

The Fix: Soccer and Organized Crime (Part I)

By Declan Hill

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Stephen Fleming, the great New Zealand cricket captain, claims he was approached by a gambler in 1999 who had told him that there was a syndicate of Asian bookies arranging top international games of cricket and soccer.

"Look, these things are not coincidences," the gambler was alleged to have said about a recent soccer match. "If you want to know where the real money is, it's in the syndicate that's going on around the world right now, speculating on the likelihood of certain results or occurrences."

The gambler, according to Fleming, said prominent sportsmen were involved, including some in English soccer and tennis. In essence, this is what Chin told me. The only difference was that he claimed to be one of the men at the centre of a network. He claimed to have sixteen runners around the world working exclusively for him. There were two phones on the table. One rang almost as soon as I sat down. Chin answered and started talking in what I think was Bahasa Indonesian mixed with English. He talked amiably, saying a few players' and coaches' names that I recognized, then he put down the phone. He turned to me.

"You see, Mr. Hill, I am getting call. It is from the Philippines. You know the SEA Games that are going on now. I am arranging all the matches. Laos only lost 1-0 to Singapore. Everyone thought that Singapore would win 3- or 4-0. I control the Laos team I told them to go all out. I knew they could keep the score level."

The SEA Games are the Southeast Asian Games, equivalent to the Pan-American games or the All-Africa Games: a continent-specific version of the Olympics with athletics, soccer, and other events such as sailing. They had started a few days before in the Philippines. It was not a complete surprise that a fixer would be alleging that the games were fixed.

A top Asian sporting official, the same one who had the fixer's number in his speed-dial, had told me that the events were plagued with "caring and sharing" or "through every pipe a little water must flow." In other words, the various sports officials divided up the games to make sure that each nation would get at least some medals to make sure their home governments were not bothered by any lack of sporting success.

If it were just him, I would not bother to mention it, but a few days after my meeting with Chin, I had read that the weary Thai prime minister repeated the same allegation, saying very publicly that many of the competitions in the SEA games were fixed; the chef de mission of the Vietnamese delegation had even given a press conference at which he announced how many medals would be won by each country before the SEA Games had begun. That Chin would tell me the games were fixed was no surprise, but he went on to tell me that he and his associates travelled the world fixing international soccer matches.

I asked him what the biggest event he ever fixed was. Chin shrugged. "The Olympics? The World Cup? I don't know. Which is bigger?" This seemed absolutely bizarre. "I went to the Olympics in Atlanta in 1996," Chin said. "I fixed a game in the 1996 Olympics: Tunisia versus Portugal. I bribed some of the Tunisian guys to lose outside of the spread. They did it."

We spoke about the fix. He claimed that it was one of the rare ones where the players he approached would not even consider doing it for money: they were too religious.

"Finally I get this beautiful Mexican girl. I paid her \$50,000 for the whole tournament. That is a lot of money for them. She would hang out in the lobby ... met him [one of the players from Tunisia], they went up to his room, did it, and then she proposed to him. Then I went in ... 'Will you do the game for me?' He said 'Yes, opening game.' They lost to Portugal 2- 0 ... I make a lot of money and everyone was happy."

One of his phones rang at 10:27 p.m. There was a conversation that lasted two minutes in a language that I could not understand. Like many Asians, Chin speaks at least four languages. I could not follow what was being said. He put the phone down.

"You see this I just got a call. Hannover is going to win by at least two goal. It is arranged. I have only put \$20,000 down. Not much." "Not much! Maybe to you," I said, "but \$20,000 is a lot of money to me."

The woman on the bed laughed. It was the first and last time in the whole conversation that she showed even the slightest interest in what was said. I turned to look at her. She shrugged and flicked the converter of the television and continued to watch the movie.

"The game starts right now. Hannover will win the game by at least two goals. You watch."

A translation might be in order. The top German league is known as the Bundesliga, literally "best division." On November 26, 2005, Hannover was a middle-ranking team; they were playing another Bundesliga team, Kaiserslautern, in Germany. Chin was claiming just before the match began that Hannover would win by a score line of at least a two-goal difference.

He did not say or reveal in any way how this result might be achieved whether it was a network of players or referees. He did say, in the course of the conversation, "Some German referees are bad ... I have referees that work for me in many places, U.S., Greece. Many places."

(Editor's note: Hannover beat Kaiserslautern 5-1, fulfilling Chin's prediction of a victory by more than two goals.)