

# Scandal dogs bidding war over Soccer World Cup

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The world of international soccer has been gripped by scandal over the awarding to Germany of the right to host the 2006 World Cup. The decision was the result of a controversial vote by the sports ruling body, FIFA, last week, in which a German victory by 12 votes to 11 over rival South Africa was made possible by the abstention of Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) President Charlie Dempsey of New Zealand, who was delegated to vote for the African country after England dropped out. If Dempsey had voted for South Africa the ballot would have been level. FIFA President Sepp Blatter favoured South Africa and would have cast the tie-breaking vote.

This has produced outrage in South Africa and provoked an internal inquiry by FIFA into the bidding war for the rights to host the World Cup. South African President Thabo Mbeki told a business conference in Midrand, near Johannesburg, that the voting procedure “has got elements of dishonesty about it”. South African Sports Minister Ngconde Balfour called the decision “a loss by one vote because one old man from New Zealand decided not to vote”. “Africa is tired of being dictated to in processes like this,” he said. Nevertheless FIFA says the vote stands.

Dempsey has been cast as a pariah figure by much of the world's media, but the 78-year-old man seems to be guilty only of having gotten in out of his depth. His justification for abstaining speaks volumes about the character of a contest over what is certainly the world's richest and for many the most prestigious sporting event.

Dempsey's version of events at times reads like a scene from the *Godfather* depicting a Mafia turf-war that somehow found its way to the cutting-room floor. He said on Monday he abstained from the final ballot in Zurich because he feared a vote for either Germany or

South Africa would be detrimental to soccer in the 11 Oceania nations, as a vote either way would have made enemies for the OFC in FIFA. He hoped the no-vote would ensure the OFC would make no enemies and stay friends with all concerned. “It had also been made clear to me by influential European interests that if I cast my vote in favour of South Africa, there would be adverse effects for OFC and FIFA,” he explained. “I thought the Asians were going to vote for South Africa, apparently there was a change at five or six in the morning—everyone was voting for everyone at one stage.... They switched, but nothing has been aimed at them,” he continued.

Last weekend Dempsey, speaking to reporters in Singapore midway through his flight home, said, “The last two days have been something horrible.... Football is no longer a sport, it's a political scene.” He explained that he had been placed under “intolerable pressure ... not by the actual bidding people, but by people on the fringe and incessant phone calls I was receiving in my room and also the attempt to bribe me.” The New Zealander said he had received calls telling him how to vote: “I did get cranky calls and I was a bit concerned about it, but it wasn't life-threatening, but I was told what I had to do.”

Initially attention was focused on the activities of the German satirical magazine *Titanic*, which had faxed 8 members of the 24-member FIFA executive committee, including Dempsey, offering small bribes for backing Germany and arranging for hotel staff to slide faxes under delegates' doors around midnight.

Dempsey told the OFC Monday, “That's when I took real fright ... that night was a nightmare. Up until the whole of the pressure came on, I would've been voting for South Africa.” He had contacted his lawyers and other delegates to the OFC before he made his decision.

Despite the satirical hoax, there was nothing imagined about the pressure on Dempsey. He has also said that amongst the calls he had received were ones from former South African President Nelson Mandela and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. "I got contact from Mr. Blair and I've got to tell you something, I discovered I was in the world scene," he said.

Dempsey's actions came at the end of a scramble over the right to an event that would bring money and political prestige for the host nation. Against a background of raging international power politics that even involved heads of state, and money being thrown around like water, FIFA delegates were forced to play often very low politics for very high stakes.

For many there were strong political considerations to register a vote for South Africa. It would be interpreted as an endorsement of Europe's staunchest ally on a continent that exports some of the world's finest soccer players, but has never hosted a World Cup tournament. Their hosting the event would also have counteracted complaints that the event is primarily Europe's baby.

The potential financial rewards for South Africa were high. Tickets for top games can fetch upwards of \$100 and this all goes to the host country. Economists had forecast that a winning bid would create 130,000 jobs, boost gross domestic product by 2 percent and lead to \$2.3 billion in foreign investment. When the bid failed the rand fell against the dollar and shares dropped by 0.7 percent.

The European soccer federation UEFA were always determined that the event be hosted in Germany, however, and the most powerful country in Europe did everything they could to make this happen. Their bid was led by footballing legend Franz Beckenbauer, who was joined by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, tennis superstar Boris Becker and supermodel Claudia Schiffer. Beckenbauer argued that the fact that West Germany had hosted the 1974 World Cup was irrelevant because of its subsequent reunification with the former East Germany. He said of the bid's success that it "should be seen as greater than that of [Germany's] World Cup victories in 1974 and 1990." A debate in parliament was interrupted for an announcement of Germany's victory.

The only fly in Germany's European ointment was England, which had made their own bid for the World Cup, having broken a "gentleman's agreement" with

Germany to back them in return for its support for England hosting the 1996 European Cup. England squandered 10 million pounds, twice as much as anyone else, on schmoozing FIFA delegates and themselves at expensive parties, booking the best hotels and hiring villas. Just over £3 million came from the national lottery. It not only promised to help develop football in countries where votes could be won like Trinidad and Thailand, but even allowed top team Manchester United to withdraw from the national FA Cup and compete in the world club championship in Brazil in an attempt to win three South American FIFA votes.

Having angered the pro-German UEFA, however, the British received just two votes and were summarily knocked out. The behind-the-scenes politicking and the prestige attached to the World Cup bid was epitomised in a somewhat bitter editorial in the July 6 edition of Britain's leading business journal, the *Financial Times*, which feigned sympathy for South Africa as an excuse for anti-German rhetoric. FIFA's not voting for South Africa after Britain's elimination, "was a shame, a mistake, and a badly missed opportunity.... As for Germany's success, it restores football to the status once described by Gary Lineker, the former England player, as a game played by 11 men against 11 men, in which Germany always wins in the end."



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