



Web Special: Soccer's Dark Side

*Journalist Andrew Jennings throws stones at sports Goliaths for a living. He spent more than a decade investigating corruption in the International Olympic Committee, and his eventual findings filled three books, showing how the committee had fallen far short of the Olympic ideal. Now the author has turned his sights on FIFA, global soccer's governing body. His recent book, *Foul!*, and a companion BBC Panorama documentary, paint the organization as a corrupt fiefdom rife with bribes and vote rigging. Naturally, Jennings' allegations have riled FIFA officials, who were eager to put on a cheery face for the 2006 World Cup tournament that runs through July 9 in Germany. But their efforts to squash the book with legal injunction fell flat. So they've had to settle for banning Jennings from FIFA events and decrying his allegations as unfounded. CJR's **Mariah Blake** spoke with Jennings about shoe leather, populism and – of course – the ugly side of the beautiful game.*

CJR: You do something few journalists do: investigative sports reporting. How did you find this niche?

Jennings : I stumbled into it in the late 1980s. I had just finished covering the Iran-Contra affair for the investigative television magazine *World in Action*, and one of my sources tapped me up and said, "Have you ever looked at the International Olympic Committee?" So I started looking at the IOC.

Where I pioneered an area is that sports politics, particularly outside America, is mostly covered by the sports reporters. Well, you may be brilliant at describing how the center forward knocks the ball into the net -- I mean, there are plenty of purple prose merchants doing that. But when they're told by their desk, there's a meeting of the IOC or the FIFA executive committee, they don't know what to do except take the press release.

Meanwhile, any proper reporter who doesn't think, "I've got to keep the contacts," or "I need to get one-on-ones" just says, "I don't like the smell of this" and gets to work. And that's what I did. And it wasn't very long before

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friends in Barcelona sent me photographs of [former IOC President] Juan Antonio Samaranch wearing a fascist uniform with Franco. Is that a coup, or is that a coup? After that, I began reporting on doping cover-ups and all the other dirt.

CJR: Can you give CJR readers a synopsis of your latest book?

Jennings: The book is a long-overdue investigation of two decades of corruption in the leadership of the world's most popular sport. FIFA has found it easy to bamboozle most of the world's sports reporters, buy off most of its member associations, avoid any proper external scrutiny and so, not surprisingly, has sunk into what a police investigator in Switzerland calls "a swamp." Leading officials have solicited and been rewarded with bribes in exchange for marketing contracts, votes have been rigged to make Sepp Blatter FIFA's president, and, if you want a hard-to-get ticket for the World Cup and have a fat wallet, just pay three times the face value to your nearest FIFA official. Bingo!

CJR: And how did you go about reporting the book? You obviously got a lot of people to talk to you because you describe some scenes in amazingly vivid detail.

Jennings: I talked to quite a lot of people, not a vast amount. The job is to identify people with good quality information and then try to get them to speak. How do I do it? Well, I'm in the shoe leather preservation society. I knock on doors. And that's how I got to people who had been involved in paying bribes – just as functionaries, not as politicians at the top. So shoe leather is key. Google will not replace shoe leather.

I'm also a document freak. I don't believe necessarily what people tell me. I think it's very unwise. And even if it's good material you can't use it because you don't have the proof. So what I worked very hard on, and it took me a couple of years, was getting a huge trove of internal documents from ISL and FIFA. The documents are fundamental to what I do.

CJR: You wouldn't necessarily know that by reading your work. The writing is light and lively– somewhere between popular fiction and tabloid journalism.

Jennings: Yes. I play sort of up market in getting the information and analyzing it, and then I write it for the people. That way, you're talking to the fans.

The *BBC Panorama* show I made about FIFA corruption is probably the most populist *Panorama* ever. If you watch it, what you'll see is this funny old fool halfway between Colombo and Clueso. One shot shows me walking through Zurich; it's just my feet with both my shoelaces undone because I'm too busy to do them up. Well the show has drawn such a fantastic mailbox from the fans—a big, big response. They liked the wit, they liked the funniness, and they liked the determination to get bad people.

CJR: It's not just your populist approach, though. Unlike a lot of investigative journalism, your work is narrative, filled with scenes and characters.

Jennings: Yeah, well, if you walk into a shop and put \$25 on the counter, you are entitled to your money's worth. And it isn't just a boring list of crime. So much American investigative journalism is very good in its research, and utterly bloody boring to read. And if you're boring, people don't read you. And if they don't read you, it's all been a waste of time.

So I tell stories. That book is a collection of stories. It didn't start off as narrative stories; it started off as a whole bunch of research. It took months just to organize the chapter structure. And I've spent a lot of time studying my subjects. I video them sometimes to watch their body language. I look at their dress. Do they choose clothes that are dominating, or clothes that are subservient? I look at how people treat their subordinates and those above them.

In other words, I try to read people like Blatter because I think the reader is entitled to meet three-dimensional characters. Sure, he's a crook. But he can be charismatic and funny. And the trouble he's in shows in his face. Now he knows [Swiss police investigator Thomas] Hildbrand is coming up the road and he's almost certainly going to arrest Blatter one day. For five years Blatter's known of that possibility. So he's a very interesting case study in a human being under pressure. And you can't just denounce him as a sleazebag. That doesn't tell the readers how we got here. They need to know, what happened to what they call the beautiful game.

CJR: You aren't shy about expressing opinion or marshaling your facts toward a damning conclusion. I'm wondering, how do you negotiate the line between journalism and advocacy?

Jennings: I think the line was dreamed up by journalism professors who have never done the job. What I do is investigate people who I can demonstrate are very bad. I'm not going to do that, "Well Herr Hitler wasn't too nice to the Jewish people, but you've got to give him credit for the rebuilding of German industry." No. I'm going to do the research and get the damning evidence.

Samaranch was a dyed-in-the-wool Nazi. He was quite prepared to give the Olympic games to Adidas and ISL. What's the good side? Sepp Blatter always says, "Look at the money we give to charity." But it's only window dressing. These are determined, cynical, hypocritical thieves. The evidence points to that. The only question is did they steal a million or two million?

CJR: The books and the documentary have been five years in the making. Now that they're done, do you intend to continue reporting on FIFA?

Jennings: Absolutely. Six ISL guys are going to be charged. And when they are, the story is going to explode. In the last chapter of the book I write about the repayment of the bribes [to try to hide that they were paid] and the fact that at least one of the ISL guys has, under interrogation by Hildbrand, blabbed it all. Tons of information is about to come out. So, this story is running strongly. The only people who don't know it are the thousands of sports reporters who are in Germany covering the World Cup. They just don't have a clue—which I'm very pleased about, because, after all, I've got rent to pay.

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