

Match-fixing is a very real danger to our football – so when will the FA act?

Writes James Lawton

Lester Piggott was merely offering a wry aside as a limousine bore him through a canyon of skyscrapers to the Happy Valley racetrack in Hong Kong a few years ago. But maybe it is one worth recalling under the shadow of the latest scare that Far Eastern betting racketeers may have penetrated English football.

It speaks, after all, of an instinct – and a market – of the most disturbing force when placed, as it is now not unreasonable to fear, in

unscrupulous hands. "You know," said the Long Fella, "if all these buildings collapsed the first thing you would see is people coming out of the rubble to get a bet on."

Yes, we know well enough the strength of the wagering instinct in that part of the world, but maybe its sheer ferocity and scale need a little redefining in the wake of the Football Association's blithe announcement that there is no "timescale" on its investigation into alarming betting patterns in the Far East during the Championship match between Norwich City and Derby County.

Three days after the fears surfaced, the FA had still to contact the affected clubs at the centre of reports of huge surges of betting on the obscure game.

That is too long, by precisely three days, because we are not talking about the possibility of some passing impropriety. We are discussing the protection of the foundation stone of English football – the trust without which the whole vastly profitable circus falls apart.

When the FA chairman, Lord Triesman, asserts that English football is clean and the Derby chairman, Adam Pearson, says that inquisitive MPs should attend to other, more pressing matters, you have to wonder quite what kind of idea they have of the weight of money that could be applied to the task of match-throwing – and making nonsense of the easy assumption that tendencies of greed in English football can be comfortably contained within legal boundaries.

The truth is that English football has never been so vulnerable to subversion by the rampant force of sky-rocketing profit.

The more its popularity rises across the world, and the longer it stands out as a national game largely untouched by recurring match-fixing rumours, the juicier a target it becomes.

Triesman says that the FA will see what information there is and make an assessment at that point. "The last thing we need is guesswork." No, we don't want guesswork but we do need some work – a little proactive recognition that the astonishing popularity of the Premier League in the Far East has created an incentive for corruption unprecedented in the history of organised sport.

One insider at the heart of the British bookmak-

ing industry offers a perspective to shake down all but the most obdurate of complacency.

"No doubt people in English football are aware of the dangers and do try to be vigilant," he says, "but I also have to say I don't think anybody in the game really has a clue about what colossal amounts of betting we are talking about."

"Here, the blackest day of the bookmaking industry was when £50m was lost when Frankie Dettori rode seven winners at Ascot. In the Far East that, believe me, would be seen as a drop in the ocean. There, individual bets of millions of pounds do not cause the bat of an eyelid – don't even affect the odds. With all that money swishing around, it's pretty easy to imagine someone not thinking twice about paying huge amounts to have some guy cut a floodlight cable or get a goalie to drop one. The popularity of the Premiership in the Far East is amazing, but it's also something that has never been so threatening in the possibility that it might come back and bite English football in a very tender place.

"The irony in the current case is that the game wasn't shown live and there was no legal betting in running for that reason ... the bookies who are screaming right now are the illegals, who represent roughly half the betting market."

The details of the market are stunning. In 2003 the Hong Kong Jockey Club, aware of the huge levels of illegal betting on English football, set up its own service at the Tote counters at the Sha Tin and Happy Valley tracks. Legal betting on English football is currently running at around £2.5bn a year, and this is from a population of seven million. Illegal betting at the very least runs at the same level. The other legal market in the Far East services the Philippines and is based in Indonesia. This, staggeringly, is drawing in 15 times the Hong Kong take – and again we can add at least as much again in illegal betting.

Meanwhile, Lord Triesman assures us that there will be no guesswork, just some dreamily scheduled effort to collate a few donated facts. Even more bizarrely, Derby's Pearson should be the Norwich MPs, saying, "I think they should be looking closer at home, crime on their own doorsteps."

The trouble is that with so much at stake, everybody's football doorstep is at peril.

The threat of corruption down the years has never far away from the world's professional playing fields, of course, but never before has it carried such a capacity to be so extravagantly financed – and never before has the potential tar-

get been so clearly identified.

When eight of the Chicago White Sox baseball team were charged with throwing the 1919 World Series a street urchin was alleged to have cried to the great hero Shoeless Joe Jack, "Say it ain't so, Joe". At a time when English football has never been so well-heeled, the need for such a demand here may strike many as far fetched.

Much more so today, certainly, than when the image of English football was devastated in 1965 when 10 players, including the Sheffield Wednesday stars Tony Kay, Peter Swan and David Layne, were imprisoned for match-fixing. But if today's players are largely insulated against the bitterness that provoked the White Sox scandal – the belief of the players that they had been badly short-changed by a skinflint owner – it is surely dangerous to forget the eternal force of the gambling

addiction and the resources that can now travel west with such exploitive potential.

The brutal truth is that English football has donated no more than a pitiful fraction of its TV largesse to the protection of its most precious asset of integrity.

When Triesman spoke of a thorough investigation he begged the question of when and how it would be launched. The Football Association's entire regulation division consists of around 20 people. This is a vast improvement on the situation a few years ago, admittedly, but it is still desperately inadequate. This is especially so when you remember that the threat of match-fixing is lumped into a whole battery of other serious concerns, including discipline, drug testing, transfer dealings and contracts. The unavoidable conclusion is that football is just too thinly policed.

When do we ever hear of football breaking its own cases? The one significant bung investigation, which ended with the suspension of George Graham, was provoked by the Inland Revenue. Around that time an official of America's National Football League was staggered when he was told the circumstances. Transfer dealings were conducted by clubs and agents and players with no league supervision. "How can you protect the game's integrity like that?" asked the bemused official of a league which had a nerve centre of top investigators and lawyers.

Now we are in even more treacherous country. English football has an enemy who for the moment isn't even properly defined in official circles. But his purpose and his capacity to cause ultimate damage is plain enough. He is keen to find an edge, to extend already fabulous profit. How does he do it? He gathers – like the old-time gangsters who attempted to prey on First Division stars who couldn't afford the price of a car and travelled in third-class carriages – leads on the weak and the vulnerable and, maybe, those who are already under the weight of gambling losses.

He also carries huge amounts of cash and, if he hasn't struck yet, he has to be stopped. But by whom? It is something Lord Triesman really should have told us this week. That would have been, surely, within an appropriate timescale.

