

The Fix: Soccer and Organized Crime (Part II)

By Declan Hill

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They fixed the World Cup at an anonymous Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in northern Bangkok. There were four men. They sat at a little table hunched over so they could hear one another while they spoke.

One was black, tall, and athletic, wearing a tight blue shirt and jeans. The other three were Asians: one was Chin; beside him sat two younger Chinese men. They met at 12:00 p.m. on May 25, 2006, and continued their discussion for almost an hour and twenty minutes. After ten minutes, a tall white man dressed in an unironed shirt came to a nearby table. He looked harassed and had problems with his mobile phones. He went outside a number of times to try to get them to work.

The four men were discussing how to fix a World Cup match in the 2006 finals. It was a little bizarre. In an anonymous, suburban shopping mall in northern Bangkok, the four men were planning to make lots of money and at the same time destroy the dreams of millions of people around the world. I was the tall white man. I was also trying to covertly tape their meeting. I had two secret audio recording devices. Unfortunately, my hidden camera was not working properly, so I was reduced to taking photos of the meeting with my mobile phone.

There was pop music playing over the speakers, and until I got the KFC manager to turn it down, it ruined my recording. The "problem" with the mobile phone was me trying desperately to get my phone to take enough video and photos to link the four of them together without being seen by them or any of their henchmen, who I had to presume were somewhere close by. It was harrowing work. I pretended to read newspapers while I eavesdropped on their conversation. I glanced at my watch frequently, to try to look like an overstressed businessman waiting for a call. Then from time to time, I would pick up my phone, make a fake call, and pretend to have a conversation, all the while trying to take a picture.

Their meeting was about how they were planning to rig the gambling market. From what I heard then, and from what Chin told me later, their conversation was along the following lines. The black man was the runner or match-broker from one particular team. He claimed to have a number of players and officials from his country willing to consider throwing a game. But Chin and his associates had a problem. They did not have enough money to cover the initial payment it takes to ensure trust with the team.

The match-broker for the team wanted to work with them. He had worked with them before. There were good levels of mutual trust on either side. But he needed "shopping money" to convince the allegedly corrupt members of the team to agree to the deal. The amount of money needed in these situations depends on the level of the game. For a local Asian league match or a youth international tournament \$1,000 a player will do. But to arrange a game at the World Cup Finals is serious stuff.

The match-broker was asking for at least \$100,000 to cover the network. Chin wanted to introduce him to another syndicate -- or investors -- who could front the money. Chin would surrender control of the fix, but still receive some money for the deal. The match-broker did not like this. He didn't know who the new people were. It was going to be a difficult task to ensure that there was trust on both sides.

On the other side, the broker allegedly had two team officials who wanted to take part in the fix. Chin and his

associates didn't like this development. They had, they claimed, worked with the team before. They knew the players in the network. They didn't like the idea of bringing in officials at this point. The four men talked back and forth about the various issues.

All the time, I was trying to listen as closely as possible, without looking as if I was listening, while trying to maintain my appearance as an overstressed businessman. A KFC restaurant is not the kind of place that one sits in for a long time. I finished my meal. I read every page of the two tabloid newspapers I brought with me, twice. At one point, a young couple came in and sat between me and the group. I almost hit them. I got up and walked past the men. As I did so, I heard a discussion about goalkeepers. I stood just outside the door and frantically took photos and video of the group.

At 1:20 p.m. the group of men stood and walked out. Chin walked with one of the Asians, the black man with the younger-looking Asian. Chin did not look at me. I tried to avoid eye contact with him. I stared at the black guy, trying to soak as much information as possible into my memory. At 1:59, I got a phone call. It was Chin. He sounded exultant. The problems were being solved. The fix was on.

Throughout the winter and spring of 2006, Chin and I kept in contact. He had talked about organizing the fix for the World Cup and one country had been mentioned repeatedly: Ghana.

According to Chin, back in 2004 at the Olympics in Athens, some of his group were able to get close to some of the Ghana team and get them to throw their last game against Japan. I had no idea how good Ghana could or would be as a soccer team. Chin laughed at my ignorance.

"Do you think Japan could ever beat Ghana? You have to be kidding Ghana has a good team. There is a player. I paid him \$15,000 [prepayment]."