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**The Autonomy of Sport: Threat or Promise**

*A View from the Grass Island*

by [Shaka Hislop](#)

**Allow me to introduce myself- my name is Shaka Hislop, I was born in England, raised in Trinidad and Tobago and University educated in the US. I am married with 5 beautiful children, a direct result of the autonomy of my wife's genes. I had played professional football for 15 years before my eventual retirement a couple of months ago. I have represented the country of my birth in an international friendly, and most proudly my home country of Trinidad and Tobago at full international level, most notably at the World Cup in Germany in 2006.**

I was contacted by Jens Andersen earlier this year and asked to present, on my interpretation of the theme "The Autonomy of Sport: Threat or Promise". An interpretation that would no doubt reflect the naivety of my having lived on a 90mx45m grass island for the last 15 years and the arrogance of having been paid handsomely to do so.

I have always been intrigued by football's politics, and indeed have paid a far keener interest in it than the vast majority of my counterparts.

In the last 12 months I have challenged Fifa Vice president, Jack Warner's accounting skills and been installed as interim President of the Football Players' Association of Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean's first players' association.

But still this has provided me with a new challenge, a fresh look into the often-murky world of football's politics. A world that players either ignore or believe has no place on our 4000 square metered grassy Eden.

I started my research some 30 years ago on my own grassy Eden in Trinidad. Twenty-two kids running around respecting the authority of a referee's whistle and the autonomy of sportsmanship and competition. No one outside of the grassy field needed to remind us to ensure that our opponents were okay after a tough tackle, remind us to shake hands after the game or remind us to assist with removing the nets from the goal and collecting the balls. Autonomy in its purest form.

I have always found sport's autonomy and the relationships between its governing bodies and local governments a peculiar one.

The fact that Government has an obligation to sport at every level is beyond dispute. I find the often-heard proclamations that politics plays no part in sport, though, hard to believe. Ever since the earliest versions of sport, from Phillip of Makedon and his son Alexander erecting the Philippeion in the Olympic sanctuary in 338BC and holding political meetings during each Olympiad. Or be it football and depending on which historical account you believe- the early Romans or Mexicans

playing with the chopped off heads of their enemies, or the ancient Chinese in about 2600BC using a ball made of leather, playing in celebration of the emperor's birthday, the two, sport and politics, have been intertwined.

This co-existence and indeed co-reliance is no more evident than in present day sport. From the 60 member states boycotting the Moscow Olympic games of 1980, to the British government's recent announcement that it will fund the 2012 Olympic games to the tune of over US\$15bn or the South African government capping the cost on the World Cup stadiums at a more modest US\$1.25bn.

Even in tiny Trinidad and Tobago the Government invested in excess of US\$10m in the Soca Warriors' efforts at World Cup qualification.

As the separation of State and sport was beginning to make some sense with the language in the EU's White Paper on sport, Mr. Jack Warner, Special Advisor to the Trinidad and Tobago Football Federation, President of the Caribbean Football Union, President of CONCACAF and Fifa Vice President was named as the chairman of the United National Congress, the political opposition party in Trinidad and Tobago, for the upcoming general elections next month. What separation?

Over the last decade Mr. Warner has transformed himself into a larger-than-life character, based largely on his success in the rise to the near peak of football's governing hierarchy. All this while navigating occasional run-ins with the FIFA Ethics Committee.

My relationship with Mr. Warner started some 13 years ago. I was in the third year of my professional life and the only goalkeeper on the books of modest second division club, Reading FC. I was being forced, by a curious TTFF mandate, to return to Trinidad for the anniversary 'celebration' of a game that we had lost some 5 years earlier. A game that had we won would have seen us qualify for World Cup Italia 1990. A strange thing to celebrate by anyone's standards. Nonetheless, I resisted. A spell of 5 years in the international wilderness followed.

I had always put myself at the forefront of player relations with Mr. Warner and was called into action in March 2005, when we were called to a meeting with Mr. Warner and the TTFF Technical Committee; a committee made up of 8 of T&T's most trusted names in football, to announce the appointment of Ron Atkinson, himself a larger-than-life, controversial figure, as our next national team manager. An appointment I reacted angrily to given Mr. Atkinson's latest racially charged outburst, this time against the black, French midfielder Marcel Desailly, during a Chelsea game in which he was commentating on and thought the mic was switched off. It was far more interesting to note though that none of the TTFF's own hierarchy were present, and the entire technical committee, to me, had seemed either unaware of, unconsulted on or unconcerned by the proposed appointment.

An announcement was made some 4 hours later that Leo Beenhaker was to assume control of our national team with immediate effect. And the rest is history as they say...or it would have been had we not negotiated a substantial share of the revenues raised should we qualify for the WC 2006, which of course we did.

In August of last year we were told that this would amount to a payout of US\$800 per man for the 23-man squad.

Within months 16 of the squad had launched a legal challenge to the figures. Mr. Warner reacted angrily! Mr. Jack Warner, Fifa Vice-President, in a press interview with the Caribbean Media Corporation, accused the players of greed, and of holding the TTFF to ransom. Promising that we would “stay outside the pail of organized football”! Comments and threats which prompted me to write to him personally in response- pointing to our human right to legal counsel and, particularly, that despite his position within the region’s football he had taken leave of neutrality all together.

On reflection of these issues, and in particular in researching this presentation, I couldn’t help but think that football in Trinidad and Tobago and indeed the Caribbean had become far more autocratic than autonomous. The pure autonomy I experienced as a child on my grassy Eden had given way to the forbidden fruit of autocracy and I was living its consequences.

The “Nice Declaration” specifies, “sporting organizations have to exercise their task to organize and promote their particular sports “with due regard to national and community legislation”.

But still, the relationships between big business and football’s governing bodies, from Fifa to the TTFF, continues to push the bounds of fair play and ethics as perfectly envisioned by Jules Rimet all those years ago.

Don’t get me wrong, we as players are by no means blameless through all of this. We continue to ignore, turn a blind eye or be completely oblivious to our sport’s governing as we chase our boyhood dreams around the pitch. Our dreams neatly packaged and branded and sold to the highest bidder.

As the rewards of success grow even higher, we distance ourselves even further from anyone and everyone around the game. We’re only following everyone else’s lead though. The “Big Business Model” has become the model of the beautiful game. As clubs chase larger profits, players are treated as little more than cattle- warehouse stock. Our indifference, our self-absorption, indeed our “arrogant disregard” is as a result of our recognition and acceptance of this fact of the modern day game.

All of this plays perfectly into the hands of those who run our game.

The culture of the ‘bottom line’ is in perfect harmony with the perception of the game’s governance becoming more autocracy than autonomy.

As financial profit becomes the benchmark for success on the world stage, it is emulated at club level.

As clubs shift their focus in keeping with world football’s, so do the players. Bank balances have become far more important than medals won.

As we each rely on each other’s compliance, in a true Trickle-Down Theoretic, we know we can all rely on the seemingly blind faith and unwavering support of the true football fans.

Strangely, even in saying this, I know that I will be going to football matches week after week, my only concern being what I had just witnessed and been a part of for 90 minutes.

The point of my being here was to give my opinion as to whether the autonomy of sport was a threat or a promise. My answer is this- it is a promise in constant threat of the politics of power to control the riches within the game, and the apathy of those of us who benefit.

Dr. Uwe Schimank, of the FernUniversität in Hagen, in his paper “The Autonomy of Modern Sport: Dangerous and Endangered” points out “Autonomy is usually a latent property...when it is talked about, most of the time there is something wrong with it.” What is wrong is that, even as my favoured dictionary.com clearly and distinctly defines the difference between autonomy and autocracy, we have all allowed a strange co-existence of the two within football’s governance. It is here the threat lies.

The existence of this autocracy is no more appealing to the game than is the sheep-adorned wolf to the rest of the flock.

But don’t fear folks, all is not lost! There is hope for us yet.

Maybe I am once again showing my naivety; maybe I am still rosy-eyed from my recent involvement and appointment at FPATT. I find the game’s defenses within the defenses of the game’s true assets- its players, and its lifeblood- the fans.

Fifa’s credibility problems, real or perceived, are of its own making. I was recently going over a list of appointees from the CONCACAF region to a number of Fifa committees, a list from which my name was strangely omitted, (the autonomy of my own ignorance I guess) and was stunned at how many committees there actually were within Fifa, with the same names heading up or at least involved in a number of these committees. Fifa has become far too insular. With next to no outside involvement or input how can Fifa hope to be seen as transparent or just?

It is here that both Players’ and Fans’ Associations hold the trump cards in this game of football governance. A fact that Fifa is now alluding to with their signing of a “Memorandum of Understanding” with FIFPro, the world body of players’ associations.

With this understanding comes responsibility. A responsibility that football may soon come to rely on. A responsibility that the game cannot afford to be perverted.

I look at my six-year-old running around and scoring goals on her grassy Eden far away from the perversion I realize that I have become a part of. Now, in moving from the innocence of my youth, to the perversion as a player, to becoming an administrator with the heart and soul of a player and a fan, my own efforts are best served in preserving football’s autonomy.

Again, I find myself revisiting the point of my being here. I maintain sport’s autonomy is a promise; it is its perversion that threatens; it is its perversion we are called to resist.