



# The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

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Editor-in-Chief – Dr. Muktai Deb Chavan; Publisher – Alden Vas; ISSN: 2583-9896

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## GAME, SET, COURT: NAVIGATING LEGAL CHALLENGES IN INDIA'S SPORTS INDUSTRY

*-ANKITA MISHRA*

### INTRODUCTION

Sports in India have evolved from a pastime into a multi-billion-rupee industry, driven by leagues such as the Indian Premier League and Indian Super League, along with the growth of digital streaming and fantasy gaming platforms. With increasing commercialization, the sports sector now faces several legal challenges involving player contracts, broadcasting rights, sponsorships, governance, and regulatory oversight.

The rapid expansion of the industry has also led to concerns relating to doping, match-fixing, intellectual property rights, athlete welfare, and transparency in sports administration. Courts and regulatory authorities have therefore played an important role in resolving disputes and ensuring accountability within the sector.

This blog examines the major legal issues in the Indian sports industry, including governance controversies, contractual disputes, doping regulations, media rights, and athlete protection, while highlighting the growing role of law in modern sports governance in India.

### BACKGROUND- COMMERCIAL GROWTH AND LEGAL CHALLENGES

Over the past two decades, sports in India have transformed into a commercially driven industry due to the rise of franchise based leagues such as the Indian Premier League, in cricket. Massive investments from broadcasters, sponsors, and corporate entities have turned sports into a major source of entertainment and business, with athletes turning into high value brands and stadiums

into mediacentric entertainment hubs. This commercial growth has also extended to football with the ISL, kabaddi with the Pro Kabaddi League, and emerging interest in leagues for hockey, badminton, and e-sports.

However, rapid monetization has exposed structural weaknesses in India's sports governance. The absence of a unified sports law, overlapping authority between the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, affiliated National Sports Federations, and private league bodies, along with limited transparency in decision making, has created fertile ground for legal disputes. Issues such as opaque bidding processes, franchise conflicts, player contract disagreements, gambling and fantasy sports regulations, and rights clearances have become recurring themes. At the same time, commercialization has intensified concerns around player welfare, image rights exploitation, data privacy, and the balance between commercial interests and sporting integrity.

As the sports industry continues to grow, the Indian legal system is playing an increasingly important role in balancing commercial interests with fairness, accountability, and the integrity of sports.

## **MAJOR LEGAL ISSUES IN THE INDIAN SPORTS INDUSTRY**

### **1. Match Fixing: *When the pitch is rigged, not the game.***

Match fixing is one of the most serious ethical and legal threats to the integrity of sport in India. It involves players, officials, or third parties manipulating the outcome or course of a match for financial gain, often through betting syndicates. In India, such conduct falls under the ambit of gambling and cheating laws, apart from being governed by the disciplinary codes of sports federations and leagues.

Match fixing is the nightmare that haunts the credibility of Indian sport. The most famous chapter in this saga is the early-2000s cricket match fixing scandal, which led to the *CBI's investigation and the BCCI's life ban on former captain Mohammad Azharuddin and player Ajay Sharma*<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://elibrary.sansad.in/items/a7cbf4c8-379d-4090-81c8-17ed5cbc1ca8>

In that case, taped conversations, bookie player networks, and financial trails exposed how matches were being manipulated for betting gains, forcing the BCCI to invoke its Anti-Corruption Code and impose terminations. Today, this case remains a benchmark for understanding how legal and disciplinary mechanisms can and sometimes fail to protect the integrity of sport.

## **2. Doping in sports: *When the body is “enhanced” but the career ends.***

Doping refers to the use of prohibited substances or methods by athletes to enhance performance unfairly. It violates the principles of fair play and damages the integrity of sports. In India, anti-doping regulations are primarily governed by the *National Anti-Doping Agency* in accordance with the rules of the *World Anti-Doping Agency*. Several Indian athletes have faced suspensions and disqualification due to doping violations, bringing attention to the need for awareness, education, and stricter monitoring systems. Doping cases also raise legal questions concerning disciplinary procedures, athlete rights, and fair hearings.

A recent, high-profile example is the *case of DP Manu, the Indian javelin thrower, who was handed a four year ban by NADA after testing positive for a banned substance at the Indian Grand Prix athletics meet*<sup>2</sup>. Broader reports also highlight that India has seen several doping related suspensions across athletics, weightlifting, and cricket in recent years, underscoring the need for stronger legal safeguards, clearer due process standards, and statutory clout so that the anti doping system is not seen as merely a “bureaucracy with a ban hammer.”

## **3. Intellectual Property Rights in Sports: *When the logo is worth more than the player.***

Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) play a significant role in protecting the commercial value of sports. Broadcasting rights, team logos, merchandise, trademarks, and athlete image rights are major sources of revenue for sports organizations and leagues. Unauthorized use of logos, illegal streaming, and counterfeit merchandise often lead to legal disputes. The protection of trademarks

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/dp-manu-india-javelin-throw-four-year-ban-nada-doping-fail-test>

and copyrights under Indian law is therefore essential to safeguard the financial interests of sports leagues, teams, broadcasters, and athletes.

Bodies like the *Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI)* aggressively protecting their brand value. A standout case is the BCCI's trademark infringement suit against "*Indian Fantasy League*" and similar entities, where the Board successfully argued that the use of IPL style branding and domain names created a likelihood of confusion among fans.

Another key example is the *Bombay High Court decision against Grace Sports Pvt Ltd*<sup>3</sup>, which ran a junior level "IPL-like" tournament under a name too close to the official brand. The court ordered an injunction, holding that the BCCI's "IPL" trademark and associated logos were protected by commercial assets under the Trade Marks Act, 1999. These cases show how courts are treating league names, team logos, and even franchise style formats as property rights, raising fresh questions about the balance between fan led creativity and brand monopoly in the digital age.

## CONCLUSION

The Indian sports industry today stands at a fascinating intersection of glamour, commerce, and constitutionality. From match fixing scandals and doping bans to contract wars and trademark battles, the field is no longer governed only by the referee's whistle but also by the judge's pen. Each high profile case; whether it involves a life ban, a four year doping suspension, or a trademark injunction, reminds us that the integrity of sport ultimately depends on the strength and clarity of its legal framework.

Yet the current structure remains uneven; strong disciplinary codes sit alongside patchy statutory backing, and progressive policy moves often race ahead of clear enforcement mechanisms. As leagues grow, women athletes demand equality, and digital platforms reshape sponsorship and broadcasting, India needs a more coherent, athlete centric, and rights based sports law regime. Only then can the slogan "Game, Set, Court" truly reflect a system where commercial growth, sporting fairness, and legal justice play on the same side of the field.

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<sup>3</sup> Bd. of Control for Cricket in India v. Grace India Sports Pvt. Ltd., Commercial IP Suit, No. 185 of 2017 (Bom. H.C. Jan. 16, 2018).