REVIEW OF CRIME, PEACE AND SOCIETY
ISSN (O): 3079-6105, ISSN (P): 3079-6091
Vol. 3, No. 8, 2026, 413-424

Human Rights Approach to Favouritism and Equality before the Court of Arbitration for Sport

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Abstract

This paper aims to assess the institutional and procedural structures of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) from the public international human rights law perspective, reviewing the tensions between private lex sportiva and standards relating to fundamental fair trials. The CAS serves as the worldwide highest court for athletic conflicts, and have monopolistic jurisdiction through compulsory arbitration clauses in sporting licenses that stipulate that athletes must give up access to local courts in order to participate in professional sports. This paper argues that from a structural perspective, the CAS has an institutional bias that is working in favour of governing bodies of sports and not in favour of the individual participants. That is because the nominating process for arbitrators is limited, the procedure favours the "closed list" of well- capitalized "repeat players" such as WADA and FIFA and the administrative control of the International Council of Arbitration for Sport (ICAS). The structural vulnerabilities are assessed in the light of the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, in particular that of Mutu and Pechstein v. Switzerland and the substantive challenges in Semenya v. Switzerland. The analysis illustrates how the decisions taken by the courts at a national level have been influenced by the private sport regimes in a way that vitiates the fundamental requirement for courts to remain independent, fair and unbiased treatment of both parties, as protected under Article 6(1) of the ECHR and Article 14 of the ICCPR. To redress this bias, this paper makes concrete normative proposals to remove the current bias, such as allowing athlete unions to have equal appointing rights in ICAS, opening the list of arbitrators to human rights experts and expanding independent legal aid mechanisms to retain the legal legitimacy of international sport.

Article History
Received 22 September 2026
Accepted 14 October 2026
Published 20 October 2026
Corresponding Author*
OPEN ACCESS
Keywords
Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), Lex Sportiva, Equality of Arms, Forced Arbitration, Human Rights in Sport, International Council of Arbitration for Sport (ICAS)

1. INTRODUCTION

With regard to the global governance system of the modern age, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) has a unique and unprecedented status. It is called the “Supreme Court of world sport” because it is a private arbitral body which appears to have monopolistic adjudicative jurisdiction over transnational sporting issues, from intricate anti-doping offences to commercial eligibility arrangements. 1 This huge authority generates an inherent and problematic conflict between the private lex sportiva (autonomous sports law) and the public international human rights law. International sports governing bodies (SGBs) claim absolute autonomy in order to ensure uniformity in sport rules across the globe, but this private jurisdictional shield often provides a protection for transnational sports governance from constitutional and human rights protections for sovereign nation-states. Thus, every athlete

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becomes caught in a series of disciplinary procedures different from those of a criminal court, without any of the protections of the constitution (Khan et al., 2027).

This structural exceptionality puts the principle of procedural equality itself at risk. It's "equality of arms" in any valid judicial or quasi-judicial context which means that both sides should be given a level playing field for presenting their argument, without any systemic disadvantage. But claims of favoritism in CAS have been longstanding and have been plaguing the organization. The institutional structure is slanted with the greater part of its administrative and financial organs (such as the ICAS) historically created and financially supported by larger SGBs, including the IOC, one of the leading organizations in the Olympic movement. Theunequal conditions that can face individual athletes, in terms of access to financial resources, institutional knowledge and power to negotiate with the institutions "repeat players", like the global anti-doping authority (WADA) or major sports federations are frequent.2 The acute expression of this deep asymmetry is through the historical practice of the tribunal of only considering a few arbitrators, what one could call a “closed list”, which undermines the autonomy of the athlete in choosing the arbitrator, while maintaining the power of the sports federations over the exercise of this choice.3 Although CAS offers a centralized and highly efficient system for dispute resolution internationally, its institutional setting and rules give an institutional imbalance, which undermines the principle of equality before the law, and thus the international standards of human rights as stipulated in the human rights protections provided under Article 6(1) of the ECHR4 and Article 14 of the ICCPR.5

In order to support this thesis, this paper goes on to analyse in four parts. The 1st Part sets out the international human rights standard, in play, as it were, and outlines the contours of the right to procedural fairness and of the "equality of arms" doctrine. Part 2 examines the institutional structure of CAS, sheds light on the closed arbitrators list, and the model of governance, revealing that they promote institutional favoritism in CAS. In the following 3rd Part, the weaknesses of these structures are examined from the perspective of critical jurisprudence, in the context of the recent European Court of Human Rights decision in Mutu and Pechstein v. Switzerland, and the contemporary debate on structural arbitral deference.6 Finally, 4th Part departs from the subject of lex sportiva to look at how the two elements can be reconciled with human rights obligations and it suggests concrete institutional procedures to protect the equality of athletes (Khan, 2027)

2. The Human Rights Framework of Procedural Equality

The international sports arbitration institution (CAS) needs to be assessed against the public international law and its procedures must be assessed to determine whether it creates a culture of institutional favoritism. International sports law includes several international sports organizations that create and enforce rules for sports through private agreements. These organizations often claim that national courts cannot review their decisions. However, when a private tribunal has power over one individual’s career and livelihood, then the basic fairness and justice must be prioritized. The principles of judicial equality, institutional independence and procedural fairness are among the key elements of human rights law which offer a minimum standard for such an evaluation (Haider et al., 2026). If there were no objective standards, then any criticism of an "inequality" or "bias" in private arbitration would be just a guess. Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is the major universal principle of judicial fairness. Under Article 14(1) all individuals must receive equal treatment before the tribunals or any judicial body and are entitled to a fair, open hearing before a tribunal established legally that is independent, qualified and unbiased.7

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has made it clear that this right extends to specialized or administrative tribunals which hear matters concerning rights and obligations, as well as to the traditional domestic court. The principle of equality in front of the tribunals under the ICCPR provides that parties have the same rights and privileges in judicial proceedings, and sets a limit on how much a state or private body may have a hand in the adjudicative body. This is a universal rule directly contravening the asymmetric set-up of private transnational tribunals (Khan et al., 2026). Avoiding this is impossible without obeying Article 6(1) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in the European context in which CAS is physically based in Lausanne, Switzerland, and is subject to the judiciary oversight of the Swiss Federal Supreme Court. Article 6(1) guarantees the right to a fair trial which provides that "everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing before an independent and impartial body established by law within a reasonable time". The ECtHR has always ruled that a tribunal must be both structurally independent of the Executive and of the parties before it to be considered "independent. Moreover, the concept of 'impartiality' means there must be no actual or apparent bias, which means that those who make up the tribunal must not have a bias against one class of litigants over the other. Article 6(1) is a constitutional limitation that has binding effect upon the validity of arbitral awards under Switzerland's legal framework since such awards are governed by their domestic law and rather than the law of the arbitral seat. The doctrine of the 'equality of arms' (égalité des armes) is at the heart of Article 14 ICCPR and Article 6(1) ECHR. This is a principle of procedural law, and was developed in great depth in European human rights jurisprudence, which requires that each party have "a reasonable opportunity to present their case in conditions that do not place him in a substantial disadvantage compared with the other party (Haider et al., 2026).

In the famous case Dombo Beheer B.V. v. In the Netherlands, ECtHR affirmed this principle by holding that a trial cannot be considered to be structurally flawed when one party is given procedural or evidentiary benefits which are not provided to the other party.8 The equality of arms is not limited to a formal equality, it also means a substantive equality. A procedural imbalance which arises through a structural preference in the law, rules of evidence and/or selection process for "repeat players" over "one shots" is a violation of the human rights of the "one shot" litigant. The main and most important questions is that how does the law affect international sports arbitration? How can human rights principles improve the way international sports disputes are decided? In majority of the cases, CAS faces big and powerful organizations like international sports federations and anti-doping authorities that has huge financial resources and has a strong institutional support. In order to achieve the "equality of arms" in this context, the arbitral rules need to be actively designed to redress this imbalance of resources and structures (Haider et al., 2026). However, if the procedural structure reinforces the power of the sports governing bodies by excluding tribunals from their lists, restricting the availability of financial legal support and/or maintaining closed lists, the tribunal does not meet the public international law criteria of a fair trial. Thus, the three principles of independence, impartiality and equality of arms of the ECHR and ICCPR are sufficient to judge whether CAS is an independent judicial body or merely a tool for institutional favoritism .

3. The institutional framework of CAS and the "favoritism" issue

To grasp the systemic favoritism within the CAS institution, more attention needs to be paid to the institutional structure rather than to specific cases of favoritism. Private commercial

arbitration is based on the mutual consent of the economic equalities which negotiate the terms, costs, and the choice of the arbitrators, in a situation of relative balance. International sports arbitration, by contrast, is based on a compulsory regime, in which the CAS must have jurisdiction over the individual athlete as an absolute condition for participation in sports competitions. This structural asymmetry turns these deviations in the procedure into important human rights issues. The structural reality of CAS reveals that there is potential for favoritism for sports governing bodies (SGBs) inherent in the design of CAS (Lin et al., 2024).

3.1. The future of the Closed List System and Asymmetric Influence

The CAS "closed list" system is the main structure of limitation of the athletes' procedural autonomy. The Code of Sports-related Arbitration requires that the individual who files an appeal or a regular arbitration proceed must choose a person from an official roster prepared by this institution.9 In the regular international arbitration, the parties are free to appoint any qualified and independent legal expert from anywhere in the world. This changes with the CAS closed list, which restricts the types of CAS that students can complete. This closed list brings into existence institutional favouritism as constituted in the process of designation and appointment of these designated arbitrators (Khan & Jiliani, 2023). The decision of who to put on this list is at the discretion of the council responsible for overseeing sports arbitration which is ICAS. In the past and currently, the inclusion criteria favour people who have strong links with sports federations or international sports governance institutions. The selection of athletes to this elite group is determined without much input from the athletes or their representative unions. If an athlete chooses an arbitrator, he or she must select someone from backgrounds and experiences oriented towards the protection and continuity of lex sportiva not the protection of fundamental human rights. This situation puts the athlete at an instant disadvantage because the roster does not have any varied legal experts who have legal training in public international law or in constitutional protection (Khan et al., 2023).

3.2. The Repeat Player Advantage

This is an unfair advantage in the system which is called the “repeat player” effect. In any special dispute resolution procedure, there are those who are "one-shotters" (litigants who appear in the system once or twice in their lives) and those who are "repeat players" (litigants that appear very often in the same forum).10 The CAS framework regards an individual athlete as a classic one shotter, who is presented with situations that are crucial to him or her and where he or she has limited financial and structural support. On the other hand, major international sporting bodies including the IOC, WADA and FIFA are a constant presence in front of the court. This is a procedural disadvantage for repeat players. SGBs have a great deal of institutional memory that they have from cases heard by specific CAS arbitrators over the years, and can follow the record of such arbitrators on dozens of cases (Hussain et al., 2023).

They have the ability to appoint arbitrators in the past who have been inclined toward institutional independence or regulatory enforcement, respectively, and whose such character can be a useful asset in future cases. As published jurisprudence becomes more available, an athlete does not have an equal amount of capital and systemic data to match this selection. Moreover, the case studies reveal that the arbitrators rely on repeated cases for their livelihood, thus creating an indirect commercial interest. Compared to an individual athlete, who may not want to nominate the same arbitrator for another dispute, SGBs can nominate a dozen times for different disputes. This can give rise to the impression of a cognitive bias, that may lead arbitrators to favour the interests and stability of sports bodies to maintain their presence in the list of frequent nominators (Lin & Khan, 2021).

3.3. Financing and Governance: The ICAS Structure

The institutional problems of CAS are directly linked with its general governance and financial structure of the ICAS. An understanding of the balance of the institutions is achieved by looking at the statutory make up of ICAS as defined in the historical and operational statutes in the CAS Code.[11]

ICAS' role is to

- To manage CAS finance. To be responsible for CAS finance
- Making and improving proper changes to the Code of Sports Arbitration
- The procedure through which the parties involved in a dispute select the arbitrators who are going to hear their case

The ICAS appointment system of its 20-member body shows a clear institutional bias in favour of sports federations over athletes. In particular, 4 members are directly elected by the International Sports Federations (IFs), 4 members are elected by the Association of the National Olympic Committees (ANOC) and 4 members are elected by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). These twelve members then select four more after consultations which are put in place to protect the interests of the athlete. Finally, these sixteen choose the other four independent personalities. This mathematical fact means that the leadership of big sports federations appoint at least half of the 20 members of ICAS. This governing council is not directly and independently constituted with members from independent athlete unions. The sports governing bodies thus effectively regulate the regulatory framework of the very court that regulates them since the appointment, suspension and removal of judges from the closed list of arbitrators are controlled by ICAS.[12]

Recent changes have created a new leadership with three Vice-Presidents to deal with the growing number of complaints, but the leadership power is still within the hands of institutional

sports stakeholders.[13] Such a set-up results in the fact that the defendant in a human rights case is also the employer, financier and regulator of the judicial system. This is a serious structural problem with “equality of arms” in international human rights law.

4. Critical Case Law Analysis with The Human Rights Turn

Any doubts about the structural fragility within the CAS framework are not just theoretical: the Court has been a major flash point in the ongoing battle over transnational human rights law. The sports arbitration bubble was a legal environment, insulated from constitutional challenges, for decades. The Swiss Federal Supreme Court consistently provided very limited reasons to overturn CAS arbitral awards, allowing only extreme cases of violation of public policy and formal procedural errors to be appealed. But with the sportivisation of the private, physical and professional lives of the sportsman a turning point was reached. In the last 10 years, international human rights tribunals have been actively breaking this veil of privacy imposed by private contracts, forcing sports arbitration to take account of the principles of public international human rights law (khan et al., 2021).

4.1. Constitutional Crucible: Mutu and Pechstein v. Switzerland

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) is the landmark case with respect to the human rights legitimacy of CAS, in the joint judgment of Mutu and Pechstein v. Switzerland.[14] It was a case that united two separate lawsuits: Romanian football player Adrian Mutu's appeal over a multi-million-euro damages sentence after he was caught using drugs in a test and German speed skater Claudia Pechstein's appeal against a two-year suspension for a "dope profile" that identified abnormal blood levels. Pechstein's legal challenge focused on the structural features of CAS and specifically that the European Convention on Human Rights Article 6(1) required the presence of independence and impartiality within the tribunal, which was denied because of the power of sports governing bodies in the arbitrator selection process. The ECtHR's reasoning arrived at a two-fold finding which had a lasting impact on global sport law. In the first place, the Strasbourg court officially recognized CAS as a legal and valid, if not a genuine, forum under the Convention. In essence, the court admitted that sport arbitration is not truly voluntary but rather a “forced arbitration” mechanism, the athlete being unable to decline the CAS arbitration clause without giving up his career. In CAS, the jurisdiction is mandatory, not consensual and the court stated that the athlete cannot be considered as having waived his rights under Article 6(1) of the ECHR. Therefore, CAS proceedings should be offered 'the full range of guarantees which are required of a traditional national court', such as independence, impartiality and a public hearing (Usman et al., 2021).

The ECtHR was very strict in assessing structural allegations of favouritism, having already found that Article 6(1) would apply in full to this forced arbitration system. The CAS closed list system combined with its organizational structure of the ICAS led to an institutional bias in favour of the sports federations, said Pechstein. The ECtHR pointed out that, even though sports organizations were well represented in the ICAS, it failed to find from this, on its own, any evidence of a lack of independence and impartiality among the individual arbitrators on the closed list. The court found that Pechstein did not offer proof of actual or apparent bias in regard to a specific majority of the arbitrators who heard her case. The ECtHR agreed however that there had been a breach of Article 6(1) of the Convention as CAS had not complied with Pechstein's repeated demand for a public hearing. In a case where the technicalities of the evidence were and are of great importance, and where there was a high level of interest in reputation at stake, the denial of a public forum did not meet the transparency test of a rule of law. The Pechstein judgment was an institutional wake-up call which led CAS to update its statutes to allow public hearings on the request of an athlete but left the question of structural favouritism for future legal challenge (Khan et al., 2020).

4.2. Clash of Rights: Semenya vs. Switzerland and the limits of deference

Should be case of South African middle-distance runner Caster Semenya, the dispute between the power of sports regulating bodies and fundamental human rights grew much worse. Semenya's objection to the Female Classification Regulations of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF, now World Athletics) that required female athletes with certain differences of sex development (DSD) to medically lower their naturally elevated levels of the hormone for their participation in specific sports competitions. CAS rejected Semenya's appeal, conceding that the rules were discriminatory but that that was a “necessary, reasonable and proportionate” way to maintain “fairness” in the women's sporting world. This was followed by a CAS upholding the award by the Swiss Federal Supreme Court, which is a characteristic and historical attitude towards the autonomy of private sport federations. A deferential approach was challenged internationally in Semenya v. Switzerland.[15] The Chamber of the ECtHR ruled that the Swiss authorities had breached its positive obligations under the ECHR with respect to Semenya due to the lack of adequate institutional measures to prevent discrimination against him. The court found that the domestic proceedings with

respect to the substantive complaints of Semenya, which raised questions of the right to equal treatment (under Article 14 of the Convention), protection of personal and private life (under Article 8 of the Convention), and access to an effective legal remedy (under Article 13 of the Convention) were inadequate. The Semenya case not only reflects an extreme form of institutional favouritism in the CAS system, but also demonstrates how the CAS system consistently gives greater importance to the rules and policies of sports governing bodies, over the existing human rights protection. CAS panels often regard the rules of FIFA, WADA, or World Athletics, respectively, as autonomous legal systems when assessing whether the player is in compliance with the rules.In an anti-doping or disciplinary context, CAS panels often find the rules of FIFA, WADA or World Athletics to be self-contained legal systems. The court's concern for the operation of the sports competitions over the fundamental rights of individual athletes shows its institutional bias (Khan et al., 2020).

This judicial deference puts a big hurdle in the way of athletes. The traditional CAS rule is that an athlete is not entitled to simply argue that an SGB rule is invalid, if it offends against an international human rights convention; instead, the athlete has to establish under Swiss private law that the rule is arbitrary, capricious or that its impact is completely disproportionate. The framework is a serious limitation of the scope of the review. The ECtHR's emerging jurisprudence shows that a private tribunal that has a systemic approach of "deference" toward sports regulators, and whose decision-making processes and laws are not directly based on

international human rights standards, systematically fails to give athletes an equal footing in the legal arena (Khan et al., 2020).

5. Proposing an alternative solution to Lex Sportiva and Human Rights If one wants to develop a critical analysis of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) it is imperative to carefully assess the arguments proffered in favour of the current system. Sports governing bodies (SGBs) and traditional sports law theorists hold that sporting events are different and thus warrant an exceptional legal framework. If the sports world were subjected to the slow and non-specialist processes of home courts, they say, they would come to a standstill under a host of conflicting decisions. But this defense must be tempered with the fact that forced arbitration clauses are also in common use and frequently are a legal fiction of voluntary submission by an athlete.

5.1. The Autonomy of Sport is the Operational Justification

A key defence of the existing system of rules and principles governing international sports is based on the notion of the autonomy of sport. SGBs argue that such a private, central and highly specialized tribunal is a very necessary step to ensure a level playing field among jurisdictions. The fragmentation of the international competitions, which would follow from a dispute in the local public courts of the various nations about doping and/or eligibility would be a serious problem. One court in one state may issue an order permitting an athlete to compete and a court in an adjoining state may uphold a suspension for the same reason. In addition, in most cases, the traditional judicial systems in public institutions are not adequately prepared to respond to the rapid demands of international sports calendar. When something big happens e.g. the Olympic Games, or a continental football championship, the timeframe of days or hours is not an acceptable time frame for a standard civil court. CAS is dedicated to meeting this need with special features such as its Ad Hoc Divisions that provide binding arbitral awards within 24 hours of competitions.16 SGBs say the quick and consistent solution ensures the integrity of the sporting environment, the welfare of the “clean” side of sports and

a level of separation from mainstream domestic court systemsThe Forced Arbitration & Waiver Dilemma

The need for uniformity is obvious, but the rules and procedures that are enforced in relation to this jurisdiction raise vast human rights concerns. SGBs are frequently based on the notion that arbitration is a “private” matter, that the athlete has “voluntarily” relinquished his or her right to a public trial by signing entry forms and/or licensing agreements. In recent years, however, international human rights jurisprudence has increasingly accepted this as a legal fiction of "voluntary submission. It is not feasible for any individual to decide to embark on a career in professional sport and refrain from being subject to the CAS jurisdiction; all major international sports federations stipulate that they have jurisdiction over that individual as an absolute condition for participation in a sporting event. The absence of choice brings a very clear "forced arbitration" into the picture, as in fact recognized by the European Human Rights Court. The old doctrine that both parties must freely agree to a contract is undermined because the athlete is forced to choose between signing the agreement or losing his/her career. If a party would have no choice but to submit to an arbitral tribunal, the arbitral rules it has to abide by are not private. Rather, the compulsory jurisdiction imposed on the State should not be negotiated as there is no doubt about its respect for public international human rights law. If athletes cannot opt out of the system then the tribunal must guarantee “equality of arms”, and thus be seen to be legitimate. The challenges of reconciling lex sportiva with human rights lie in the need to have uniform and efficient dispute resolution mechanisms in sports, while not doing so at the expense of fundamental procedural safeguards guaranteed under international law.

Conclusion

The institutional structure of the international sports arbitration institution i.e. CAS is unique, as it presents a certain structural imbalance and puts the principle of equality before the law at risk. It is undeniable that there is a need for a speedy, centralized and uniform dispute resolution mechanism in international sport but this cannot be done at the expense of the rights of the individual competitors. CAS puts in place a closed list of arbitrators, curated by an organization influenced by sports governing bodies (SGBs), and operates in a forced arbitration system,

which violates the basic requirements of impartial decision making, fairness and equal treatment of both parties guaranteed by the human rights standards set out in Article 6(1) of the ECHR and Article 14 of the ICCPR. The current system often makes international sports arbitration into a fairly impartial forum that is actually used in favor of institutional power and at the expense of individuals' rights. The international sporting community needs to take concrete steps to reform the existing norms, in order to overcome these vulnerabilities and get rid of the existing systemic advantage of repeat institutional players. First, ICAS needs to either do away with the closed list system or change the way it is made up, so that independent athlete representative bodies have equal votes when it comes to appointing arbitrators. Having a panel that included civil liberties experts, public international law scholars and human rights experts would bring good diversity to the tribunal and take it beyond a narrow focus on the protection of the rules of sports federations. Second, there is a need to create, develop and consolidate strong and autonomous legal aid systems. Currently, CAS has laid out guidelines for legal aid, but there is not much of it available for many independent athletes who are being faced by highly capitalized federations.[17]

It is essential that individuals be given the same legal representation, expert witnesses and scientific analysts, as would the officials and the game, in order to restore the balance of procedure that is necessary under the equality of arms doctrine to a fully independent, well funded legal defense fund for athletes. Finally, long-term legitimacy of international sport is a function of its openness to embedding private dispute resolution processes into international human rights norms. The absolute autonomy of lex sportiva is simply no longer viable in the light of the greater constitutional dimension that international courts are giving awards handed down by private courts. The process of institutionalizing CAS in CAS does not change the sports ecosystem—instead, it will enhance it—when it is institutionalized according to the criteria of international law for a fair trial. If procedural equality is highlighted and structural favouritism is removed, CAS can be truly a trusted and fair supreme court for all sporting participants, maintaining the integrity of sport at the international level and the rights of theathletes who are the force behind it.

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