.

The Voice tells me that Warner already has 12 votes locked up – victory! – and maybe 13. Here's how the numbers are running. Warner starts with three votes – his and his two hand-picked Concacaf sidekicks on Fifa's executive committee, Chuck Blazer from New York and Guatemala's Rafael Salguero.

Shift south and there are three easy pulls in Latin America. Don Julio Grondona, the noted anti-Semite from Argentina, chairs Fifa's finance committee with Warner as deputy. What do they do with Fifa's money? Swiss investigating magistrate Thomas Hildbrand is trying to find out. Another kindred spirit is Ricardo Teixeira, son-in-law of Havelange, himself no stranger to corruption allegations. Tricky Ricky bosses Brazil's association. The most recent investigation said it is "a den of crime, anarchy, incompetence and dishonesty."

The trio is made whole by Paraguay's

Nicolas Leoz. He has presided over the Latin American franchise since 1986. Last time England were bidding, Sir Bobby Charlton was dispatched to Asuncion to court him, just days after Leoz had secretly trousered a \$100,000 kickback from ISL, the company given World Cup marketing rights. A month later Leoz was hosted in London by the FA, lunched at the House of Commons, dined at Lancaster House and then collected a further \$30,000 from ISL. Look's like we're up to six for Televisa.

Warner's been in Nigeria recently, to support a Fifa voter in distress, Dr Amos Adamu. Readers will recall Amos was denounced for corruption and fired from the Nigerian sports ministry. Warner will be back in Lagos this week with light-fingered Leoz, guests of the African regional franchise congress.

Which way will Africa's leader Issa Hayatou swing? And the new boy from Ivory Coast, Jacques Anouma? The fourth voter is Slim Chiboub from Tunisia. After listening to my well-informed friends in West Africa, I'm compelled to write that all four will back Jack. That's 10 – two more than Europe can muster.

Thailand's Worawi Makudi was helped to see Germany's case for 2006. Jack should be his man. That's 11 on the board. You wouldn't think that Asian franchise boss Mohamed Bin Hamman, a copiously rich fellow from Qatar, would ever need any help. Suddenly his leadership faces two well-funded challenges and he needs help. Hello, Jack. That's 12 of 23. Bingo!

Maybe Jack will score more. Russia's delegate has his own way of looking at these things and we know little about the new guy from Oceania, Tahiti's Raynald Temarii.

England might add two votes from the Japanese and Korean delegates to Europe's eight. It's still not enough. Much might change before the vote in December 2010 but, for now, it seems that Jack's past the post.