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## **It seems the folks in the soccer world don't like paying taxes any more than the rest of us - by Paul Dion**

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Americans love a champion, and every year, sports fans get to see new champions crowned. We've got a World Series, a Super Bowl, and NBA finals that drag on for months. We've got the Kentucky Derby, the Indianapolis 500, and the Nathan's Famous National Hot Dog Eating Contest. And every even-numbered year, the Olympics bring us more exotic champions in curling, synchronized swimming, and dancing horses.

But there's one event that mobilizes the rest of the world in a frenzy of competition: soccer's World Cup. A billion people watched France defeat Argentina, 4-3, in a perfectly ordinary first-round-of-finals game. And more than three billion will watch the final match on July 15th in Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium. That's almost half the population of the globe.

Tax collectors across the world will join their countrymen to cheer their countries' teams. But they'll have another reason to watch. It seems the folks in the soccer world don't like paying taxes any more than the rest of us. And there are nearly enough tax cheats in the sport to fill out an entire bracket's worth!

In 2011, IRS investigators used tax charges to "flip" Chuck Blazer, a member of soccer's international governing body, into wearing a wire to help indict 14 corrupt officials on charges of racketeering, wire fraud, and money laundering. Blazer, a 450-pound Falstaffian figure, lived large on his share of those bribes, keeping two apartments at Trump Tower: An \$18,000/month three-bedroom for himself and a \$6,000/month one-bedroom next door for his cats.

IRS Criminal Investigation head Richard Weber couldn't resist some obvious puns after the eventual arrests, announcing "This is the World Cup of fraud, and today we are issuing FIFA a red card," he said. But really, the jokes just write themselves. How about "Corrupt soccer officials couldn't keep hands off the cash"? Or maybe, "Prosecutors score GOOOOAAAALLLLL against corruption"?

In 2013, Spanish authorities accused superstar striker Lionel Messi of using companies in Belize, Uruguay, and Switzerland to evade 4.1 million Euros in tax on endorsement earnings. Messi, an Argentinean who plays professionally for Barcelona, said he wasn't involved in the details. (Like a player faking injury for a ref, he said "I just played football," and claimed he signed whatever his father put in front of him.) Nevertheless, he made a 5.3 million Euro "corrective payment" equal to the tax plus interest to settle the charges.

But prosecutors insisted on penalty kicks, and in 2016, a court found Messi and his father guilty on three counts of fraud. (Clearly not Messi-ing around, right?) The court imposed a 21-month prison sentence (which was automatically suspended under Spanish law) and fined the pair another 3.1 million Euros.

Not to be outdone, Messi's arch-rival Cristiano Ronaldo, who plays professionally for Real Madrid, just announced he would pay Spain 18.7 million Euros to settle tax charges centered on his endorsements. Now, fans who bicker over who's the better player can start bickering over who's the better tax evader.

What kind of football do you prefer, the kind with headshots or the kind with helmets? Either way, we're sure you'd rather follow your favorite team than spend time looking for missed opportunities on your taxes. That's where our team comes in! So call for a plan, and see where in the world you can go with your savings!

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