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Croatia

Sports Law

Contributor

Badzim Law Practice



Lovro Badžim

Attorney-at-law | l.badzim@lblaw.hr

This country-specific Q&A provides an overview of sports laws and regulations applicable in Croatia.

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Croatia: Sports Law

1. Do you have a specific sport tribunal in your country to decide sports-related domestic issues for one or more disciplines? Are there any other sports-specific alternative dispute resolutions in your country, i.e. mediation, conciliation, or sports ombuds instance? Are there cases that can or cannot be submitted to a specific sports tribunal or cannot be subject to arbitration (e.g. labor disputes)?

Under Croatian law there is no single national sports tribunal competent to hear all disputes. Instead, the system is decentralised and built around arbitral bodies established within national sports federations, whose authority derives from the Sports Act (Zakon o sportu). These tribunals are considered legitimate fora for resolving disputes between athletes, clubs, coaches and other stakeholders, though they operate within the boundaries set by both federation statutes and the national legal order.

The most developed structure is in football, where the Arbitration Court of the Croatian Football Federation (HNS) serves as a permanent tribunal for disputes over player and coach contracts, transfers, status questions, and the legality of internal HNS decisions. It expressly excludes matters of sporting discretion, such as match results, refereeing decisions, or licensing, and it applies a layered hierarchy of norms: HNS statutes and regulations, FIFA/UEFA rules, and, subsidiarily, Croatian arbitration and civil law. Basketball and water polo follow similar models. The Arbitration of the Croatian Basketball Federation (HKS) hears appeals on player registration, transfers, contractual issues and disciplinary sanctions, while the Arbitration of the Croatian Water Polo Federation (HVS) is empowered to resolve conflicts of interest and disputes between clubs and players regarding contractual obligations, with fast-track deadlines and reliance on equity (*ex aequo et bono*). In handball, the Regulations on Registration and Status of the Croatian Handball Federation (HRS) foresee arbitration for disputes over contracts, registration, and transfers, while also expressly providing mediation as an alternative procedure.

The jurisdiction of these bodies is therefore primarily limited to status, membership, registration, transfer, and internal contractual disputes. They cannot rule on the

"rules of the game" or competition results, and crucially, they are not competent to decide disputes that fall under the general regime of labour law. The 2022 Sports Act made this boundary explicit by regulating professional contracts as *sui generis* sports agreements (professional playing agreements, scholarship contracts, etc.), but it also acknowledged that where a player is employed on the basis of a standard employment contract, labour disputes belong to the jurisdiction of the state courts. The Constitutional Court recently confirmed this balance in a 2024 case (U-I/732/2024), when several football clubs challenged transitional provisions of the Sports Act on the harmonisation of scholarship and employment contracts. The Court refused to strike down the contested provision, affirming that the Act's approach to contracts was constitutional and reinforcing that the ordinary courts remain a safeguard against federation overreach.

A practical question arises in situations where a contractual issue or a labour-related dispute is not regulated by federation rules. In such cases, the arbitral bodies must fall back on the hierarchy prescribed by law: they apply federation statutes and regulations if available; failing that, they rely on FIFA/UEFA (or other international federation) rules if applicable; and if no sports-specific regulation governs the issue, they apply the general provisions of Croatian law, including the Civil Obligations Act (Zakon o obveznim odnosima), the Labour Act (Zakon o radu), and the Arbitration Act (Zakon o arbitraži). In practice, this means that certain disputes – especially those grounded in fundamental employment rights, such as collective bargaining, bypass sports arbitration entirely and proceed before the competent labour courts.

In conclusion, Croatia's dispute resolution system in sport is federation-based and arbitration-driven, but ultimately subordinate to the general legal order. It provides a specialised forum for resolving internal sports disputes, while leaving labour law matters and issues not covered by federation rules to the jurisdiction of the ordinary courts.

2. How is Sports law codified in your country? Is there a specific Statute or Code? Are there national sports authorities, independent agencies, or government ministries responsible

for oversight?

Sports law in the Republic of Croatia is regulated through a set of special statutes, the central one being the Sports Act (*Zakon o sportu*, Official Gazette "Narodne novine" No. 141/22) as the *lex generalis*. There is no single, unified "Sports Code." Instead, general matters are governed by the Sports Act, while specific issues are addressed in separate laws—for example, the Act on the Prevention of Disorder at Sports Events.

Oversight is exercised by the competent state authority for sport (the Ministry), the Sports Inspectorate, and umbrella sports organizations (the Croatian Olympic Committee, the Croatian Paralympic Committee, and the Croatian Sports Association of the Deaf), which carry out professional supervision of national sports federations.

National sports federations are vested with public authority, and their general acts are subject to judicial review.

3. Advertising and marketing in sport: which are the limitations foreseen in your country, for instance in relation to alcohol, tobacco or betting advertising on or around sports infrastructure, on official clothing, etc.?

The *Tobacco and Related Products Act* (NN 141/22) imposes a general prohibition on all direct or indirect advertising, promotion, or sponsorship of tobacco products. This includes the use of names, logos, or other marks on sports facilities, official clothing, or at sports events. Sports venues are classified as public spaces, making the ban fully applicable to stadiums and arenas. Depictions of tobacco use for promotional purposes are likewise prohibited. Violations trigger substantial fines for both natural and legal persons.

Alcohol marketing is permitted only under strict conditions. The *Media Act* prohibits it unless specifically authorised by another statute. The *Electronic Media Act* allows advertising only if certain safeguards are met: advertisements must not target minors, depict minors drinking, link alcohol to physical or sexual success, present it as medicinal, or promote excessive consumption. In sports venues, the *Act on the Prevention of Disturbances at Sports Events* (Art. 21) bans the sale and distribution of alcohol, with a narrow exception for beverages under 6% ABV if approved by the federation and police.

Betting and gaming promotions are subject to extensive restrictions. Advertising on publicly visible surfaces such

as stadium façades, stands, LED boards, and fan zones is banned, with only a limited exception for licensed betting shops displaying their name or logo. Sponsorship visibility in sport is restricted to the operator's name and logo, without slogans, inducements, or the use of athletes or other public figures. Additional rules prohibit betting ads on TV, radio, or online media between 6:00 and 23:00, and at any event aimed at children or youth. Foreign operators are not permitted to advertise at all. Breaches carry significant fines, and sports clubs or federations risk disciplinary measures.

Oversight is shared among the Ministry of Health (tobacco), the Electronic Media Agency (alcohol media advertising), the police (alcohol restrictions in venues), the Ministry of Finance (betting), and the Sports Inspectorate, which can annul acts of sports bodies that breach the law. Sanctions range from substantial fines to disciplinary measures against clubs and federations.

4. Match-fixing: How is match-fixing and other forms of match manipulation combated in your country? Has your country ratified the Macolin Convention? What is the role of the sports betting industry in your country and is it subject to any specific state regulations?

Croatia combats match-fixing through a combination of criminal law provisions (offences of bribery and abuse of authority) and strict regulation of the sports betting market (*Zakon o igrama na sreću* – Gambling Act), which provides for conflict-of-interest rules, licensing requirements, and comprehensive technical and financial oversight. A specific criminal offence of "match-fixing" has not yet been introduced, nor have the obligations of the Macolin Convention been implemented, as Croatia has not ratified the Convention. In practice, the sports betting industry therefore operates under close state supervision, with the aim of safeguarding the integrity of sporting competitions.

5. Is there an institution safeguarding the integrity across sports in your country, e.g. ethics and doping violations or abuse cases? Which rules does such an institution apply?

In the Republic of Croatia, the safeguarding of sports integrity is not entrusted to a single, centralized authority. Rather, it is dispersed across several institutional levels, reflecting a fragmented model of governance. At the **state level**, the Sports Inspectorate is mandated to supervise compliance with the full range of statutory provisions in

the field of sport. In parallel, a **specialized anti-doping function** is carried out by the Croatian Institute of Public Health (*Hrvatski zavod za javno zdravstvo, HZJZ*), which serves as the national anti-doping organization. Finally, **umbrella sports organizations and national federations**—most notably the Croatian Olympic Committee (HOO), the Croatian Paralympic Committee (HPO), and the Croatian Sports Association of the Deaf (HSSG)—regulate matters of ethics, disciplinary responsibility, child protection, and anti-doping through their internal regulatory frameworks.

Although each of these actors applies its own normative instruments, their authority is ultimately grounded in a common legal framework provided by the *Sports Act*, the *Health Care Act* (with respect to doping control), and the *Sports Inspection Act*. This tripartite distribution of responsibilities illustrates Croatia's reliance on a multi-layered regulatory approach, in the absence of a unified Sports Integrity Agency.

6. How is corruption in sport regulated in your country? Is corruption between private individuals subject to criminal or civil liability and are there any sport specific corruption regulations?

In Croatia, corruption in sport is addressed primarily through general criminal law rather than through a specialised sports integrity statute. Offences such as bribery, abuse of office, trading in influence, and commercial bribery form the core of the criminal framework, with prosecution entrusted to the specialised anti-corruption office (USKOK). Courts have developed case law in the sporting context, particularly in football, where referees were convicted for accepting payments to influence match outcomes. The jurisprudence makes clear that the mere acceptance or promise of a benefit is sufficient to constitute an offence, irrespective of whether the sporting result was actually affected. Alongside criminal liability, corrupt conduct may also trigger civil responsibility, as courts have awarded damages for reputational harm or financial loss resulting from manipulation of competitions.

This criminal law framework is complemented by the *Sports Act* and related regulations, which impose integrity safeguards specific to the sporting sector. Individuals convicted of corruption offences are barred from holding positions in clubs, federations, or umbrella organisations, and sports associations are under a duty to suspend such persons without delay. The Sports Inspectorate exercises oversight, while national federations must

adopt disciplinary rules and integrity policies, often in line with those of the Croatian Olympic Committee. Preventive measures also extend to the betting sector, where ownership links between operators and sports clubs are prohibited. Notably, corrupt arrangements between private actors, such as athletes or club representatives, fall within the scope of criminal and civil liability, underscoring that Croatian law treats both public and private forms of manipulation as equally serious.

7. How is fan behavior regulated by law (for example banning orders, criminal penalties for violence, specific laws addressing measures against violence at sporting events etc.)?

In Croatia, spectator misconduct at sports events is regulated by the *Act on the Prevention of Disorder at Sports Events* (ZSNN), which combines criminal and misdemeanour sanctions with preventive and security measures. The central tool is the "banning order," prohibiting attendance at matches for six months to five years, enforced through police monitoring, reporting duties, and a national register of offenders. Police and organisers hold broad powers on site, including identity checks, searches, video surveillance, and the authority to suspend matches. Organisers must deny tickets and entry to sanctioned individuals, while courts consistently apply these measures in a strict and preventive manner. Together, this framework ensures a robust system of deterrence and enforcement aimed at protecting public safety and the integrity of sporting events.

8. What legal frameworks exist around the ownership and governance of professional sports clubs (e.g. foreign ownership restrictions, fan ownership models, licensing requirements)?

In Croatia, professional sports clubs may be organised either as non-profit associations or as sports joint-stock companies (*sportska dionička društva – SDD*).

The *Sports Act* (Zakon o sportu, NN 141/22) sets integrity safeguards on ownership and governance. Individuals cannot simultaneously control two clubs in the same sport, while bookmakers, agents, contracted athletes, and persons with certain criminal convictions are excluded from management and ownership roles. Foreign investors, however, face no quantitative restrictions: they may acquire equity under the same conditions as nationals, provided they respect conflict-of-interest rules. Supporters also enjoy no special statutory rights, but may influence governance by joining a club-association or by

acquiring shares in an SDD.

Clubs must additionally satisfy a dual licensing system. Each professional club must be entered in the state Register of Professional Sports Clubs and hold a licence from its national federation. These licensing rules, covering financial and governance standards, are subject to review by the High Administrative Court.

A key distinction of the Croatian system concerns the use of profit in SDDs. Article 96 of the Sports Act requires that at least half of net profit (after losses and general reserves) be placed into special statutory reserves, which can only be used for sporting purposes, specifically the training and development of children. Only the remaining profit may be distributed as dividends.

Finally, most sports facilities are publicly owned, with clubs holding rights of use rather than ownership, further embedding sport as a community asset.

9. Do you observe an increase in multi-sport ownership in your country, either across various sports or within one sport or sports discipline?

Croatia has historically had multi-sport societies, but most of them fragmented during the 1990s into stand-alone clubs. Today, the model is still rare, though there are a few exceptions (HAŠK Mladost continues as a classic multi-sport society). Overall, Croatia does not show a broader trend towards multi-sport or multi-club ownership, especially when compared to European developments such as the rise of corporate multi-club networks (e.g. City Football Group).

10. Are there any mandatory national provisions, apart from regulations of international sports governing bodies, which regulate athlete representation in your jurisdiction and are there specific limitations to the representation of athletes, such as e.g. provisions regarding dual representation, caps on agent commissions, regulations on the protection of minor athletes?

Croatian law regulates athlete representation through a limited set of mandatory provisions that operate as a "framework," while most substantive rules are left to sports federations and contracts.

The Sports Act (Zakon o sportu, NN 141/22) defines *intermediation in sport* and requires that only persons licensed by the relevant national federation may act as

agents. It also imposes integrity-based eligibility filters, excluding convicted persons, betting-related actors, and those in conflict-of-interest situations. However, the Act does not impose statutory caps on commissions or a general ban on dual representation; these issues are governed instead by federation by-laws (e.g. FIFA rules in football) and by general contract law, with courts applying principles of conflict of interest on a case-by-case basis.

Protection of minor athletes is ensured under general legislation: the Family Act requires prior approval by the Social Welfare Centre and notarial form for contracts disposing of a child's future earnings, while the Labour Act makes paid sporting activities during compulsory education subject to a special permit. The Sports Act also enshrines a general safeguarding duty requiring all stakeholders to report and prevent breaches of children's rights.

In practice, this framework means that agents must be licensed and integrity-checked, while investors or officials with statutory disqualifications cannot represent athletes or clubs. Since national law is silent on dual representation and fee caps, enforceability depends on federation rules and carefully drafted contracts. For minors, compliance with child-protection formalities is crucial, as contracts concluded without them are void.

11. Are there national statutory frameworks, apart from regulations of international sports governing bodies, or cases concerning the participation of transgender athletes in competitive sport in your country? How is the issue currently regulated and/or debated?

Croatia has not adopted a sport-specific legal framework regulating the participation of transgender athletes. Neither the Sports Act nor related legislation contains provisions on gender identity in sport, and no Croatian court has yet ruled on the eligibility of transgender competitors. Instead, the issue is governed indirectly through the Anti-Discrimination Act, which expressly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender identity and expression, and the Gender Equality Act, which requires national rules to be interpreted in line with European equality standards. These provisions extend to sport and oblige any exclusion to pass a strict proportionality test, balancing legitimate aims such as health or competitive fairness against the athlete's right to equal treatment. In practice, national federations, empowered by the Sports Act to regulate competition and athlete registration, fill this legislative gap by transposing

the eligibility criteria of their international governing bodies, though their by-laws remain subject to administrative court review for legality and compatibility with anti-discrimination law. This fragmented approach means that transgender athletes in Croatia rely on general equality guarantees and federation discretion rather than clear statutory guidance. In the absence of pending legislative initiatives, disputes over participation are likely to be resolved case by case, with courts applying non-discrimination and proportionality principles to test the validity of any restrictions.

12. What is the legal framework for e-sports in your jurisdiction? Is there a specific Statute or Code in your country or motions to implement such?

In Croatia, there is no specific “E-sports Act” or dedicated code regulating electronic sports. Instead, e-sports fall under the general provisions of the Sports Act and related legislation (media, e-commerce, labour, IP, consumer law). Competence for official recognition of e-sports lies with the Croatian Olympic Committee (HOO) and the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MINTS), but to date neither body has adopted an act including e-sports in the official nomenclature of sports, nor has a legislative initiative for a dedicated statute been announced.

In practice, the sector has developed a self-regulatory framework through the Croatian eSport Federation (HeSS), established as a non-profit association and governed by its Statute of 2021. The Statute sets out HeSS’s role in uniting clubs and associations, organising competitions, promoting e-sports, and cooperating internationally. In 2023, HeSS also adopted a Competition Regulation that defines the national competition system from club to international level, harmonises it with international standards (IESF, IOC), and submits it for HOO review.

Thus, while e-sports in Croatia currently lack formal state recognition, the Statute and regulatory acts of HeSS form the operative governance framework. Until e-sports are included in the official nomenclature by HOO/MINTS, players cannot obtain athlete status under the Sports Act and clubs/federations cannot access the full legal and financial benefits available in recognised sports.

13. Which has been the leading sports law case of the past year in your country?

The most prominent Croatian sports law case of the past year centered on the dispute between NK Osijek and its

former coach Nenad Bjelica. Bjelica, one of the highest-paid coaches in Croatian football history, had signed a lucrative long-term contract in 2020, but was dismissed in 2022 following a breakdown in relations with the club’s management. The dismissal triggered a high-stakes legal battle over the enforceability of his contract, particularly the severance clause.

Because Croatian football regulations mandate arbitration, the case was first referred to the Arbitration Court of the CFF, and then through the appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). In early 2025, the case was resolved by a confidential settlement, with indications that Bjelica received a portion of the claimed compensation. The dispute underscored several key legal issues, such as the importance of carefully drafted termination clauses in coaching contracts, and the limited scope for unilateral termination by clubs without financial consequences.

14. What other sports law topic(s) would you highlight as being very current and relevant in your country?

A particularly pressing and internationally relevant topic in Croatia concerns the development and governance of sports infrastructure. The National Programme for Sport 2019–2026 (the official Government strategy document) recognises that, despite Croatia’s remarkable sporting achievements, the physical infrastructure of sport remains fragmented, underfunded, and unevenly developed across regions. Many facilities date from the socialist era, with inadequate maintenance and limited adaptation to modern standards of accessibility, sustainability, and multifunctional use.

This structural gap presents a significant opportunity for foreign investors, especially given Croatia’s membership in the EU single market and the consistently high international performance of Croatian athletes across football, basketball, handball, tennis, athletics, and water sports. A legal framework already exists for public–private partnerships (PPP) in infrastructure, and EU structural funds earmarked for sport, tourism, and urban regeneration can be leveraged in combination with private capital. Foreign investors can thus participate not only in constructing or modernising arenas and training centres, but also in operating multipurpose facilities that integrate sport, commerce, and entertainment. From a legal perspective, the challenge lies in designing PPP agreements and concession models that balance public interest (broad community access, youth development, national representation) with private incentives (long-term returns on investment, naming rights, ancillary

revenues).

Contributors

Lovro Badžim
Attorney-at-law

l.badzim@lblaw.hr

