

## The role of the Court of Arbitration for Sport in sports governance: legal trends and future challenges

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the role of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in sports governance, focusing on legal trends and future challenges. The study adopted a qualitative doctrinal and descriptive research design to examine the role of CAS in contemporary sports governance. The research focused on analysing the evolution, legal framework, jurisdiction, and emerging challenges of CAS as the leading institution for the resolution of international sports disputes. CAS has played a significant role in resolving international sports disputes by providing a specialised arbitration mechanism that ensures efficiency, neutrality, and legal certainty. It has evolved into a forum for the adjudication of sports-related disputes, ranging from doping violations and contractual disagreements to governance and disciplinary issues. Nowadays, sports-related disputes have increased considerably due to the commercialisation of sport, and CAS faces increasingly complex legal challenges in resolving such disputes. However, CAS also faces important concerns regarding the independence and impartiality of its arbitrators, as these aspects have been questioned by claims that CAS tends to favour governing bodies over individual athletes. The future effectiveness of CAS will depend on its ability to strengthen stakeholder confidence through greater transparency, enhanced procedural safeguards, broader accessibility, and continued efforts to preserve institutional independence.

### KEYWORDS

Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS); Sports Arbitration; Sports Governance; Dispute Resolution; Legal Challenges

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) has emerged as a global platform for the non-judicial resolution of disputes relating to sports activities. It settles sports-related disputes through arbitration and mediation and provides a forum for athletes, sports federations, and other stakeholders to resolve conflicts through an independent and impartial adjudicatory body. Through its specialised dispute resolution mechanisms, CAS seeks to ensure fairness and integrity in sports practices while promoting sound legal standards in arbitration (McLaren, 2001; LLC, 2021).

The CAS is seated in Lausanne, Switzerland, although arbitration proceedings may be conducted elsewhere under exceptional circumstances (CAS, 2023). Since its establishment, it has developed into a highly respected international legal institution that contributes to the protection of sporting integrity and the promotion of the fundamental principles of natural justice (Kavanagh, 1999). Due to its central role in the resolution of international sports disputes, CAS has frequently been referred to as the “World Supreme Court of Sports” (Goh et al., 2022).

In addition to providing the institutional framework necessary for sports arbitration, CAS establishes arbitral panels and supervises administrative procedures designed to facilitate the efficient and expeditious resolution of disputes (Code of Sports-related Arbitration, 2023). Its awards may be challenged before the Swiss Federal Tribunal and, in certain circumstances, before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) (Goh et al., 2022). Swiss law serves as the *lex arbitri* of CAS proceedings, while the International Council of Arbitration for Sport (ICAS) oversees its administration and is responsible for safeguarding its independence and impartiality.

Despite its remarkable success in resolving sports-related disputes, CAS has increasingly faced criticism concerning several aspects of its operation. Questions have been raised regarding the independence and impartiality of arbitrators, the limited scope of judicial review of arbitral awards, procedural constraints affecting athletes, and challenges related to transparency and enforcement. Furthermore, the growing commercialisation and globalisation of sport have generated increasingly complex legal disputes involving governance, anti-doping regulation, contractual relationships, eligibility criteria, and human rights considerations.

Against this background, the aim of this study is to examine the role of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in sports governance, with particular emphasis on its legal framework, jurisdictional development, emerging legal trends, and future challenges affecting its legitimacy, independence, and effectiveness as a global sports dispute resolution mechanism.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1. Study Design**

This study adopted a qualitative doctrinal and descriptive research design to examine the role of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in contemporary sports governance. The research focused on analysing the evolution, legal framework, jurisdiction, and emerging challenges of CAS as the leading institution for the resolution of international sports disputes.

The study was based on a comprehensive review of primary and secondary legal sources. Primary sources included the Code of Sports-related Arbitration, decisions issued by the Court of Arbitration for Sport, rulings of the Swiss Federal Tribunal, decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, and relevant international sports regulations, including the World Anti-Doping Code. Secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, books, legal commentaries, institutional reports, and academic publications related to sports law and arbitration.

### **2.2. Procedure**

Relevant literature and legal documents were identified through academic databases, institutional publications, official CAS documentation, and legal repositories. Particular attention was given to landmark cases involving anti-doping disputes, contractual conflicts, governance issues, and questions concerning the independence and legitimacy of CAS.

### **2.3. Data Analysis**

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify the principal legal trends and challenges affecting the operation of CAS. The collected materials were examined thematically and grouped into four major categories: (i) historical evolution of CAS, (ii) legal and institutional framework, (iii) jurisdictional scope, and (iv) contemporary challenges and future developments. This analytical approach enabled a critical assessment of the effectiveness of CAS in promoting fairness, consistency, and legal certainty in international sport governance.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this review indicate that the Court of Arbitration for Sport has evolved into the principal international institution for the resolution of sports-related disputes. The analysis revealed four key dimensions that explain its relevance within global sports governance: its historical evolution, the development of a specialised legal framework, the expansion of its jurisdiction, and the emergence of significant challenges concerning independence, transparency, and human rights protection. These themes are discussed below:

### 3.1. Evolution of CAS

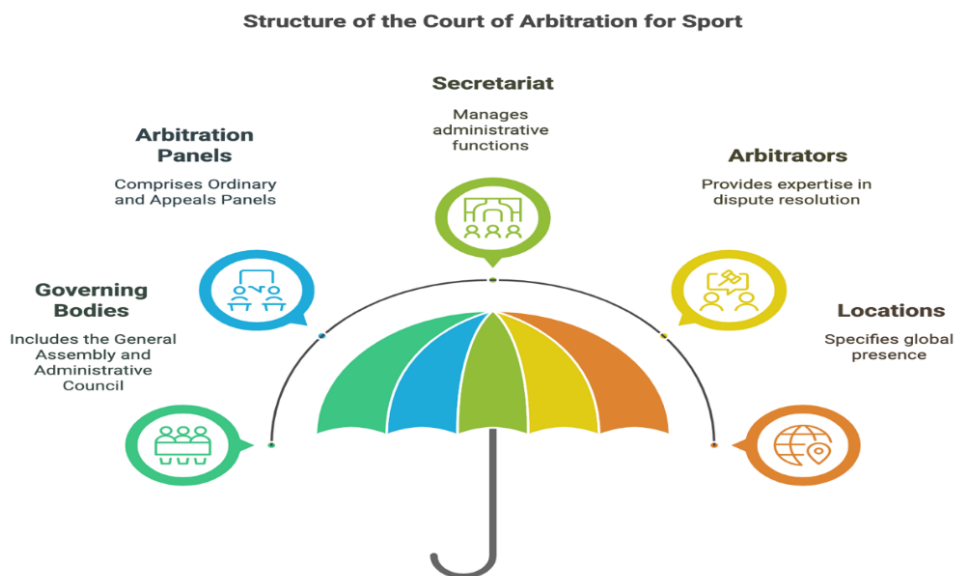
The CAS evolved in the early 1980s in response to the demand for independent and impartial settlement of legal issues in relation to sports, sports federations of national and international, national Olympic committees, and organisers of the Olympics and other games (McLaren, 2001). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) comprehended the necessity and establishment of the CAS to serve as a definitive and enforceable arbitration jurisdiction for resolving all sport-related issues, including anti-doping breaches. The concept of establishing a sport-specific jurisdiction was first proposed by former IOC President Mr. Juan Antonio Samaranch in 1981 (Kane, 2003). In the subsequent year at the IOC Session in Rome, IOC member H.E. Judge Kéba Mbaye, then serving as a judge at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, presided over a working group assigned to formulate the statutes for what would soon evolve into the CAS (CAS, 2013). The CAS as an institution evolved during the IOC session in New Delhi on 6 April 1983 (Kavangh, 1999). Further, on 30 June 1984, the CAS acquired legal status by being formally recognised in the Paris Convention, which the president signed of the IOC. The Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF), the Association of International Olympic Winter Sports Federations (AIOWF), and the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC), in the presence of the French Minister of Justice (IOC, n.d.). The CAS began operations in 1994 as an IOC-supervised entity, with the International Council of Arbitration for Sport (ICAS) emerging to oversee its activities and safeguard its impartiality. Furthermore, today, the CAS is the most prominent organisation in the world regarding drug offences, contractual disagreements, eligibility issues, and disciplinary punishments that occur inside sporting events. The CAS developed a comprehensive arbitration system incorporating *lex sportiva* (Foster, 2016) representing the laws of the official sport. The CAS Ad Hoc Division emerged in 1996 to deliver quick dispute resolutions during the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup and UEFA tournaments. The CAS Ad Hoc Division operates as a separate unit that handles urgent disputes within a single-day timeframe to maintain the uninterrupted participation of athletes and teams despite legal doubt. Hence, the influence of sports law and future arbitration norms is evidenced by CAS rulings, particularly in the Maria Sharapova doping case and the Manchester City Financial Fair Play (FFP) dispute. Therefore, the progression of CAS development transpires through the acceptance of new legal structures, enhancement of fairness methods, and response to shifts in the sports industry. With the resurgence of the global sports industry, stakeholders will emphasise sports arbitration more, making it increasingly important. The most effective arbitration mechanisms are needed with the growing integration of sports,

entertainment, commercial investment, human rights advocacy, and technology. Under CAS and emerging digital arbitration systems, authorities will resolve sporting disputes swiftly, objectively, and definitively with legal endorsement.

### **3.2. Legal Framework of CAS**

The CAS functions within the ambit of the well-organized legal framework that promotes and defends its autonomy and efficiency in adjudicating sports-related disputes. It is a specialised entity that is fundamentally focused on legal disputes within the periphery of the sports. The ICAS regulates its operations and guarantees the natural law principle of justice and impartiality in its decision-making process and financing of CAS (Code: ICAS Statutes, n.d.). The legal foundation of CAS is the code of sports-related arbitration, which delineates the procedure for regulating arbitration and mediation. The CAS strictly admires the Swiss law, which facilitates its ruling, as rulings are valid and recognised worldwide (Perruchoud, 2023). As per Article 45 of the Code, if the parties to the dispute fail to choose the application of the law, substantive and procedural Swiss law are applied in such circumstances. In *COC & Beckie Scott v. IOC* (2002) the arbitral tribunal ruled that “where the dispute cannot be resolved by applying the rules chosen by the parties, the arbitral tribunal will follow Article 45 of the Code of Sports-related Arbitration and apply Swiss law.” Furthermore, its jurisdiction guarantees a wide range of sports-related disputes, including contractual disputes, doping violations, disciplinary action and commercial issues such as broadcasting rights and sponsorship disputes (Georgi Gradev, 2025). It also has a different forum for the efficient and expeditious dispute settlement. The ordinary arbitration division entertains common sports issues, while the appeal arbitration division critically evaluates decisions rendered by sports organisations, international federations and anti-doping authorities (Stuart E. Willick MD, 2016). Likewise, the CAS also offers mediation services, which promote a non-binding yet conciliatory resolution process for sports-related disputes. Further, the CAS awards are conclusive in nature and obligatory, which signifies that once an award is rendered, it must be accepted by all parties. They are enforceable by virtue of the New York Convention (1958), which facilitates the international recognition of the arbitral award (UNFA, 1958). While CAS is conducted independently, although, its awards may be subject to limited review by the Swiss Federal Tribunal, which ensures judicial oversight and prevents any misuse of authority. A panel of experts in sports law and arbitration is selected by CAS to serve as arbitrators, ensuring impartiality and equity (Acries, 2021). The rules of procedure ensure openness, effectiveness, and adherence to natural justice principles. Through the years, the Court of Arbitration for Sports (CAS) has significantly impacted the maintenance of integrity in the governance of

international sports by providing an alternative to traditional judicial procedures that is expedient, flexible, and cost-effective.



**Figure 1.** Structure of the court of arbitration for sport

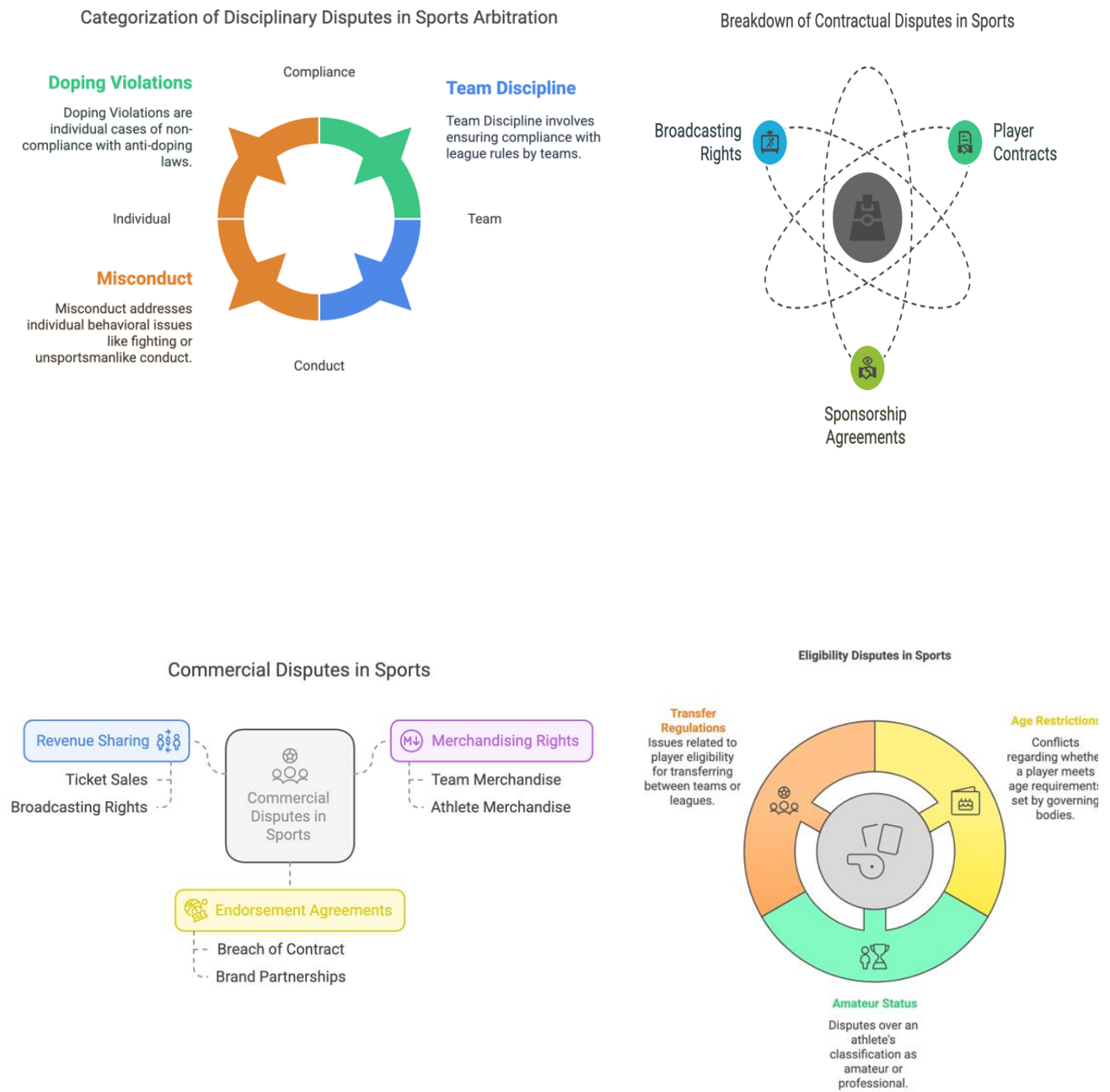
### 3.3. Jurisdiction of CAS

The CAS's jurisdiction and authority as an arbitration tribunal are based on the parties' agreement (Mitten, 2014). Further, the courts typically uphold a written arbitration agreement mandating that parties submit disputes to the CAS for resolution, as well as International Olympic Committee (IOC) or International Federation (IF) regulations necessitating arbitration before the CAS as a prerequisite for participation in Olympic or international athletic competitions, thereby prohibiting athletes from litigating the substantive merits of the dispute in a judicial forum (Mitten, 2014). Moreover, the CAS comprises over 300 arbitrators from 87 nations, selected for their arbitration and sports law expertise. Approximately 300 instances are documented by the CAS annually (CAS, n.d.). A dispute can be referred to the CAS only if an arbitration agreement exists between the parties that explicitly designates the CAS as the forum for resolution. Moreover, the jurisdiction of the CAS also encompasses any private disputes relating to the sport. The S12 of the CAS Code provided that it “constitutes Panels which have the responsibility of resolving disputes arising in the context of the sport by arbitration and/or mediation pursuant to the Procedural Rules.” This extensively extends the ambit of the CAS jurisdiction. The CAS has adjudicated the issues of diverse nationality athletes, entertaining disputes, television broadcasting and market rights. Most of

the disputes brought to CAS relating to appeals against disciplinary actions were heard by the competent sports authorities and international federations. Most of such appeals relate to doping issues and, as well as field sporting violence, the mistreatment of horses participating in equestrian events (Matthieu Reeb, 2002). The selection of athletes for national representative teams and formal recognition of athletic events are legitimate selection criteria (Kane, 2003). Further, (i) the CAS has exercised extensive jurisdiction over doping matters under the aegis of the World Anti-Doping Code (WADC), serving as the ultimate appellate authority for conflicts involving international federations, national anti-doping organisations, and prominent sporting entities such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).

The CAS has been dealing with appeals against doping measures, with awards being final and binding, subject only to limited review by the Swiss Federal Tribunal. Although doping in sports is not a new thing, the 2020 CAS decision in (*WADA V. Mr Sun Yang & FINA, 2020*) which the Chinese swimmer suffered an initial eight-year ban was finally reduced to four years due to violations related to sample collection. In *Maria Sharapova v. International Tennis Federation (ITF) (2026)*, the tennis star's two-year punishment for using meldonium was reduced to 15 months after the CAS determined she lacked intent to deceive. The CAS affirmed anti-doping eligibility regulations in *WADA v. IAAF (2008)*, so too did it in other cases. For large-scale sporting events such as the Olympics, the CAS Anti-Doping Division (CAS ADD) also handles first-instance matters, guaranteeing a uniform and equitable anti-doping system across the globe. Furthermore, the CAS has continually evolved into a venue for adjudicating issues unrelated to substance abuse. (ii) Commercial disputes: the CAS also deals with commercial disputes related to contracts, sponsorships, broadcasting rights, and financial agreements within the sports industry (S29, 2023). Hence, matters of this nature are brought before the Ordinary Arbitration Division, the Court of CAS is the principal forum for conducting conflict resolution based on commercial agreements between parties (S29, Code of Sports-related Arbitration, 2023). In the *Matuzalem v. FIFIA ( 2012)*, the CAS adjudicated on contractual violations, deciding that the financial penalties levied by FIFA for contract termination were excessive and unreasonable. In the leading case of *Fenerbahçe SK v. UEFA, (2013)*, the Turkish football team contested their expulsion from European championships on the grounds of financial issues, but CAS finally affirmed UEFA's ruling. Likewise, in *Sporting Lisbon v. Rafael Leão (2020)* , the footballer was ordered by the CAS to pay back the money he received for his unilaterally terminated contract. These cases show how important CAS is for resolving

commercial disputes and providing consistency and fairness in international sports contracts and financial matters



**Figure 2.** Shown kinds of disputes

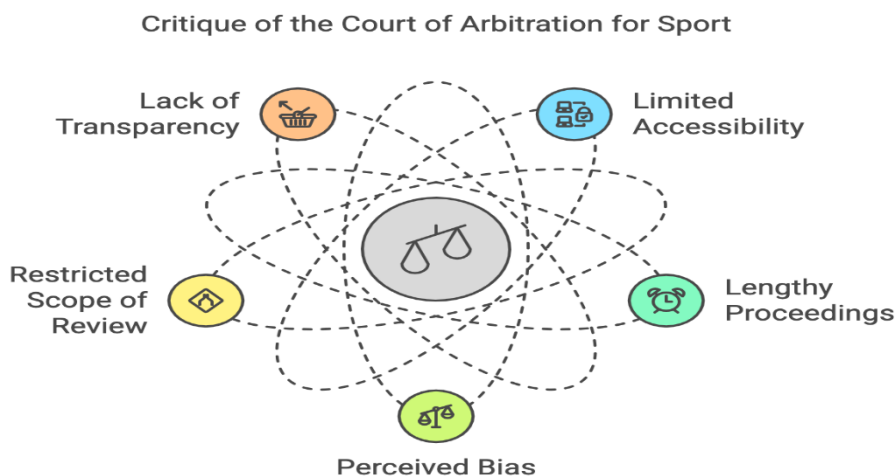
### 3.4. Emerging Challenges of CAS

The CAS has been facing the most fundamental challenges of independence and impartiality of the institution. Since its establishment, these issues have remained a bone of contention (Trakman, 2007) despite its status as an apex institution for resolving sports disputes peacefully (Rigozzi, 2010). John Forster asserts that the CAS's deficiency in independence stemmed from its initial self-governance issues and proximity to the IOC (Forster, 2006). Its critics remain one of the most significant issues, despite the several measures that have taken place and pitches against it always remain high, and stakeholders continue to have disputes with the entire justice delivery process. However, the IOC established and funded the CAS, which possessed significant authority to intervene in CAS operations and arbitral matters, including the ability to amend the CAS Statute and the Swiss Federal Tribunal (SFT) evaluates the independence of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in relation to its financiers and users. It brought into light the issues of funding and independence of CAS in relation to the SFT's previous case law. It explains why the SFT saw no justification for deviation from it. As a result, it evaluates the potential for a future alteration of such a viewpoint (Palermo, 2018). Moreover, in the case of *Claudia Pechstein v. Court of Arbitration for Sport* (2018), the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) dismissed, by a majority vote, Claudia Pechstein's complaint, in which the international athlete contended that the CAS lacks impartiality and independence, thereby infringing upon her right to a fair hearing. Critics have directed their objections at this ruling of the ECtHR, which reinforced CAS's position in the realm of sports. The crux of this critique, echoed by two dissenting judges of the ECtHR, is the court's divergence from its established jurisprudence regarding judicial impartiality and independence (Kocasakal, 2020).

Furthermore, the impartiality and independence of CAS arbitrators appointed by the parties have been subject to scrutiny before the Swiss Federal Tribunal. In the leading case of *Valverde v. CONI* (4A\_234/2010), the Tribunal rejected an application to annul a CAS award based on allegations that one of the co-arbitrators lacked impartiality, thereby reaffirming the specific standards applicable to international sports arbitration (Segesser, 2011). However, even though the Supreme Court has confirmed that all CAS arbitrators must maintain the same level of impartiality and independence, it remains unclear whether the Court is willing to apply a stringent standard to them. When reviewing the case, the Court decided that an evaluation of the independence of a CAS arbitrator should take into account the specificities of the arbitration, especially international arbitration.

This was done in order to emphasise the one-of-a-kind nature of sports arbitration (SFT - Valverde v. Coni, 2010). This case also demonstrates that the Supreme Court is prepared to accept a certain leniency in relation to judging the level of independence of CAS arbitrators. Further, Arbitration is distinct from litigation because the parties to the dispute must provide their approval for the procedure to be considered valid. Regarding any method of conflict resolution outside the national courts, mutual consent is an essential component (Steingruber, 2012). In other words, the agreement between the parties is necessary for the arbitration process; therefore, the importance of this component of mutual consent cannot be overstated, as the absence of it would render the arbitration process invalid. Hence, there have been numerous instances in which the courts have emphasised that the most important component of arbitration is a contract between the parties (Williams, 2011). The parties' consent to arbitrate their disputes constitutes the fundamental component of every arbitration agreement within the laws and regulations of sports regulatory agencies. Consequently, the consensual nature of arbitration in sports has diminished, (Steingruber, 2012) as athletes are compelled to either accept arbitration or abstain from participating in the respective sport (Rigozzi & Robert-Tissot, 2015). Thus, the threshold of consent raises questions on the substantive validity of the arbitration agreement. This principle is also reflected in certain regulations, which stipulate that the contract and any disputes arising from it must be finally settled by the CAS in Lausanne, Switzerland, in compliance with the Code of Sports-related Arbitration, as stated in certain rules (Blackshaw, 2006). As an alternative way of putting it, CAS has been selected as the sole dispute resolution agency by the governing bodies of multiple sports, including the International Olympic Committee (IOC), FIFA, WADA, and UEFA (Mavromati & Reeb, 2015). Further, the criteria of mutual consent also diminished in sports, particularly because WADA designates CAS as the authority for adjudicating appeals regarding its doping verdicts (MS, 2012). Thus, the ground for compulsory arbitration for sports disputes implies that the parties did not freely consent to arbitration. Former CAS arbitrator Jan Paulsson called consensual sports arbitrations an abuse of words (Blackshaw, 2006). Besides, the issue of a limited timeline for filing an appeal before the CAS is another crucial aspect in the proceeding of CAS. Article R49 of the CAS Code delineates the appellate arbitration procedure. It provides that unless otherwise stated in the statutes or regulations of the relevant federation, organisation, or sports-related entity, or in a prior agreement, the appeal deadline is 21 days from the contested judgment. Moreover, Article 62 of UEFA Statutes limits appeals to the CAS to ten days from receipt of a UEFA organ's decision. Therefore, it also argues that the time limitation for appeals is inadequate and improper. Because they lack sports arbitration information, players may only grasp the consequences of their arbitral agreement after the

arbitral and disciplinary proceedings. Sports arbitration is still new in many countries. This field also lacks specialists, solicitors, and consultants. Moreover, critics have severely criticized CAS for its limited transparency in proceedings, as they are frequently confidential, and the rationale for specific decisions is not consistently disclosed. This may lead to suspicions of bias and inconsistency in adjudications. Further, athletes have become more worried about human rights infringement, particularly in eligibility, gender identity, and free speech situations. CAS must work within the ambit of international legal frameworks and human rights organisations to balance sports legislation and human rights. The CAS award in contested CAS rulings in national courts, as a result, causes extended legal disputes and ambiguity over the conclusiveness of decisions. Moreover, The CAS is essential for maintaining equity in international athletics. Dealing with challenges such as structural independence, transparency, enforcement, and accessibility is crucial for enhancing its legitimacy in sports arbitration. The CAS remains a trustworthy and efficient dispute resolution institution in the changing sports law context by implementing reforms and building stakeholder trust.



**Figure 3.** Critique of the court of arbitration for sport

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the role of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in contemporary sports governance, focusing on its institutional evolution, legal framework, jurisdictional scope, and emerging challenges. The findings indicate that CAS has developed into the leading international mechanism for the resolution of sports-related disputes, providing a specialised forum capable of delivering relatively efficient, consistent, and globally recognised decisions across a wide range of sporting matters.

The analysis demonstrated that the legal authority of CAS is founded on a well-established arbitration framework supported by the Code of Sports-related Arbitration, Swiss arbitration law, and the recognition of arbitral awards under international legal instruments. Over time, its jurisdiction has expanded beyond traditional disciplinary and anti-doping disputes to encompass contractual, commercial, governance, and eligibility-related matters, reinforcing its central role within the global sports system.

Despite these achievements, several challenges continue to affect the legitimacy and effectiveness of CAS. Concerns regarding institutional independence, arbitrator impartiality, mandatory arbitration clauses, procedural transparency, accessibility, and the protection of fundamental human rights remain subjects of ongoing debate. These issues have become increasingly relevant as sport continues to evolve within a highly commercialised and globalised environment.

Therefore, the future effectiveness of CAS will depend on its ability to strengthen stakeholder confidence through greater transparency, enhanced procedural safeguards, broader accessibility, and continued efforts to preserve institutional independence. Addressing these challenges will be essential for ensuring that CAS remains a credible, fair, and effective mechanism for the governance and resolution of disputes in international sport.

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## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## **FUNDING**

This research received no external funding.

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