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Times Online

June 19, 2006

Anxious wait for schoolkids in World Cup ticket scam

BY DEVIKA BHAT AND SEAN O'NEILL IN COLOGNE

Hundreds more children face the prospect of missing out on attending a World Cup match after organisers of a schools outing fell victim to an international ticket scam.

Nearly 400 children aged 11 to 15 from schools across the country have already been disappointed after the travel agent which organised their "World Cup Experience" was defrauded by a British-based internet ticket agency.

Now a further 324 English youngsters due to see a match on Friday could be set to lose out as organisers admitted they had not yet received official confirmation on whether they had secured tickets with a new agent.

Representatives from the travel agent Activ4, which is organising the trips, realised that they had been conned upon arriving at Cologne airport where they were supposed to collect the tickets for a match last Saturday, only to find that no one had turned up from the internet agency, which is based in Swanlea, Kent.

John McBride, sales director of Activ4, said that the company had been forced to turn to the website after originally being let down by a Florida-based ticket agent which bore the official Fifa logo on its website, but was not authorised to do so.

Since the alleged fraud by the Kent website, Activ4 has yet again been forced to look elsewhere for tickets for one of the three matches to be played on Friday. Although it is in the final stages of a deal with a new agent, it has yet to receive confirmation that it has guaranteed tickets.

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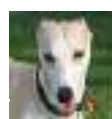
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Children and their parents affected by the scam today voiced their disappointment. Beverley Dodgson, from Hayling Island, Portsmouth, said that her 13-year-old son, Jack, had been looking forward to the experience since last year when the trip was booked.

"He is hugely disappointed and utterly deflated," she told *The Times*.

"This was a once in a lifetime opportunity and it cost a lot of money to send him out there. He lives football and had prepared a giant flag to wave in the crowd. It's really terrible to do this to children."

Mrs Dodgson's son was part of a group of 23 boys from Mayville High School in Portsmouth who had flown to Cologne along with more than 300 others. Headteacher Linda Owens said: "The children have been looking forward to this a great deal and it's a huge disappointment for them.

"The whole point of the trip was to see a World Cup match, to get the flavour of what it would be like, the excitement of it. But the boys have been amazingly good, despite how devastated they obviously are."

Joshua Hunter, 12, from Hayling Island, said: "I was just really annoyed. I can't believe someone would do that to children. We had seen the World Cup on TV, we had been talking about it with friends before going and we had been waiting a long time for this trip, but when this happened, it was so disappointing."

His mother Linda said: "We are just devastated because we can't believe people would target children at schools and they were all so looking forward to it.

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