

**PLAY THE GAME**

An important conference was held last week in Aarhus, Denmark. ***“Play the Game 2013- Stepping up for democracy in sport. “*** The aim of this conference was to discuss the essential issues in sport. Various topics were discussed and some of the speakers’ comments are indicative of the situation sport is facing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Match-fixing in football featured in the programme. Below are a few comments.

Chris Eaton, Director of the International Center for Sports Security said *“ While doping threatens the integrity of sport, match-fixing threatens sport itself. Match-fixing is the most serious threat to sport as we know it today. While the current debate places a strong emphasis on corrupt players and officials, they are of lesser importance than the fixers themselves. Criminals are applying the same tactics to the sporting world as they apply to other human activities. The lack of regulation in global sports betting only increases the opportunities for criminal gangs.”* He went on by saying *“ A market-driven “perfect storm” is approaching, driven by unregulated sports betting and organised crime, with governments as “mostly spectators”.*

Drago Kos, a former Slovenian professional football goalkeeper and referee asked *why so many East European players are tempted to fix matches. He cited the case of a Slovenian player who was forced to retire at the age of 24 after exposing match-fixing. Following his revelations, he was sacked by his club and was unable to secure a new contract. Kos said “ During his time as a referee, he acquired evidence of match-fixing, however his attempts to report the problem were unsuccessful. A call to the top sporting body was met with a request to report the incident to the police who in turn suggested he contacted the sporting body. While the situation has improved today, systems to encourage whistleblowing still do not fully acknowledge what a player has to lose. Although players are sometimes not paid, we cannot rely on self-regulation by the clubs, they are not interested and neither are the states.”*

Nick Garlick, Senior Specialist at Europol, had this to say – *Football matches are fixed on a regular basis by criminals, because for them it makes economic sense. While the rewards are often great for the fixers it is a broad network of agents and middle men who shield them from the law. The fixers employ a network of middle-men including highly skilled linguists who travel the globe making contact with players and officials. Often the least-professional members of the conspiracy were the players themselves. The gateway to the problem was “gambling by primary actors” ie. the players, managers and associates betting on their own sport. This was seen as a gateway to so called spot-betting, or the manipulation of specific aspects of a game. Although some saw spot-betting as a less severe type of match-fixing, it was the second step on the slippery slope towards full-blown match-fixing.*

That is an indication of the global match-fixing pattern. The Malta Football Association has been educating all stakeholders about the danger and pitfalls of match-fixing. Although most seem to have, partially understood the situation, we haven’t seen the expected commitment and co-operation. Some have carried on with their agendas ignoring our advice and guidance putting local football in a most precarious position. Our message to these people is that we will be persevering in our mission to protect the game from vicious and unscrupulous attacks.ft