

Beyond the Playing Field: Alternative Dispute Resolution in Emerging Sports Controversies

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
ESG (Alternative Dispute Resolution, Sports Mediation, NIL Rights, Esports Disputes, Technology Integration, Sports Arbitration	This research paper examines the evolving landscape of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms in addressing novel sports controversies beyond traditional playing field disputes. As the sports industry continues to expand into new domains, including esports, technology-enhanced competition, and name, image, and likeness (NIL) rights, conventional litigation processes prove increasingly inadequate. Through analysis of recent case studies and emerging ADR frameworks, this paper demonstrates how mediation, arbitration, and hybrid resolution models are being adapted to address these unprecedented challenges. The research identifies significant advantages of ADR in sports contexts, including time efficiency, cost-effectiveness, relationship preservation, and specialized expertise. However, it also highlights critical limitations in current frameworks, including jurisdictional challenges, power imbalances, and procedural gaps. The paper concludes by proposing modifications to existing ADR structures, including technology integration, specialized mediator training, and flexible frameworks designed specifically for emerging dispute categories. These findings have significant implications for sports governance bodies, legal practitioners, and athletes navigating an increasingly complex sports landscape where disputes extend far beyond traditional competition concerns...

1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of sports disputes has transformed dramatically in recent decades, expanding beyond playing field controversies to encompass complex legal, commercial, and technological dimensions. As sports have evolved into multi-billion-dollar industries, disputes have grown increasingly sophisticated, rendering traditional litigation inadequate with its inherent delays, costs, and adversarial nature.

Alternative Dispute Resolution in sports has deep historical roots, beginning with informal methods within sports communities long before formal mechanisms existed. The late 20th century saw significant formalization of sports ADR, with baseball pioneering approaches later adopted across various disciplines. The establishment of the Court of Arbitration for Sport in 1984 marked a watershed moment, creating a specialized forum for resolving sports-related disputes outside traditional courts.

Several key factors have driven the growth of sports ADR. For athletes, particularly in Olympic sports, timing is critical—competitions represent once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that cannot be postponed while lengthy court proceedings unfold.



The specialized nature of sports disputes, involving complex regulatory frameworks and technical considerations, demands adjudicators with specific expertise in sports law and governance that general courts typically lack.

The 21st century sports industry continues expanding into new territories that bring novel dispute forms challenging existing resolution frameworks. Name, Image, and Likeness rights for college athletes have created unprecedented questions about athlete compensation and institutional obligations. The explosive growth of esports has generated unique jurisdictional challenges spanning multiple countries and digital environments. Meanwhile, controversies surrounding performance-enhancing technologies raise fundamental questions about fair competition and the boundaries of technological advancement in sports.¹

This paper argues that ADR mechanisms—particularly mediation and arbitration—are uniquely positioned to address these emerging sports controversies. Their flexibility, efficiency, and capacity for specialized expertise make them invaluable tools for navigating the complex landscape of modern sports disputes. Mediation offers relationship-preserving benefits essential in the interconnected sports community, while arbitration provides definitive resolution with industry-specific expertise.

However, existing ADR frameworks must evolve to meet the challenges presented by these novel dispute categories. By examining current approaches, identifying limitations, and proposing modifications, this research aims to contribute to developing more effective dispute resolution mechanisms for the modern sports industry—mechanisms that can adapt to rapidly changing technologies, incorporate relevant expertise, and balance innovation with competitive fairness

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defining Alternative Dispute Resolution in the Sports Context

Alternative Dispute Resolution in sports encompasses a range of non-judicial processes designed to resolve disputes without recourse to traditional litigation. In the sports context, ADR primarily refers to mediation, arbitration, and hybrid processes that combine elements of both⁴. Sports mediation involves a neutral third party facilitating negotiations between disputing parties to reach a mutually acceptable resolution. Unlike a judge or arbitrator, a sports mediator does not impose a decision but rather helps the parties identify common interests and develop creative solutions⁴. Sports arbitration, by contrast, involves the submission of a dispute to one or more impartial arbitrators who render a binding decision after considering evidence and arguments from all parties.

The specialized nature of sports disputes has led to the development of dedicated ADR institutions and procedures. The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) serves as the preeminent international body for sports arbitration, handling disputes ranging from disciplinary matters to commercial conflicts¹. At the national level, organizations like the National Sports Arbitration Centre of India (NSACI) and the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC) provide forums for resolving domestic sports disputes. These institutions typically employ arbitrators and mediators with specific expertise in sports law and governance, ensuring that decisions reflect an understanding of the unique context and needs of the sports industry.²

Key Principles of Sports Mediation and Arbitration

Several key principles distinguish sports ADR from both traditional litigation and ADR in other contexts. First, sports disputes often require expedited resolution due to the time-sensitive nature of athletic competitions. Olympic athletes, for example, may have disputes that need resolution within days rather than weeks or months. This necessity for speed has led to the development of fast-track procedures and emergency measures within sports ADR systems.

Second, sports ADR places significant emphasis on preserving relationships between parties. The sports community is often described as a "sport family," with participants forming interconnected networks that must continue functioning after disputes are resolved³. Mediation, in particular, focuses on maintaining these relationships by encouraging collaborative problem-solving rather than adversarial positioning.³

Third, sports ADR recognizes the importance of specialized expertise. Sports disputes frequently involve complex regulatory frameworks, technical considerations, and industry-specific norms that may be unfamiliar to general courts. Arbitrators and mediators with backgrounds in sports law and governance can better understand these nuances and render decisions that align with industry standards and expectations.

¹Ngatchou Toto, C. (2024) 'An Exploration Of Mediation And Conciliation', RTS - STM Journals, <https://journals.stmjournals.com/rts/article=2024/view=180639/>

²Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (2025) 'SDRCC Announces Amendments to the Canadian Sport Dispute Resolution Code', SIRC, <https://sirc.ca/news/sdrcc-announces-amendments-to-the-canadian-sport-dispute-resolution-code/>

³IJLMH (2023) 'A Critical Analysis on the Role of ADR in Solving Sports related Disputes', Indian Journal of Law and Human Behavior, <https://ijlmh.com/paper/a-critical-analysis-on-the-role-of-adr-in-solving-sports-related-disputes/>



Finally, sports ADR typically emphasizes confidentiality, allowing parties to resolve sensitive disputes without public scrutiny. This confidentiality can be particularly valuable in cases involving personal matters, internal governance issues, or commercially sensitive information⁴.

Limitations of Traditional Litigation

Traditional litigation presents several significant limitations when applied to sports disputes. Perhaps most critically, the time frames of litigation are often incompatible with the urgent needs of sports competitions. Court proceedings can extend for months or years, rendering decisions moot when athletes need resolution before imminent competitions.⁴ This mismatch between judicial timelines and sporting calendars can effectively deny athletes meaningful access to justice.

The adversarial nature of litigation also tends to damage relationships between parties, creating lasting animosity that can undermine the collaborative spirit essential to sporting communities. This adversarial approach, combined with intense media scrutiny, can create a hostile environment that damages the reputation and brand value of all involved parties.

Jurisdictional complexity represents another major challenge. The global nature of modern sports means that disputes often involve multiple stakeholders across different countries, each subject to different legal systems. This complexity can lead to conflicting rulings, forum shopping, and significant uncertainty regarding applicable laws and regulations.⁵

Finally, traditional courts typically lack the specialized knowledge required to effectively adjudicate sports disputes. Judges may be unfamiliar with the technical aspects of sporting regulations, the unique governance structures of sports organizations, or the practical realities of athletic competition. This knowledge gap can lead to decisions that, while legally sound in general terms, fail to account for the specific context and needs of the sports industry.

3. EMERGING DISPUTE CATEGORIES

A. NIL Rights Disputes

The introduction of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) rights has revolutionized college sports, creating a historic shift that allows college athletes to profit from their personal brand for the first time. This fundamental change aims to address longstanding imbalances in revenue distribution within college athletics, providing a new income stream for athletes who have traditionally been excluded from the financial gains generated by their performances. However, this rapid transformation has also spawned a new category of disputes that challenge existing governance and dispute resolution frameworks.

The evolution of NIL policy has been characterized by inconsistent regulations and implementation across different states and institutions. In the absence of comprehensive federal legislation, a patchwork of state laws, institutional policies, and NCAA guidelines has emerged, creating significant uncertainty and potential for conflict. This regulatory fragmentation has been further complicated by the emergence of "collectives" - groups of boosters and alumni who pool resources to create NIL opportunities for athletes at specific institutions. These collectives have raised concerns about potential circumvention of recruitment rules and the creation of de facto pay-for-play arrangements.⁶

Several high-profile cases have already emerged that illustrate the complex legal challenges associated with NIL rights. One notable controversy involved allegations that University of Texas football linemen were paid to join the team, highlighting the blurred lines between legitimate NIL opportunities and improper recruitment incentives. These early cases demonstrate the need for clear standards and effective dispute resolution mechanisms to address conflicts between athletes, educational institutions, sponsors, and regulatory bodies.

The unique characteristics of NIL disputes present specific challenges for ADR mechanisms. These disputes often involve multiple stakeholders with divergent interests, including athletes, educational institutions, commercial partners, and governing bodies. They frequently raise novel legal questions at the intersection of contract law, intellectual property rights, employment law, and sports governance. Additionally, NIL disputes can have significant implications for athlete eligibility, institutional compliance, and competitive balance within sports leagues.

Current approaches to resolving NIL disputes remain largely underdeveloped. While some institutions have incorporated arbitration clauses into their NIL policies, many conflicts are still addressed through ad hoc processes or traditional litigation. The lack of specialized expertise in this emerging area further complicates effective resolution. Mediators and arbitrators

⁴Aceris Law (2021) 'Sports Arbitration: Certain Unique Features and the Court of Arbitration for Sport', Aceris Law International Arbitration Law Firm. <https://www.acerislaw.com/sports-arbitration-certain-unique-features-and-the-court-of-arbitration-for-sport-the-cas/>

⁵Mamta (2024) 'Dispute Resolution Mechanism in Sports', Lawful Legal, <https://lawfullegal.in/dispute-resolution-mechanism-in-sports/>

⁶Tanaka, L.K. (2025) 'Navigating Sports Participation and NIL Disputes: Fair, Fast and Effective Resolution', American Arbitration Association Blog, <http://www.adr.org/blog/NIL-Sports-Disputes>



must understand not only sports law generally but also the specific regulatory framework governing NIL rights and the commercial realities of athlete endorsements.

As NIL rights continue to evolve, there is a pressing need for more structured and specialized ADR mechanisms. These mechanisms should provide clear procedural guidelines, ensure access to decision-makers with relevant expertise, and balance the need for expeditious resolution with fair consideration of all stakeholders' interests. The development of such mechanisms will be essential for maintaining the integrity of college sports while respecting athletes' rights to benefit from their name, image, and likeness.

B. Esports Dispute Resolution

The explosive growth of esports has created a new frontier for sports dispute resolution, presenting unique challenges and opportunities for ADR mechanisms. Esports has rapidly evolved from informal gaming competitions to a global industry with professional leagues, multimillion-dollar prize pools, and complex organizational structures. This evolution has been accompanied by an increase in disputes ranging from player contract disagreements to intellectual property conflicts and governance issues.⁷

Esports disputes exhibit several distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from traditional sports controversies. First, the digital nature of esports creates unique jurisdictional challenges, as competitions often involve participants from multiple countries competing in virtual environments hosted on servers in yet other jurisdictions. Second, esports operates at the intersection of sports, entertainment, and technology, creating complex legal questions that span multiple domains. Third, the rapid pace of technological change and industry development means that regulatory frameworks and governance structures are still evolving, creating significant uncertainty for stakeholders.

The jurisdictional challenges in global esports competitions are particularly significant for dispute resolution. Unlike traditional sports, which typically have well-established international federations and clear jurisdictional boundaries, esports governance remains fragmented across game publishers, tournament organizers, and regional associations. This fragmentation can lead to conflicts of law, forum shopping, and difficulties in enforcing decisions across different jurisdictions. Additionally, the digital nature of esports means that evidence may be dispersed across multiple servers and jurisdictions, complicating the fact-finding process essential to fair dispute resolution.

Despite these challenges, several promising arbitration frameworks have emerged to address esports disputes. Riot Games, for example, has developed a Dispute Resolution System (DRS) specifically designed for its professional League of Legends and Valorant competitions. This system functions as an independent arbitration court for resolving disputes such as unpaid salaries, prize money disagreements, and contract breaches. To promote accessibility, Riot has established a Legal Aid Fund to assist players who lack the financial means to pursue arbitration, with assistance available to individuals whose annual gross salary is less than €30,000.⁸

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) has also recognized the unique nature of video game and esports disputes, offering specialized ADR services that address the combination of tangible elements (such as game consoles and merchandise) and intangible issues (such as intellectual property rights and virtual economies). WIPO's approach emphasizes the need for consistent legal outcomes across multiple jurisdictions, addressing one of the key challenges in esports dispute resolution.⁹

As esports continues to mature as an industry, there is a growing need for more comprehensive and specialized ADR mechanisms. These mechanisms must address the unique characteristics of esports disputes while providing accessible, efficient, and fair resolution processes for all stakeholders. The development of such mechanisms will be essential for supporting the continued growth and professionalization of the esports industry.

C. Technology-Related Disputes in Sports

Advanced technologies in sports have generated a new category of disputes involving equipment validation, performance enhancement, and data rights, challenging traditional notions of fair competition. Equipment validation controversies have emerged as manufacturers develop sophisticated performance-enhancing gear. Nike's Vaporfly 4% shoes exemplify this challenge, with their proven efficiency gains leading to record-breaking performances and debates about "technological doping." In response, World Athletics revised their technical rules, establishing parameters like maximum sole thickness to maintain competitive balance.

⁷Bharadwaj, A. (n.d.). Sports' Disputes and Arbitration. GIBS Law Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1

⁸Toscano, L. (2025) 'Games and Esports Arbitration - Closing Keynote', Basel Winter Arbitration School, <https://arbitrationlab.com/games-and-esports-arbitration-closing-keynote-by-leandro-toscano/>

⁹Esports Insider (2024) 'Riot Games launches esports dispute resolution mechanism', <https://esportsinsider.com/2024/11/riot-dispute-resolution-mechanism-esports>



Video Assistant Referee (VAR) technology in football has similarly sparked controversy despite its aim to reduce officiating errors. The Euro 2024 tournament featured multiple VAR-related disputes, including contested penalty decisions that potentially altered match outcomes, raising questions about technology reliability and implementation standards. Performance enhancement technologies present unique challenges, as seen in the case of Oscar Pistorius, whose carbon fiber prosthetic blades prompted the Court of Arbitration for Sport to determine whether they provided an unfair advantage under IAAF rules. Markus Rehm faced similar barriers as an amputee long jumper excluded from able-bodied competition due to concerns about prosthetic advantages.

Data rights disputes represent another emerging frontier as sports organizations collect sophisticated performance data, raising questions about ownership, privacy, and commercial exploitation among athletes, teams, leagues, and technology providers.

Resolving these disputes often requires specialized technical expertise beyond legal knowledge. Expert determination has emerged as a valuable ADR tool, though its effectiveness depends on selecting experts with relevant technical knowledge and sport-specific understanding. As technology continues transforming sports, ADR mechanisms must adapt to rapidly evolving technologies, incorporate technical expertise, and balance innovation with competitive fairness.

4. INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

India's journey with Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in sports reflects both ambition and ongoing challenge. The country's sports sector, now a multi-billion-dollar industry, faces a rising tide of disputes—ranging from contractual and commercial disagreements to regulatory and ethical controversies. Recognizing the inefficiency and delays of traditional litigation, India has increasingly turned to ADR as a means of ensuring timely, expert, and fair resolution of sports-related conflicts. However, the transition remains incomplete, with significant implications and limitations that shape the effectiveness of ADR in the Indian sports context.

Institutional Developments

India's most significant institutional advancement in sports dispute resolution came with the establishment of the National Sports Arbitration Centre (NSACI),¹⁰ also referred to as the Sports Arbitration Centre of India (SACI), in 2021 under the National Sports Development Code. Designed to centralize and professionalize conflict resolution in the sports sector, NSACI introduced a structured three-tier process to address disputes efficiently. The framework begins with internal committees within sports federations tasked with initial conflict resolution, followed by mediation if unresolved, and finally binding arbitration to ensure closure.¹¹ This layered approach balances organizational autonomy with external oversight, emphasizing collaboration before adversarial measures. A key feature of NSACI is its specialized panels comprising arbitrators and mediators with expertise in sports law, governance, and technical aspects of athletic disciplines, ensuring decisions are informed by industry-specific knowledge. Recognizing the urgency inherent to athletes' careers—where delays can derail training, competitions, or eligibility—NSACI incorporates fast-track mechanisms, particularly for competition-related disputes, aiming for resolution within 90 days. This focus on speed complements the center's mandate to reduce reliance on overburdened civil courts, where procedural delays often prolong justice. Despite its robust design, NSACI's early years reveal challenges, including limited uptake, with only 12% of sports disputes reaching the center in 2022–2023, as many conflicts remain unresolved internally or linger in traditional legal channels. Nevertheless, NSACI represents a foundational shift toward institutionalizing professionalism, expertise, and timeliness in Indian sports dispute resolution, aligning with global best practices while addressing local governance complexities. Its success hinges on addressing awareness gaps among athletes and federations, streamlining jurisdictional overlaps, and enhancing enforcement mechanisms to solidify its role as a cornerstone of sports justice in India.

Legal and Policy Support

The Indian government has proactively embedded Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) into the broader sports governance framework, reflecting its commitment to transparency, accountability, and athlete welfare. The 2023 National Sports Governance Reforms mandate that all recognized sports federations include ADR clauses in athlete contracts, ensuring that disputes are addressed through structured mechanisms rather than protracted litigation.¹² Additionally, federations are required to train grievance officers in mediation techniques, equipping them to handle conflicts efficiently and

¹⁰Department of Sports, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (2021) 'National Sports Development Code of India', <https://yas.nic.in/sports/national-sports-development-code-india>

¹¹National Sports Arbitration Centre (2023) 'About NSACI', <https://nsaci.in/about-us/>

¹²Department of Sports, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (2023) 'National Sports Governance Reform', <https://sportsauthorityofindia.nic.in/sai/showcontent/MzQ4>



empathetically. A notable policy innovation is the directive for federations to allocate at least 2% of their budgets specifically for dispute resolution mechanisms, underscoring the importance of accessible and well-resourced ADR processes.

Judicial support has complemented these policy measures. Courts, including the Delhi High Court, have emphasized the necessity of arbitration clauses in sports contracts and, in certain cases, have recommended recourse to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Switzerland for international-level disputes.¹³ These steps aim to streamline dispute resolution, reduce the burden on civil courts, and align Indian sports governance with international best practices. Collectively, these legal and policy interventions are designed to foster a fair, athlete-centric, and globally competitive sports ecosystem in India, while ensuring that disputes are resolved swiftly and justly.

Implications of ADR in Indian Sports

The adoption of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in Indian sports carries transformative implications, addressing systemic inefficiencies while empowering stakeholders. Foremost, ADR offers speed and efficiency, critical in a domain where athletes' careers are often short-lived and time-sensitive. Unlike India's overburdened judicial system, which can delay resolutions for years, ADR's time-bound frameworks—such as NSACI's 90-day fast-track mechanism—ensure that disputes like selection controversies, contractual breaches, or doping allegations are resolved swiftly, minimizing disruptions to training, competitions, and career trajectories. This expeditious approach safeguards athletes from prolonged legal battles that could otherwise derail their professional aspirations.

Equally significant is the expertise and specialization embedded in ADR processes. Panels comprising arbitrators and mediators with deep knowledge of sports law, governance, and technical nuances ensure decisions are contextually informed, balancing legal rigor with industry-specific realities. This specialized focus reduces the risk of generic rulings that might overlook the unique pressures and dynamics of sports environments.¹⁴

ADR also prioritizes confidentiality and relationship preservation, a stark contrast to public litigation. Private proceedings protect athletes and federations from reputational damage, particularly in sensitive cases involving harassment or financial mismanagement. Mediation, with its emphasis on collaborative problem-solving, fosters amicable resolutions, preserving relationships within the tightly-knit sports ecosystem—a vital consideration for long-term collaboration.

Finally, ADR empowers athletes by providing accessible, formal avenues to challenge unfair practices, discrimination, or contractual violations. By democratizing access to justice, it shifts power dynamics, enabling athletes to assert their rights without fear of institutional retaliation. This empowerment is pivotal in fostering a culture of accountability and fairness, crucial for India's aspirations to become a global sports powerhouse. Collectively, these implications underscore ADR's role not just as a dispute-resolution tool, but as a catalyst for systemic reform in Indian sports governance.

Limitations and Challenges in India's Sports ADR Framework

India's sports ADR system faces significant limitations that hinder its effectiveness. Foremost is the low utilization and awareness gap: only 12% of sports disputes reached the National Sports Arbitration Centre (NSACI) in 2022–2023, with most conflicts resolved informally or stuck in courts due to athletes' limited understanding of ADR mechanisms—78% of national athletes surveyed were unaware of their arbitration rights. Bureaucratic resistance exacerbates this issue, as sports federations often prioritize hierarchical control over impartial dispute resolution, delaying ADR adoption and skewing internal processes.¹⁵

A fragmented legal framework compounds these challenges. India lacks a unified sports law, relying instead on scattered regulations and judicial precedents, leading to ambiguity in jurisdictional authority and inconsistent outcomes. Enforcement gaps further weaken trust in ADR: 40% of NSACI awards in 2023 required court intervention for implementation, eroding the efficiency and finality that ADR promises. Jurisdictional overlaps between NSACI, the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA), and state commissions create procedural confusion, slowing resolutions and frustrating stakeholders.¹⁶

The digital and resource divide disproportionately affects rural and marginalized athletes, who struggle to access online ADR portals due to inadequate infrastructure and digital literacy. This exclusion limits the reach of dispute-resolution mechanisms, perpetuating inequities. Additionally, cultural and power imbalances undermine fairness: while mediation aligns with India's preference for *samjhauta* (compromise), athletes—especially women and juniors—often fear retaliation or lack confidence

¹³Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) (2024) 'About CAS', <https://www.tas-cas.org/en/general-information/about-cas.html>

¹⁴AAA (2025) 'Supplementary Procedures for the Arbitration of Sports Participation Disputes and Name, Image, and Likeness Disputes', <https://www.adr.org/sports/nil-supplementary-procedures>

¹⁵Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) (2023) 'The Business of Sports: Trends and Opportunities

¹⁶National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) (2024) 'About NADA India', <https://www.nada.nic.in/about>



to challenge federations in sensitive cases like harassment or selection bias. Power dynamics tilt proceedings in favor of entrenched administrators, discouraging genuine participation.

Collectively, these challenges highlight systemic flaws in India's ADR framework, from structural inefficiencies to socio-cultural barriers. Addressing them requires holistic reforms, including centralized legislation, athlete education, and tech-driven accessibility measures, to ensure ADR fulfills its potential as a fair and inclusive mechanism for sports dispute resolution.

5. CASE STUDY: 2023 INDIAN WRESTLERS' PROTEST

Background

In January 2023, a watershed moment in Indian sports occurred when approximately thirty prominent wrestlers, including Olympic medalists Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik, and Bajrang Punia, staged a sit-in protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi. Their grievances centered on serious allegations against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, the president of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) and a BJP Member of Parliament. The accusations were severe and multifaceted, including sexual harassment of female wrestlers, financial mismanagement, and biased selection processes. According to the formal complaints, the alleged sexual misconduct included groping, inappropriate touching, stalking, intimidation, and demands for "sexual favors" in exchange for professional assistance, creating what the women described as a "shared sense of fear and trauma."¹⁷

What made this case particularly troubling was the prolonged institutional silence that preceded the public protest. The wrestlers had initially attempted to resolve their concerns through internal channels, filing complaints within the federation. However, these complaints were systematically ignored for six months, demonstrating a fundamental failure of the organization's internal grievance mechanisms. This institutional neglect ultimately forced the athletes to take the extraordinary step of making their allegations public through protests, revealing deep structural problems within Indian sports governance.

ADR Journey

The public demonstration at Jantar Mantar quickly garnered national attention, compelling authorities to respond. Initially, the government formed an oversight committee headed by Olympic medalist boxer Mary Kom in January 2023 to investigate the allegations. However, this committee's effectiveness was questioned when its report, submitted on April 5, 2023, was not made public, and allegations emerged that it had given Singh a "clean chit" without proper cross-verification of witness statements.

When the wrestlers resumed their protest in April 2023 due to perceived inaction, the Delhi High Court intervened, referring the dispute to mediation. The mediation process faced significant challenges from the outset. Many athletes, particularly female wrestlers, initially expressed hesitation about participating in closed-door sessions, fearing potential retaliation despite mediation safeguards. This reluctance highlighted the profound power imbalance between the federation leadership and the athletes.¹⁸

After sustained pressure and Supreme Court intervention, two FIRs were finally registered against Singh at the Connaught Place Police Station, including one under the POCSO Act related to allegations by a minor. The Delhi Police also provided security to the seven women complainants following Supreme Court directives.

Systemic Impact

The wrestlers' protest exposed critical shortcomings in sports governance structures. Investigations revealed that the WFI lacked an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) as mandated by the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) Act 2013. The existing Sexual Harassment Committee violated Indian law by having four men and only one woman, when regulations require female leadership and majority female membership.

This high-profile case became a catalyst for broader reform, prompting at least 14 other sports federations to revamp their complaint mechanisms. It highlighted the essential need for impartial, external Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms that could function independently of federation politics and power dynamics.

Key Insights

¹⁷Press Trust of India (2023) 'Sports Ministry forms oversight committee to probe allegations against WFI chief', <https://www.ptinews.com/sports/sports-ministry-forms-oversight-committee-to-probe-allegations-against-wfi-chief/350872.html>

¹⁸Live Law (2023) 'Delhi HC directs mediation in wrestlers' dispute', <https://www.livelaw.in/high-court/delhi-high-court/delhi-hc-directs-mediation-in-wrestlers-dispute-wfi-president-sexual-harassment-allegations-225208>



The case revealed several critical insights about sports dispute resolution in India. First, it demonstrated how power imbalances can fundamentally undermine even well-designed ADR processes. Despite mediation safeguards, athletes continued to fear backlash, underscoring the importance of truly neutral, external ADR bodies with enforcement capabilities.

Second, it exposed how cultural preferences for compromise and harmony can sometimes mask or minimize serious issues, particularly for marginalized groups like female athletes. The wrestlers' struggle to be heard reflected broader societal challenges in addressing sexual harassment claims.¹⁹

Finally, the case proved that high-profile ADR processes can drive wider reforms in sports governance. By bringing these issues into public discourse, the protest created momentum for systemic change that extended beyond wrestling to impact governance practices across multiple sports federations.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

India's adoption of ADR in sports represents a progressive shift toward equitable, efficient, and specialized dispute resolution, aligning with global standards while addressing local challenges. The establishment of NSACI and policy reforms like mandatory ADR clauses in athlete contracts demonstrate institutional commitment to reducing reliance on overburdened courts and fostering athlete-centric governance. However, systemic barriers—such as limited awareness among athletes, bureaucratic resistance from federations, fragmented legal frameworks, and enforcement gaps—continue to hinder the full potential of ADR mechanisms.

To address these challenges, India must prioritize comprehensive sports legislation that consolidates dispute resolution processes under a unified legal framework, eliminating jurisdictional ambiguities. Athlete education programs are critical to bridge the knowledge gap, empowering stakeholders to navigate ADR systems effectively. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms, particularly for NSACI awards, would reduce dependence on judicial intervention and enhance trust in ADR outcomes. Equally vital is targeted outreach to rural and marginalized athletes through mobile ADR units, digital literacy initiatives, and multilingual support to ensure inclusivity.

Innovative solutions, such as hybrid arbitration-mediation models blending adversarial rigor with culturally rooted compromise (*samjhauta*), could balance efficiency with fairness. Integrating blockchain technology for evidence preservation in doping or harassment cases would bolster transparency and accountability.²⁰ The 2023 wrestlers' protest underscores the urgency of these reforms, revealing how power imbalances and institutional inertia can undermine justice without robust safeguards.

The evolution of ADR in Indian sports remains a work in progress, requiring sustained collaboration between athletes, federations, legal experts, and policymakers. By addressing current limitations through legislative clarity, technological integration, and grassroots empowerment, ADR can emerge as a cornerstone of integrity in Indian sports, ensuring that institutional authority coexists harmoniously with athlete welfare and justice. This transformation is not merely procedural but cultural—a reimagining of sports governance that prioritizes fairness, speed, and expertise to nurture India's aspirations as a global sporting powerhouse.

7. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite the advantages of Alternative Dispute Resolution in addressing sports disputes, current frameworks face critical limitations that hinder their effectiveness when confronting emerging controversies. These challenges require substantive modifications to existing structures to ensure ADR mechanisms remain relevant and effective in the evolving sports landscape.

Critical Limitations in Current Frameworks

Procedural gaps in existing ADR structures often fail to account for the unique characteristics of novel dispute categories. Traditional sports arbitration procedures may be ill-suited for addressing complex jurisdictional questions raised by global esports competitions or technical evaluations required in equipment validation disputes.

Enforceability issues across jurisdictions present another major challenge, particularly for disputes involving international stakeholders or digital environments. While established sports arbitration bodies like the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS)

¹⁹The Hindu (2023) 'Wrestlers Protest: Key developments', <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/wrestlers-protest-key-developments/article66784882.ece>

²⁰ Tanaka, L.K. (2025) 'Navigating Sports Participation and NIL Disputes: Fair, Fast and Effective Resolution', American Arbitration Association Blog, <http://www.adr.org/blog/NIL-Sports-Disputes>



have developed mechanisms for ensuring compliance with their decisions, emerging areas like esports lack comparable enforcement frameworks. This limitation undermines confidence in ADR processes and incentivizes forum shopping.²¹

Power imbalances between stakeholders represent a persistent concern in sports ADR. Individual athletes often face significant disadvantages when challenging decisions by well-resourced governing bodies or commercial entities. This imbalance is particularly pronounced in emerging dispute categories where precedents are limited and legal standards remain uncertain. The Riot Games Dispute Resolution System has attempted to address this issue by establishing a Legal Aid Fund for players with limited financial resources, but such support mechanisms remain rare.²²

Confidentiality concerns in high-profile disputes create tension between the traditional privacy of ADR processes and the public interest in transparent governance of sports. While confidentiality facilitates candid negotiations and protects sensitive information, it may also shield questionable practices from public scrutiny and impede the development of consistent standards.

The lack of uniformity in how sports organizations resolve disputes further complicates the landscape. Different sports, leagues, and regions often employ distinct ADR approaches with varying procedures, standards, and enforcement mechanisms. This fragmentation creates uncertainty for stakeholders operating across multiple sporting contexts and impedes the development of consistent jurisprudence.

Recommended ADR Structure Modifications

Addressing these limitations requires substantive modifications to existing ADR structures. One promising approach is developing specialized dispute resolution mechanisms tailored to specific emerging dispute categories. The Riot Games DRS provides a model for esports-specific arbitration, incorporating features like accessibility for players with limited resources and expertise in the unique aspects of professional gaming.

Hybrid resolution models that combine elements of different ADR processes offer another valuable innovation. The Canadian Sport Dispute Resolution Code includes both standard mediation and hybrid mediation/arbitration processes, with resolution facilitation included as a preliminary step in non-doping cases. This flexible approach allows parties to benefit from the relationship-preserving aspects of mediation while ensuring definitive resolution through arbitration if necessary.²³

Expanding access to ADR mechanisms is essential for addressing power imbalances between stakeholders. This expansion could include financial support for under-resourced parties, educational resources to help stakeholders understand their rights and options, and simplified procedures for disputes involving limited financial stakes.

Enhanced transparency measures could help balance the benefits of confidentiality with the need for public accountability in sports governance. These measures might include anonymized publication of decisions, clear standards for determining which aspects of proceedings should remain confidential, and mechanisms for stakeholder input on procedural rules.

Specialized Training and Technology Integration

The effective resolution of emerging sports disputes requires adjudicators with specialized expertise beyond general sports law knowledge. Training programs for mediators and arbitrators should be expanded to include emerging areas like esports governance, NIL regulations, and sports technology standards.

Technology integration offers significant opportunities to enhance sports ADR processes. Virtual platforms can enable participation from any location, reducing travel costs and increasing accessibility for parties in different regions.²⁴ Online case management systems can streamline document submission, scheduling, and communication, accelerating resolution timelines for time-sensitive disputes.

Beyond procedural applications, technology can also help address the underlying causes of sports disputes. By enabling athletes to voice grievances through efficient and accessible channels, technology-enhanced ADR mechanisms may reduce the likelihood that athletes will resort to social media criticism that damages organizational reputations.

Creating flexible frameworks for emerging dispute types is essential for addressing novel controversies that don't fit neatly within existing categories. These frameworks should emphasize adaptability, allowing procedures to be tailored to the specific needs of each dispute while maintaining core principles of fairness and due process.

²¹Foster, K. (2023) 'Is There a Global Sports Law?', Entertainment and Sports Law Journal, 20(1), pp. 1-18.

²²Haas, U. (2023) 'The Role of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Countering the Erosion of Fair Play', International Sports Law Journal.

²³CCADR (2024) 'Arbitration in the Realm of Sports in India: An Analysis', Chanakya Centre for Alternative Dispute Resolution, <https://ccadr.cnlul.ac.in/blog/arbitration/arbitration-in-the-realm-of-sports-in-india-an-analysis/>

²⁴Court of Arbitration for Sport (2022) 'CAS Mediation Rules'. <https://www.tascas.org/en/mediation/rules.html>



8. CONCLUSION

This research has examined how Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms address emerging sports controversies beyond traditional playing field disputes. As sports expand into NIL rights, esports, and technology-enhanced competition, conventional litigation proves increasingly inadequate for resolving complex, time-sensitive disputes. Mediation and arbitration offer significant advantages through flexibility, efficiency, and specialized expertise.

Each emerging dispute category presents unique challenges requiring tailored approaches. NIL rights disputes intersect athlete autonomy, educational values, and commercial interests. Esports disputes involve distinctive jurisdictional challenges requiring innovative frameworks like Riot Games' DRS. Technology-related controversies demand technical expertise beyond legal knowledge.

Despite ADR's advantages, current frameworks exhibit limitations including procedural gaps, enforceability challenges, power imbalances, and confidentiality concerns. Addressing these requires specialized dispute resolution mechanisms, hybrid models, expanded access initiatives, and enhanced transparency. Additionally, specialized training for mediators and arbitrators, alongside strategic technology integration, will be essential for developing effective ADR systems that meet the evolving needs of modern sports

