

# THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRACY IN SPORT

**I**n sports governing bodies and across the industry of sport, the word “governance” is a constant refrain. Every board meeting of a governing body or club must consider “governance”. It is a reasonable concern. Since the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, the UK has invested millions of pounds of public money across the sporting sector, not just in medal sports but in all sports. International marquee sporting events now measure their value in \$billions, even national competitions claim contributions of \$millions and commercial support for events and elite sportsmen further adds to the sporting economy. In theory, all investors in sport, public and private, can take comfort from the strict focus on money being

managed by sports bodies with good governance structures that properly and democratically represent their sport. And yet, sport is going through the worst possible time for governance failures. Take for example recent failures such as the UCI’s inability to tackle doping; the suggested failures to deal with match fixing by the International Tennis Federation’s Tennis Integrity Unit; allegations concerning ticket touting by the Irish Olympic Association; the conflicts of interests which characterise the higher ranks within the IAAF; the integrity “challenges” faced at FIFA - the list goes on. Sports governance is not really an icon of successful management. Interestingly, in all the above examples, leadership of the relevant international bodies




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is democratic. In each case leaders are elected by national federations, who in turn are elected by their regions and ultimately clubs. This pyramid of democracy is designed to ensure every local club member can theoretically influence the choice of leader of their sport. The reality is very different. The cost of campaigning internationally for an elected post is very high. National and continental voting “blocs” emerge; favours granted to support campaigns for power must be returned once power is attained; commercial backers of events and championships have muscles to flex. Ultimately, individuals campaigning for leadership are passionate about their sport, already heavily involved and often have existing interests conflicting with their governance role. Outsiders are not attracted by a tough and expensive campaign and would not have the established relationships democratic success requires. With the value of sports ever increasing, the potential (now realised) for widespread corruption seems inevitable.

Compare, however, other models for governance. The US sports of NFL and MBL are centrally run on a franchise basis. A small group of individuals operate to all intents as benevolent dictators. The United States Golf Association has a famously opaque power structure. Key leaders are appointed rather than elected and the whole arrangement relies on consensus between the governors and the governed. While this seems at first autocratic and anachronistic, the need for a general acceptance of the governing body amongst the sport means that decisions need to be reasonable and effective or the whole fragile arrangement will fall apart (as happened in boxing). Disputes, difficult personalities and questionable decisions are present, but endemic corruption seems to be less common. So has democracy failed as a governance structure for sports? Can a fully democratic structure ever exist without encouraging corruption? When we look at the business of sport, does the “old boys network” actually offer a more resilient and robust structure for governance than a democratic process? In the future, as new E-Sports set up their governance structure will they establish a fully democratic, world-wide entity? How much comfort should a corporate sponsor take from the democratic nature of their chosen sport? Governance is intended as a protection for all involved, is there a risk that democratic governance is more of a problem? Ultimately, are we asking the right questions?



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