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ATHLETE VULNERABILITIES IN ELITE SPORT CORRUPTION: A SOCIO-LEGAL COMMENTARY ON CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE EUROPEAN SPHERE

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1 INTRODUCTION

The fight against corruption in sport has become a central focus for policymakers across Europe and the United Kingdom. While instances of bribery in sport date back to antiquity, such as Eupolos bribing competitors in the 388 BC Olympic Games (Maennig, 2005; Philippou & Hines, 2021; Stephens, 2020), systematic legal and policy responses are relatively recent. These efforts have been driven by rising public scrutiny, the transnational nature of modern sport, and its vast financialization (Gottschalk, 2025; Gottschalk & Hamerton, 2025; UNODC, 2024).

This commentary critically examines evolving frameworks combating integrity threats such as match-fixing, doping, bribery, and emerging issues like sextortion. It explores convergence and divergence across European and UK approaches, assessing their adequacy, alignment with international standards, and the urgent need for interdisciplinary, gender-responsive strategies.

2 THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SPORTS CORRUPTION

The global expansion and commercialization of sport, often supported by public funding, have created fertile conditions for fraud and bribery (Masters, 2015; Vanwersch et al., 2022). International sports bodies, with opaque governance and limited accountability, remain particularly vulnerable, fostering what has been called a “culture of impunity” (Tangen, 2021), frequently facilitated by a “culture of convenience” (Gottschalk, 2025; Gottschalk & Hamerton, 2023, 2024, 2025).

While governance issues have received some attention, focused analyses of anti-bribery and corruption mechanisms remain limited, hindering the development of effective best practices (Philippou & Hines, 2021). High-profile scandals, such as money laundering in football (Abrahamyan, 2023), have heightened recognition of sports integrity as a matter of public interest (Kassem, 2023). Accordingly, deeper examination of existing legal and policy instruments is essential to expose governance deficiencies and strengthen prevention,

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detection, and prosecution mechanisms. Scrutiny of European and UK legislation should therefore focus on ensuring frameworks adequately address the unique risks of sports corruption while aligning with international standards.

3 THE CONCEPT OF INTEGRITY

“Integrity” in sport is multifaceted and often under-theorised (Gardiner et al., 2016), particularly within the corporate ethos of modern competition. Frequently defined as the antithesis of corruption (Vanwersch et al., 2023), its ambiguity complicates unified strategies. Understanding motivations behind corrupt behaviour is essential: match-fixing is commonly financially driven (Gray & Porreca, 2023; Huggins, 2018; Tak, 2022), while doping may arise from contract pressures or performance ambitions (Weber et al., 2021; Whitaker et al., 2017).

The perceived risk of detection, personal wealth, and psychological factors all influence decision-making (Vanwersch et al., 2023). Thus, an interdisciplinary approach, integrating governance, law, and ethics, is increasingly crucial with illicit practices defined by the Macolin Convention in the following broad terms: ‘an intentional arrangement, act or omission aimed at an improper alteration of the result or the course of a sports competition in order to remove all or part of the unpredictable nature of the sports competition with a view to obtaining an undue benefit for oneself or for others.’ (Council of Europe, 2023; Lavalée et al., 2024). Current research overly concentrates on football-related manipulation (Vanwersch et al., 2022), overlooking corruption across other sports and non-financial misconduct such as sextortion.

Though distinct from bribery, sextortion similarly undermines ethical standards and trust. Its inclusion within integrity frameworks like the Consensus Statement (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024) would enhance awareness of its risks to athlete welfare, underscoring that corruption extends beyond financial misconduct to breaches of ethical and personal integrity, including interpersonal transgression and wrongdoing.

4 ADDRESSING UNIQUE SAFETY CHALLENGES: SEXTORTION AND ATHLETE VULNERABILITIES

The misuse of authority for personal gain aligns directly with broader definitions of corruption, demanding stronger accountability in sports governance. Recognising that athletes may engage in corrupt acts due to financial precarity or psychological pressure necessitates educational initiatives fostering ethics and resilience from early career stages. Policies should also support fair monetisation opportunities for athletes, reducing incentives for corrupt conduct. Preventive education, combined with transparent oversight and enforcement, is essential to building a culture of integrity.

However, many autonomous sports entities and existing regulatory frameworks lack effective accountability and oversight. This deficiency not only facilitates financial corruption but also fosters environments where power imbalances enable abuses such as sextortion. Defined as “the abuse of power to obtain a sexual benefit or advantage” (Bragagnolo & Lezama, 2025, p. 2), sextortion merges elements of sexual violence and corruption (Cadzow, 2019). It exploits hierarchical relationships, often embedded in established patriarchal systems, to coerce athletes into sexual acts in exchange for opportunities or to avoid career repercussions.

These abuses are intensified by poor governance, weak reporting mechanisms, and the absence of independent accountability for senior officials. Such conditions leave athletes, particularly women, young competitors and marginalized groups, highly vulnerable to exploitation (Bragagnolo & Lezama, 2025).

5 LEGAL AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

The deviance and criminality of sextortion lies in its violation of norms governing authority, trust, dignity, and sexual autonomy. Yet its identification and prosecution remain difficult because the benefits gained are not obviously financial. Many jurisdictions require overt physical coercion and causation to establish sexual offenses, while complex safeguarding terminology in sport further obscures recognition of coercive dynamics.

Most national legal systems still lack explicit offenses for sextortion, relying instead on inadequate provisions designed for either bribery or sexual assault (Henry & Umbach, 2024). This legal gap calls for re-evaluated definitions and enforcement tools that capture the unique coercion and power abuse inherent in this particular form of exploitation.

6 DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS SAFETY RESPONSIVE POLICY

Addressing coercive exploitation demands policies beyond conventional anti-corruption frameworks that focus solely on financial misconduct. Responses must acknowledge its dual nature: the corrupt abuse of power and the sexual violation of bodily autonomy. A gender-based lens is crucial to understanding how sextortion perpetuates systemic inequality. Female athletes often face heightened risks due to gender hierarchies, economic dependency, and cultural silencing. Transnational policy development is therefore required, recognizing diverse vulnerabilities rather than applying uniform anti-corruption solutions.

This paradigm shift toward responsive policy frameworks would integrate robust mechanisms for reporting, independent investigation, and victim protection. Preventive strategies should also include education fostering respect,

consent, and equality within sporting cultures. By situating athlete vulnerabilities in sport within broader anti-corruption agendas, international institutions can begin towards a global level playing field designed to dismantle entrenched power imbalances and uphold ethical integrity across all dimensions of sport.

7 CONCLUSION

Sports corruption today encompasses both traditional financial crimes and complex abuses of power such as sextortion. Despite notable progress in Europe and the UK, governance opacity, fragmented enforcement, and the absence of gender-sensitive approaches continue to undermine and hamper reform efforts. To preserve integrity, sports governance must undergo a paradigm shift, strengthening oversight and education while establishing transparency to foster responsive and victim-centred strategies. Financial accountability alone is insufficient; ethical culture must be embedded within governance and best practice shared across jurisdictions and legislatures.

Given the cross-border nature of modern sport, effective reform also requires international coordination. The Council of Europe's Macolin Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions (Gray & Porreca, 2023; Kuwelker et al., 2022; Yilmaz & Manoli, 2024), whose 43 international signatories include both the United Kingdom and Australia, provides a vital model for cooperation of this nature. Emphasizing prevention, detection, and sanctioning through national information platforms and judicial collaboration (Council of Europe, 2023). Its success, however, hinges on consistent domestic dialogue and implementation (Vandercruysse et al., 2022). Ultimately, only concerted, interdisciplinary, and globally harmonized action can safeguard the ethical and social foundations of sport. Anti-corruption law and policy must therefore evolve beyond financial regulation toward a holistic model, one that protects athletes, promotes equality, and reinforces trust in sport as a domain of fairness, integrity, and human dignity - in the words of Billie Jean King "Champions keep playing until they get it right!".

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