The Secret Ingredient is Crime

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If you had a billion dollars, what would you do? Get an island, start a micro-nation, or lobby congress to outlaw healthcare? Apparently, one of the more popular choices is straight out of an “If I were a billionaire” fantasy: real-life FIFA. It seems that an increasingly popular hobby of our ultra-rich overlords is to sponsor their favourite sports team (or whatever team happens to catch the eye) to the peak of the competitive landscape. Even if its not the people but rather the corporations we’re talking about, sports just seem too attractive a marketing opportunity to pass up.

While billionaires playing around with sports isn’t exactly a recent phenomenon, it is one that has gained incredible traction this decade. It arguably all starts with the early entries of Russian oligarchs into the intensely money-centric sporting industries following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The most famous member of this club, which includes names like Alisher Usmanov, is Roman Abramovich, one of the world’s richest, Vladimir Putin’s BFF, and the famous owner of Chelsea FC. Since the noughties, however, there have been atleast two waves of further investment that have changed the sports landscape. The first was the entry of the ultra-wealthy princes and profiteers of the Middle East, like Man City’s Sheikh Mansour or the Saudi hosts of Joshua v Ruiz. The other wave came from the ever-present China, which has an extremely successful strategy that has taken it to the top of not just sports but essentially every industry that accepts foreign investment. For people as rich as the 1%, sports often fall into the same category as yachts, ultra-expensive paintings and tax evasion: a bit of fun mucking around.

The intentions behind these extensive investments (which amount in the hundreds of billions) are, of course, quite impossible to predict for those of us who have to get by without slaves and gold- plated phones. While some, such as Abramovich, who attends every game at the Stamford Bridge and famously made 2.5 billion(!) dollars in charitable investments in the part of Russia hit hardest by the Soviet collapse, or Mark Cuban, who has repeatedly proven a true passion for basketball and the Dallas Mavericks, seem to have fairly above-board intentions and actually care about their sport of choice, the same cannot be said for others. Red Bull, for example, is a very prominent name, with their teams in both football and Formula One racing; but their interests come from a blatant financial and public relations angle, which is in part why there has been a massive amount of anger from fans directed at them.

At the end of the day, the overwhelming majority of theories that attempt to explain the spike in sports investments by otherwise uninterested billionaire persons and corporations revolve around either white-collar crime, or self-serving interests. It simply can’t be a coincidence that in the world of “creative accounting” and soft power projection, so many of the usual suspects have decided to pollute the world of sports.

One possible motivation, and one that has repeatedly been suggested is what is known as sportwashing. When problematic players like Saudi Arabia, China, and the innumerable MNCs who happily exploit slave and child labour start buying up your favourite sports teams and players, it can only help their public relations, establish a legitimacy for their actions. The association between your team and its suspect owners eventually means that you’ll start supporting both, defending the actions of the rich, the ruthless, and the right-violators as an extension of your support for that one guy who can hit the ball good. By thus winning the war of media and publicity, billionaires, corporations and government regimes alike can get away unnoticed (or uncared about) with horrific violations of both laws and ethics.

Similarly, another likely motive that keeps cropping up is, quite simply, tax evasion. Apparently big companies aren’t satisfied with just the benefits of moving to Ireland, they also like to exploit the tax breaks that owning Ireland’s sports professionals brings. When you (or, well, you in the future after having killed a few kids via capitalism) buy a sports team, you can then write off most of your purchase price against the team’s taxable income, thus enabling you to keep your vast unearned wealth away from the grubby hands of the healthcare-loving government.

Of course, both reasons have significant overlap. Take Qatar, for example, currently slotted to host the 2022 World Cup. By receiving funding for stadiums and the usual infrastructure while simultaneously using slave labour, Qatar manages to be profitable to a vast degree; simultaneously, like Russia before it, Qatar gets the benefit of massive tourist interest and free publicity from the world’s largest sporting event.

All in all, there is quite some depth behind the 1%’s reasoning in taking over sports. Whether it’s Steve Ballmer with the Clippers, or Sheikh Mansour with the City football Empire, or China’s interests in the NBA and LeBron; if you’re wondering why they care about sports, remember, the secret ingredient is crime.