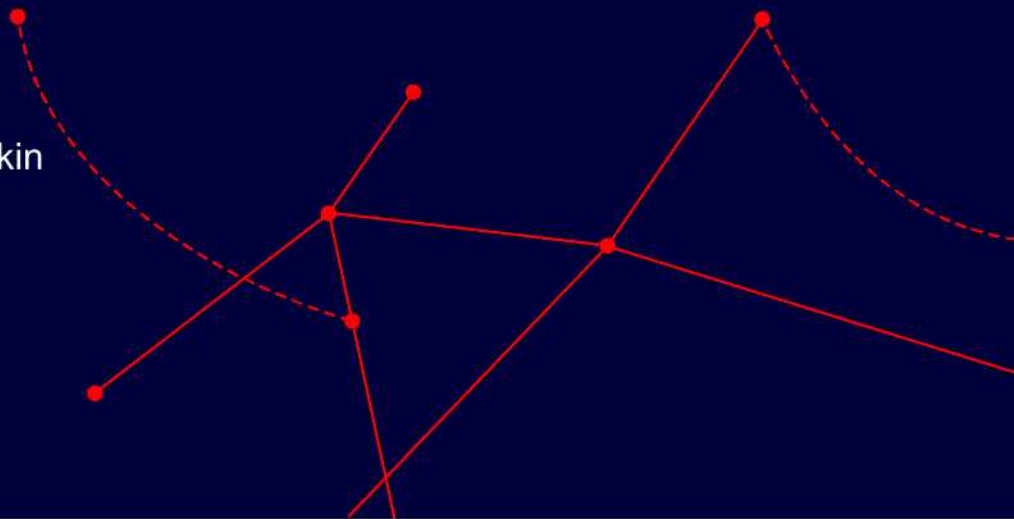# Sportradar

Ghost Games: An explanation

Written by: Oscar Brodkin

06-April-2020

sportradar

Introduction

In late March 2020, it was widely reported that a number of "Ghost Games" took place in Ukraine on 25th and 26th March. The undisputed facts are that a tournament named the "Azov Cup" was proposed and uploaded by persons as yet unknown on a fake "official website" (now defunct)[1]/[2] and a fake Facebook page purporting to be the club FC Berdyansk.[3] This led to a betting data provider offering the match to its clients both pre-match and live. On the 27th March and since, Ukraine FA and spokespeople for the clubs explained that the games did not take place.[4] And yet, there still appears to be some confusion as to whether any match existed; or were they instead fixed, or both. Below is a guide to ghost games - namely what they are; why and how they take place, and how to stop them.

Definition

A ghost game is a match which simply does not take place as stated, and is falsely advertised to bookmakers, punters and the public, in order to achieve profit from the betting markets, with the perpetrators having advanced knowledge of the final score, which they have decided. This differs from two other events:

Fake Teams

In 2009, Zimbabwe were scheduled to play a friendly game against Malaysia; however, instead, a team named Monomotapa United turned up and duly lost in a match fixed for betting purposes.[5]

In 2010, the Togo National Team played with a team of imposters against Bahrain. Again, the aim was to fix the match for betting purposes.[6]

In both of these cases, the game in fact existed, but the strength of one or both of the teams was not as advertised and therefore the fixer had a distinct advantage over the bookmaker.

Fixed Matches

Matches fixed for betting profits happen every day and they are real in every way. The games do take place as advertised, the teams (or individuals) are full-strength, but intend to

---

[1] http://koff.co.ua/

[2] http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://koff.co.ua/ (cached version)

[3] https://www.facebook.com/fc.berdyansk.9 (now removed)

[4] 2020, March 12, 'Bookmakers took bets on matches of Ukrainian regional teams' (online). UA Tribuna, https://m.ua.tribuna.com/football/1084540706.html

[5] Staff Writer, 2011, May 07, 'Match-fixing Probe', New Straits Times, https://www.asiaone.com/print/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Malaysia/Story/A1Story20110507-277559.html

[6] Staff Writer, 2010, September 15, 'Fake Togo team linked to match-fixing allegation', (online), *The Telegraph*, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/8005163/Fake-Togo-team-linked-to-match-fixing-allegation.html

manipulate some or all of the match contrary to the betting markets' expectations. Referees can also be used to achieve the desired result.

The Market

Over half a million sporting contests are made available for live betting each year. In order for such matches to be offered for betting, one generally needs a 'data scout' who relays the information on the pitch, via fast data feed (provided by a data supply company), to punters who follow the match on their chosen screen, at their chosen bookmaker, in a digestible but life-like format.
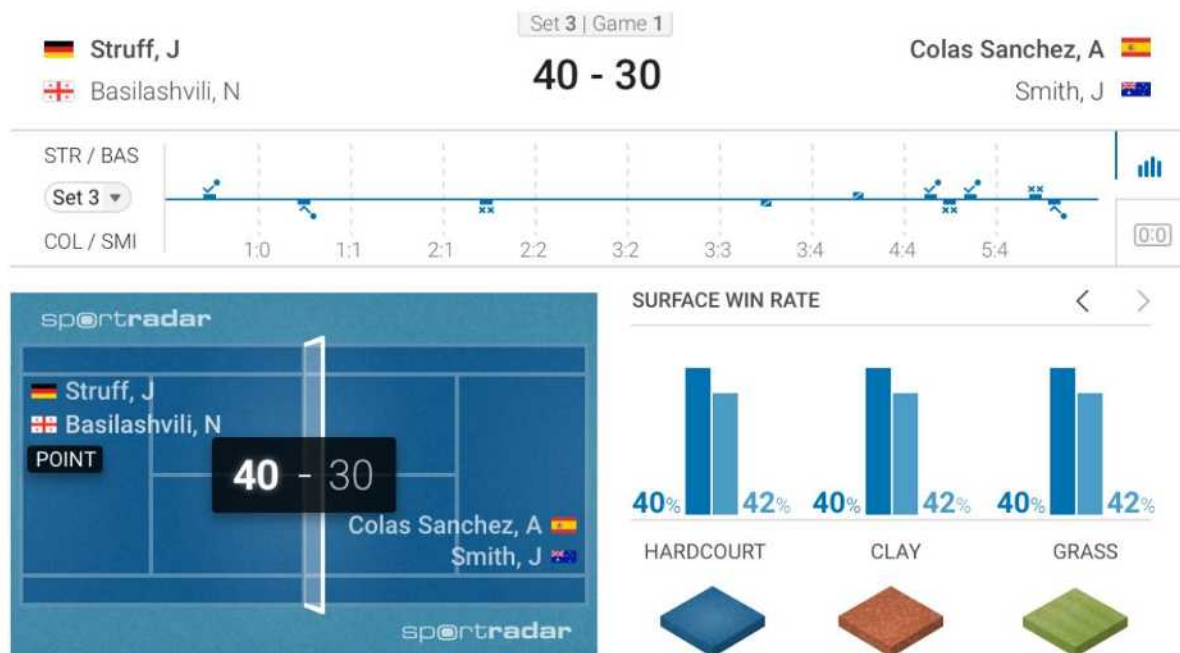

Figure 1: An example of data communicated from a tennis match which is displayed to the bettor

The aim of most bettors is to "beat the market" i.e. to have a better grasp of the probabilities than the bookmaker. However, some who cannot beat the market fairly, resort to gaining advance knowledge of the results. One of these methods is data fraud.

Data Fraud

Data is attempted to be manipulated by scouts in three main ways, each more audacious than the other. Like most types of fraud, the smaller frauds attempt to fly under the radar with low risk and low rewards; however, at the upper end, the risks are high, but so too are the profits. Below is a description of each sub-type of data fraud from the common 'delay' to the more infamous ghost game.

Small delay of approximately ten to thirty seconds in entering goals or a red card

This is the easiest method and the most commonly occurring type of data fraud. Data scouts deliberately delay the input of goals or significant events by ten to thirty seconds so their corrupt associates can place bets already knowing the outcome.

Bookmakers generally have a bet-delay of around six seconds (meaning the gap between a punter placing a bet and the bookmaker accepting it) so that they can protect themselves against the risk of slight delay in their live data feeds. However, longer bet-delays are not desirable as they create a negative user experience in a business where speed of transaction is commercially advantageous.

It's worth pointing out the difference here between this type of activity and that of *courtsiders*.[7] Courtsiders are not involved in fraudulent activity – rather than corruptly manipulating the fast data feed (as happens with data fraud), they physically attend sporting events to try to be faster than it. This enables them to place bets on an event or outcome before the market has adjusted its position, thereby either getting a price advantage or a certain outcome. Whilst this is obviously undesirable for bookmakers, it does not involve manipulation/corruption of the system.

Getting the game to kick-off 30 minutes early or delaying the kick-off time online

This is much more difficult to be realised, but the profits here can be far larger than a small delay. It cannot happen in top-tier sporting events due to their matches being so widely covered through broadcast, online and within social media. It is therefore only possible in lower leagues and reserve/youth/friendly matches. By having the match kick-off significantly earlier than advertised, but maintaining the appearance of the scheduled kick-off time, fraudsters have the possibility to place many more successful bets (with as much as thirty minutes advanced knowledge).

Similar to a ghost game, they may fraudulently advertise the match as kicking off 30 minutes later than the real start time. In order to achieve this, they may bribe owners of clubs or local sport sites or even have sites under their supervision using hackers or 'sock puppets'.[8]

Ghost Match

This is different to the two other methods of data fraud because in both of the aforementioned cases, the matches physically take place. However, a ghost match is a simulacrum, invented for the purpose of fraudulent profit-making. It still requires a data scout to input "live" data but in the case of a ghost match, fixers are not just 30 seconds or 30 minutes ahead of the action; they are aware of the final score because the events are inputted at their discretion. To pull off a ghost match, a scout or a syndicate much adhere to a number of principles, plan methodically, execute and ride their luck.

The ghost match must strike the perfect balance between low profile and appealing for bettors. For instance, if criminals dared to pretend Real Madrid were playing a friendly vs. Galatasaray at 7.30pm on a Tuesday in Istanbul, there would be thousands of people noticing that this match does not exist due to the fact they can't purchase tickets or the players are tweeting from their homes thousands of miles away. On the other hand, if one wants to create a ghost game between two unknown chess players, the match won't even be offered for betting.

---

[7] A courtsider is someone who views the action in real time and takes advantage of bookmakers slow to change their odds by betting with advanced but not 'illegal' knowledge
[8] Kerr, Jack, 2015, November 25, 'Timor: sock puppets infiltrate Opta database', (online), *Sport Integrity Initiative*, http://www.sportsintegrityinitiative.com/timor-sock-puppets-infiltrate-opta-database/

Once the match and location has been picked, some form of false promotion will take place on Facebook, Twitter, a fake website or prominent blog. Next, a data scout needs to offer to cover the match for a data provider so that he or she can control the information from the match.

In reality, the scout will not be at the advertised match, but simply communicating events which do not exist. Lastly, the match must be offered for betting, and if the above steps were completed free of suspicion, the ghost match will go ahead.

Who Cares?

Ghost games and data fraud in general matter for four main reasons and affect different stakeholders.

Firstly, the profits for a ghost match are quite sizeable depending on the match chosen to falsify and the limits allowed by the bookmaker. But if a particular ghost match in, say, Costa Rica was executed and the betting was fully exploitative of the half and full-time result, as much as $300,000 could be gained. These sums can contribute to Organized Crime or can be reinvested to plan real fixes where players, coaches and referees are needed.

Secondly, there is considerable reputational damage to the individual club, federation, the confederation and even the sport itself. In the case of the Belarusian ghost match between SFC Slutsk and SFC Shakhter on February 3rd 2015, The Telegraph[9] featured the story. Through no fault of their own, the league might suffer financial loss such as sponsor withdrawal.

Most of all, the betting industry suffers – both the bookmakers and bettors alike. The bookmakers often have to void losing bets, but pay winners. The punter loses confidence in the site or the pastime itself, leading to a downtrend in revenues.

Lastly, data providers are constantly tested by these criminal elements and have to dedicate large resources to fighting against such fraud. Their reputation can be tarnished - similar to a data breach in the cyber world – as their name in the marketplace depends on the validity of their sports data.

How to Stop Them?

In 2020, with the technology and methods available, any bookmaker, data provider, club or federation could suffer the embarrassment of a ghost game. More specifically, all data providers who employ scouts or attempt to verify information from official sources are susceptible to data fraud and/or ghost games. And yet, there are methods of detecting and preventing such instances.[10]

---

[9] Rumsby, Ben. 2015, February 18th, 'Revealed: the ghost game which took place around the world..that never actually took place', (online), *The Telegraph*, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/news/11421732/Revealed-the-ghost-game-bet-on-around-the-world...that-never-actually-took-place.html

[10] This article will not detail all methods so as not to inform any would-be fraudsters

Data providers such as Sportradar vet their scouts in order to prevent criminals from infiltrating their network. It is well known that fraudsters will often have runners or go-betweens apply on their behalf, subsequently to allow the real syndicate to attend or ghost the matches. And yet, real-time and face-to-face interviews (online or in person) prevent this particular swindle. Every previous instance of corruption within the data arena is logged and can be connected to a current case using state-of-the-art detection and connection tools.

Next, when in the ground, the scout must prove with audio and visual means that they are at the game; even background noise can be recorded to verify the individual is present at the correct match. If any downtime occurs, the scout can be contacted to report on what happened and their explanations are once again verified. Bookmakers will report incidents of suspicious betting to data operators relating to data fraud. For instance, if a bookmaker registers extremely strong betting for Team A to lose 30 seconds before a red card, this is noteworthy.

The operator must then work out if the betting is related to data fraud, match-fixing or even courtsiding which is in itself no easy task. Lastly, and most importantly, all fixtures must be verified, which includes checking whether the website advertising the game is official or fake. For a large data provider, scouting hundreds of thousands of matches, a large team is needed for the fixture quality assurance, monitoring and investigation of incidents.

.
Previous Ghost Games

On 16th January 2012, Turkmenistan U21 played Maldives U21 in an end-to-end belter, eventually finishing 3:2. The only issue is that the game never existed and is one of a handful of the aforementioned ghost matches which have taken place over the years in 'locations' such as Portugal, Belarus, Armenia and now Ukraine. Odds were indeed offered, and live scores were communicated.

Figure 2: A screenshot from a betting website offering the Turkmenistan U21 vs. Maldives U21 match

Figure 3: A screenshot from a score website showing the result and the goal times
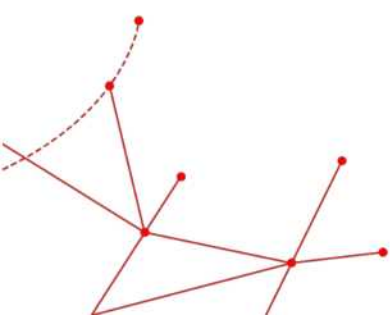
Match	Date	Link
Turkmenistan U-21 vs. Maldives U-21	16-Jan-12	http://m.espn.com/soccer/story?storyId=7927946&lang=EN&wjb=&pg=1
Ulisses Yerevan vs. Gandzasar Kapan	29-Jan-14	http://www.sportsintegrityinitiative.com/the-ghost-game-phenomenon/
Freamunde vs. Ponferradina	4-Aug-14	http://www.playthegame.org/news/news-articles/2015/0068_the-ghosts-fixed-the-match/
FC Slutsk vs. Shakhter Soligorsk	3-Feb-15	https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/news/11421732/Revealed-the-ghost-game-bet-on-around-the-world...that-never-actually-took-place.html
PFC Montana vs Sapovnela Terjola	14-Jan-2016	Not reported on
PFC Montana vs. Norderstedt	18-Jan-2016	Not reported on
Ghana U23 vs. Niger U23	26-July-2019	https://livescore.football365.com/international-friendlies-u23-ghana-u23-vs-niger-u23/26-07-2019/901113#history

Table 1: A table of recorded and suspected ghost matches

In Summary

And yet, for all the hype and intrigue related to ghost matches, in truth, they are relatively rare and not on the rise or a perennial problem in football or any other sport. Technology is a legitimate data provider's friend and a robust impediment to this form of criminal activity. Indeed, whilst sites can be hacked and false information widely spread, the methods for ensuring matches are real are clearly assisted by the use of appropriate technology and techniques, not to mention the rise in globally accessible social media. The dangers still lurk and far-fetched schemes such as fake audio or even video content pose a threat, but ghost matches do seem to be on the decline (even these current ones were swiftly identified).

Overall, ghost matches will continue to be a source of intrigue and a target for opportunists, but effective measures - spearheaded by legitimate forward-thinking data providers - are in place to combat such rare phenomena.