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# Match-fixing threats: Effective responses of coaches

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## ABSTRACT

Incidences of match-fixing impinge on the integrity of the game and undermine critical confidence required to grow the sport. This paper reviews match-fixing in light of recent media coverage and highlights the role coaches can play to strengthen the core values of true competition, fair play and sportsmanship. Several strategies for coaches to consider are proposed.

**Key words:** match-fixing, integrity, Tennis Integrity Unit

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## INTRODUCTION

It was front-page news in a leading newspaper, Two Charged over Alleged Tennis Match-fix Syndicate (Vedelago, 2020, p.1). The match-fixing story reported Victorian Police had charged two alleged members of the Australia wing of an international tennis match-fixing syndicate. It was alleged the syndicate had recruited low-ranked players from Europe and South America to throw matches while associates placed bets with bookies on the other side of the world.

The story's prominence on the front page was surprising given the havoc being experienced at the time by COVID-19. Sharing front-page billing with an update on the infection count from the virus demonstrated the gravity of the match-fixing story. It was a story that went to the heart of integrity in tennis, in a renowned and proud sporting nation, Australia.

Granted the majority of tennis events are on hold internationally at the time of writing this paper due to COVID-19, the interest in the integrity of tennis is however not on hold. Nor is the need to examine the threats to integrity on hold. Accordingly, it is arguably a good time to extend Valino's (2019) paper on match-fixing in tennis and highlight the role coaches can play to strengthen the fight against this serious threat to the game's integrity. Let's first put match-fixing in context and review what we mean by integrity in tennis.

## INTEGRITY IN TENNIS

Integrity in tennis is the manifestation of the ethics and values which promote community confidence in the game, including:

- Fair and honest performances and outcomes, unaffected by illegitimate enhancements or external interests.
- Positive conduct by players, administrators, officials, coaches, supporters and other stakeholders, on and off the court, which enhances the reputation and standing of competition and tennis overall (Australian Government Department of Health, 2016).



This definition highlights that the presence of integrity is a cornerstone for community confidence in the game. Integrity underpins participation rates and has a direct impact on reputations, commercial revenue and sponsorships for individuals and tennis entities including clubs, teams and associations (Wood, 2016).

In terms of threats to integrity in tennis, these are not limited to match-fixing. Threats also include doping, harassment, bullying and discrimination; child protection; health and safety issues; regulation and supply of performance and image enhancing drugs; selection disputes including those stemming from possible gender issues and governance issues. As evident in the newspaper report cited above, match-fixing and doping tend to attract more media attention than other forms of threats to the game (Wood, 2016).

## MATCH-FIXING

Match-fixing (also known as 'competition manipulation' or 'cheating to lose') involves the manipulation of an outcome or contingency by players, teams, coaches, officials and others. It can include:

- The deliberate fixing of the result of a match, or of an occurrence within the match or of a points spread
- Deliberate underperformance
- Withdrawal (tanking)
- Deliberate misapplication of the rules of competition
- Interference with the play or playing surfaces
- Abuse of insider information to support a bet placed by any of the above or placed by a gambler who has recruited such people to manipulate the outcome or contingency (Department of Health, Australian Government, 2014)

Generally, there are two key motives driving match-fixing:

- Wagering-related corruption to secure a pecuniary benefit
- Non-wagering-related manipulation, which might involve accessing prize money or qualifying points; ranking and draw manipulation; official bias and favouritism or other motivations (Wood, 2016).

Within these categories there are different types of 'fixing'. The two dominant ones are:

- Manipulating the overall outcome of a match
- Manipulating an 'event' within a match (also known as a 'spot-fix'), for example winner of the first set (Wood, 2016).

It is noted that spot-fixing compared with match-fixing is easier to execute, more difficult to detect and likely to generate a lower profit on wagering markets. Notwithstanding, the rapidly growing global wagering markets pose a significant risk to an increase in both spot-fixing and match-fixing. A wager can now be placed from virtually any location in the world and there are sophisticated criminal syndicates that make detection onerous. Alarming, tennis has been identified as a high-risk sport for match-fixing given it attracts significant and highly liquid betting markets (Wood, 2016).

It is recognised that some coaches, officials and players are vulnerable to engaging in match-fixing due to personal weaknesses and compromise, financial and other pressures or ambitions. These vulnerabilities can be exploited by criminals or others, through blackmail, extortion or grooming (IOC-INTERPOL, 2016). With respect to players, the most vulnerable are those competing in the lower-tier professional ranks where prizemoney rarely covers a player's expenses of travel, accommodation and coaching (Valino, 2019). The strongest match-fixing risk factors for coaches and other officials are negligible pay and a lack of financial security (Bricknell, 2015).

To date there are no known sanctions or prosecutions against tennis coaches for complicity in match-fixing (other than an Australian coach who committed the offence when he was a player ["Qld tennis coach avoids jail for match-fix", 2018]). This is an enviable achievement and one that can be maintained, and indeed enhanced, when coaches lead by example with a proactive response to match-fixing threats. The sphere of influence from such conduct by coaches can be extensive given they are well positioned to influence players, support persons and others in the tennis community. How might coaches take a leading role to stamp out match-fixing? Let's review some of the strategies coaches might consider.

## RESPONSES TO MATCH-FIXING THREATS BY COACHES

Coaches might consider adopting some, or all, of the following strategies depending on individual circumstances. The list of strategies is not exhaustive but rather highlights a selection for consideration.

### Keep abreast of match-fixing developments

The Tennis Integrity Unit (TIU) website (<https://www.tennisintegrityunit.com/>) is an excellent source of resources, news and inter-active material. The website also provides links to ITF Knowledge (<https://education.itftennis.com/#/entry>) and ITF Academy (<https://www.itf-academy.com/>) where additional content and on-line courses are available. Regular review of these websites can help ensure coaches have the latest knowledge about match-fixing (e.g., the methods used by criminal gangs to attempt to corrupt or comprise coaches; reporting obligations; support and counselling services; code of conduct and rules regarding betting).

### Do a financial health-check

Avoiding financial difficulties can significantly minimise the risk for coaches to be targeted by betting syndicates associated with match-fixing (Wood, 2016). It is sound practice to seek financial planning advice to avoid running up unmanageable debts. Discussing financial concerns with one's employer or a support person can also help to minimise vulnerability to match-fixing syndicates due to stressful financial circumstances.

### Play a safe game of zero betting

Not betting on matches and not instructing, encouraging or facilitating others to place bets are 'fail-proof' strategies. Absenteeism from betting on matches (or aiding others to place bets) substantially minimises the risk of any possible perception or allegation that a coach may have received a dubious, unethical or illegal payment, gift or other benefit from an involvement in match-fixing. Adopting a 'zero betting' approach ensures there is no basis to, or evidence of, wrongdoing by a coach.

### Protect 'inside' information

Coaches need to guard sensitive and confidential information (e.g., injuries to players, the form of players) that would allow others to secure an unfair advantage or financial gain from betting on a match. It is to be expected that coaches have 'inside' information about players but what they do with such information is critical. Being mindful of what coaches communicate with others is essential. It is also prudent for coaches to be mindful of the possibility communications with others may be overheard or accessed (e.g., emails left open on a computer for others to see; comments posted on social media) and subsequently misused by 'third-parties' (Young, 2012). Coaches need to be vigilant and avoid such situations when information needs to be protected.

### Do not hesitate to report

The Tennis Integrity Unit (<https://www.tennisintegrityunit.com/>) was established to investigate integrity concerns so coaches should not hesitate to report if they hear something suspicious or if approached to fix any part of a match. Coaches can take comfort knowing it is not their responsibility to

investigate matters but it is their responsibility to tell the relevant authority (it could also be an integrity unit at a coach's national association if such a unit exists) [ITF Code of Ethics, 2019]. Coaches may well find it a considerable relief to share their concerns with the Tennis Integrity Unit. Doing the right thing (by reporting concerns) can greatly enhance a coach's well-being and sense of self-worth (Young, 2009).

#### Instil in players a 'best efforts' mentality

A guiding philosophy for coaches is to encourage players to always give their best in matches, playing each point with 100% effort. Adopting this approach, both coach and player are unlikely to even entertain the idea a player would deliberately underperform or 'tank' a match. As a team, a coach and player put a protective ring around themselves from match-fixing threats because the goal is always for the player to give his/her best efforts in an ongoing pursuit of developing the player's full potential. Coaches can instil in players it is all about learning from matches, identifying areas for improvement and giving one's best endeavours both on and off the court over an extended period. There should be no shortcuts or diversions from the 'best efforts' mentality!

#### Implement education sessions and discussions with players

Coaches can conduct information sessions, and initiate fruitful discussions, about match-fixing threats with players. For example, it can be most beneficial if players understand the methods criminal groups may employ in their attempts to corrupt, compromise or blackmail players into match-fixing. It is also critical for players to understand the serious repercussions and penalties if found guilty of involvement in match-fixing. Sharing case studies of convictions (<https://www.tennisintegrityunit.com/investigations-and-sanctions>) with players can be a powerful means to illustrate how any perceived gain or benefit from match-fixing is completely eclipsed by the risk of bans, fines and reputational damage. Key information for coaches to impart to players can be sourced from the Tennis Integrity Unit, the International Tennis Federation and/or national tennis and coaching associations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Match-fixing, whether it is related to betting or not, is a curse on the game. It rocks the foundation of confidence in the game's integrity. We all want to enjoy and engage in tennis knowing the game is played honestly, fairly and with good sportsmanship. Regrettably across all levels of the game, financial gains and other benefits can entice individuals to attempt to influence the results of matches (Wood, 2016). The containment of the growing global threat of match-fixing is, to a large extent, entrusted to the Tennis Integrity Unit. However, coaches can also play a key role to strengthen the core values and rules of the game that ostracize and penalise those found to engage in match-fixing. What is of critical importance to a coach is his/her professional reputation. Taking a proactive stance against match-fixing can only enhance that reputation. It also has the advantage of positively influencing players and others in tennis given the status of coaches as mentors, role models and leaders in our sport. Match-fixing can be beaten with the help of coaches and the tennis community. To do so will have direct consequences for the many health, social, economic and cultural benefits that tennis generates when it is clean, fair, safe and inclusive.

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