

Flying circus



FIFA

Corruption in Fifa is alive and well, and living in the Caribbean, writes Andrew Jennings, as FA blazers prepare to kowtow to the wishes of the all-powerful Jack Warner

WHY is the English FA terrified of offending sleazy Jack Warner? This evening they'll be bowing and scraping to him at the Hasely Crawford stadium in Trinidad and praying their team don't humiliate the locals (Not so likely after the Wembley sleep-walking on Wednesday).

The conventional wisdom is that Fifa vice-president Jack must be "looked after" if England is to host the 2018 World Cup. Jack controls three of the 24 votes at Fifa's executive committee and so the weary English squad have been airlifted across the Atlantic for a game nobody – except Warner who is charging record ticket prices – wants.

But there's another, longer-term, secret agenda behind the cringing. The English are out there grafting for all four home nations, making sure that senior blazers continue enjoying Fifa's rich lifestyle – alongside Warner.

Traditionally the Brits have held a vice-presidency at Fifa. David Will was there for 17 years and when John McBeth spoke the truth about Fifa he was quickly dumped for England's compliant Geoff Thompson.

Geoff knows he's in Warner's crosshairs. Tucked in his flight bag is a tattered old fax he's been hiding from us. It begins "My dear President and Friend" and coming from Warner, that's enough to send a chill down the spine. It gets worse.

The heading is, "Proposal to change Fifa's statutes." It seems there had been a matey chat between Jack 'n' Geoff about the future of the British vice-presidency. Jack, taking a break from touting World Cup tickets by the tonne, had agreed not to use his considerable muscle to end this privilege. This was "because of our trusted friendship of long standing."

Not any more. The fax dates from the spring of 2002 and that glorious moment when it seemed possible the Blatter-Warner junta at Fifa might be swept away in a tide of scandal.

The English had squeaked support for change and

Warner noted, "Recent utterances ... have planted grave doubts in my mind as to whether Great Britain would retain its status quo... based on your response, therefore, I would be able to determine what my future position will be on this matter."

Warner's little chopper has hung over Britain's seat ever since. In January last year he threatened again, "If I can get support I will fight to have it abolished."

Warner controls 35 votes at Fifa; one wrong word and the Brits could be relegated to the outer darkneses of Fifa with less clout than Papua New Guinea. So as Fifa's scandals mount – bribes, ticket rackets, burgeoning legal bills – don't be surprised at the silence from the blazers of this offshore island.

Warner's latest ambush for the nervous English – it's got the London hacks into a tizzy of misunderstanding – is the "revelation" that the USA may bid to host 2018. Who says so? American blazer Sunil Gulati. Who he? Mr Gulati is one of Warner's entourage at the regional confederation he presides over, Concacaf. Gulati wouldn't speak without Warner's prompting.

Despite this theatrical diversion, it's unlikely the World Cup will go to America again while Warner has a say. Why? Business there is too accountable, too transparent for Warner and his rackets. Last thing Jack wants is the Feds and the Internal Revenue gumshoes checking the takings. Think Enron, think jail.

If the agitated English want to discover who is the front-runner in the race for 2018 they should make a detour on their road to the airport tomorrow and drop by Warner's vast commercial-

cial leisure, soccer, health club and convention complex, the Centre of Excellence – paid for, of course, by Fifa.

One of the multi-purpose halls is named after Sepp Blatter. It should be. He provided the cash. The other big one is the Guillermo Canedo hall. Mexican TV mogul Canedo was a member of Fifa's ruling group from 1962 until his death in 1997. His tightness with long-time president Joao Havelange brought the World Cup to Mexico in 1970 and again in 1986 and truckloads of dollars for Canedo's Televisa company. Warner learned at his knee.

Canedo's son, another Guillermo, is a vice-president of Warner's Concacaf, far senior to America's Mr Gulati. Warner is frequently airlifted to Mexico City by private jet to talk privately with Guillermo and Mexico's president. Mexican business practices have never been tarnished by allegations of transparency.

One of my better sources in the real world of Fifa, where money comes first and football last, tells me that at this stage in the race, Mexico is indeed where the money is, even though they haven't made a formal declaration like the eager English.

The choice of host for 2018 – and possibly 2022 – is the last possible big payday for the ageing generation at Fifa who thought kickbacks on contracts and bribes were theirs by right. For the English, it may be the Mexican wave – goodbye.

But not before making the Warner family richer. Recalling McBeth's disclosure that when Scotland entertained Trinidad & Tobago at Easter Road in May 2004, Jack Warner asked that the \$75,000 match fee be paid to his personal account, I emailed the FA's press office. They told me they were "absolutely confident" there would be no hanky-panky by Warner and his family.

That was comforting – until I saw an advert, posted on the official England fans website. It featured some gorgeous Trinidad women enticing visitors for a "Lunch & Lime" party before the game. It was promoted by Warner's T&TFF and the entry fee was £70. Before I could calculate the FA's commission on this money spinner, the blogging began.

"Does the price include the barmaid?" queried one fan. "Can I drink £70 worth of alcohol in five hours," wondered another. Then there was, "Bargain – I was a bit worried that we might get turned over when we got there." And, "You're having a laugh!"

Then it got personal. "Is the money payable to Mr Warner, perchance?" Finally, "This event is a sicko scam."

Embarrassed FA officials swiftly erased any mention of the £70 fee. With only 750 England fans bothering to attend what some call "a meaningless game" Mr Warner may be unhappy. So the FA won't risk raising human rights issues with the football dictator of the Caribbean.

In 2006 Fifa signed a recognition agreement with FIFPro, the International Federation of Professional Football Players and most leading football nations followed suit with their national players association. But not Jack Warner. He sneers at the Trinidad players association.

The FA's new chairman is Lord David Triesman, a former trade union and Labour Party general secretary. I asked if he would urge Warner to comply with Fifa policy.

"This is not the business of the FA" riposted a press office blazer.

