

Sports Governance: Modern Challenges

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[The International Cycling Union] vested extensive powers in the office of president, which created an entity run in an autocratic manner without appropriate checks and balances.

Report of the Cycling Independent Reform Commission

The issue of sports governance has rarely been out of the media this year, with scandals exposed in cycling, football, and athletics, and there is a constant refrain about the lack of checks and balances in international sports federations. The purpose of this talk was to discuss some current issues in sports governance, recommendations made by the Cycling Independent Reform Commission (“CIRC”) and discuss possible ways forward.

Perhaps one of the reasons that sport finds itself in the regulatory void in which it appears to exist today, is that it has developed too much in isolation. Generally, national governments give federations a wide berth to self-govern, in deference to the principle of the ‘autonomy of sport’. This principle presupposes that the sports movement alone understands the unique characteristics (or ‘specificities’) of sport, and therefore knows best how to govern and regulate sport. The legal status of sports federations is also worth examining; as is the case with FIFA, most international federations are created as non-profit organisations and enjoy certain privileges, including tax benefits. This also means that they are not subject to the duties and obligations of for-profit corporations.

Lapses in good governance, as exposed by recent scandals and highlighted in the CIRC Report, raise questions about the ‘autonomy of sport’ and whether the principle holds true in a modern era, where sport is big business. One of the key findings of the Report is that good governance is an essential part of effective anti-doping. The challenge facing sports administrators today is to establish and enforce good governance. It seems clear that pressure from within and without will force change in how sport is governed. The question remains whether that change will come from within or without.

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