

Moral Boundaries in Sports Governance: Ethical Reflections on Manipulation, Commercial Interests, and Institutional Accountability

Hongfei Liu^a

^aSchool of management, Swansea University, UK

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Abstract

Purpose— This paper applies a qualitative, critical-ethical analysis using multiple case studies, including court arbitration documents and regulatory reports. The framework integrates moral theory and institutional critique.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Match-fixing is not only an individual moral failure but is also deeply rooted in flawed institutional governance, athlete vulnerability, and commercial conflicts, particularly involving the gambling industry. The paper emphasizes the need for structurally independent ethical oversight.

Findings – The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the ethical issues surrounding match-fixing within modern sports governance systems, with a particular focus on the underlying institutional vulnerabilities and conflicts of interest that exacerbate manipulation risks.

Research Implications – The study contributes to the ethics and governance literature by proposing reform strategies that integrate integrity education, governance transparency, and structural support for vulnerable athletes. It provides actionable insights for sports policymakers and regulatory bodies.

Keywords: Match-fixing, Sports governance, Athlete vulnerability, Gambling industry, Ethics, Institutional reform

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^a First Author, E-mail: liuhongfei1488@163.com

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I. Introduction

The core values of sport are rooted in fair competition, integrity, and the embodiment of the sporting spirit. The establishment of modern sports governance systems aims to safeguard these principles. However, with the increasing commercialization and globalization of the sports industry, a range of ethical challenges has emerged, with match-fixing being one of the most notable and concerning examples. Such practices not only undermine the fairness of competition but can also affect athletes' careers, public trust, and the interests of sponsors.

In recent years, match-fixing has received growing attention from both researchers and policymakers. Documented cases include instances where tennis players have deliberately lost a set for financial gain, football goalkeepers have accepted payments to concede goals, and entire teams have collaborated to achieve a specific score for betting purposes. These cases involve individual ethical decisions and also highlight potential limitations in governance mechanisms for prevention, investigation, and enforcement. Furthermore, the governance of match-fixing often operates at the intersection of ethics and law. On one hand, sports organizations have internal "sports justice" systems that address violations through their statutes and disciplinary procedures; on the other, national legal systems may impose criminal sanctions for certain forms of misconduct.

The complexity of the match-fixing problem extends beyond the breach of rules and touches on the vulnerabilities of athletes. Literature in areas such as "Duty of Care" and "Eating Disorders in Elite Sport" suggests that many professional athletes—particularly younger athletes, women, and those in lower-income sports—may face considerable psychological, financial, and identity-related pressures. These factors could increase susceptibility to external influence or coercion. In contexts where social support and governance oversight are limited, athletes may encounter difficult choices that could conflict with ethical or legal standards. Determining intent and responsibility in such situations can be challenging. This raises a broader question: to what extent should the system provide stronger support structures to protect those in more precarious positions?

In summary, match-fixing should be understood not only as a legal matter but also as an ethical challenge within the broader sports governance framework. This article will examine match-fixing from a governance perspective, outlining its main forms and associated sanctioning mechanisms, exploring the vulnerabilities of the athlete community and their position within governance systems, and analysing the tensions between gambling-related commercial interests and regulatory objectives. It will conclude by offering proposals intended to inform governance practices and contribute to policy development and theoretical discussion.

II. Definition and Governance Dilemma of Match Rigging

Within the sports governance framework, match-fixing is widely regarded as a significant ethical challenge. It not only affects the integrity of competition but can also influence confidence in the governance structure as

a whole. While it may appear to be primarily an issue of individual misconduct, it also raises questions about the design and operation of governance and sanctioning mechanisms. Match-fixing is generally defined as the intentional interference by individuals or groups involved in sport in the process or outcome of a competition, with the purpose of obtaining undue advantage. Such interference can take forms such as accepting payments, making deliberate errors, coordinating outcomes in secret, or manipulating scores. Although both legal systems and sporting regulations typically classify such conduct as a serious violation, the operational definition of “manipulation” can sometimes be ambiguous—particularly in distinguishing between “intent” and the available “evidence”—creating challenges for governance bodies in decision-making.

One challenge concerns the limited investigative authority of sports governance organizations. Unlike judicial bodies, they may not have the same ability to collect and verify evidence, which sometimes requires them to reach decisions based on a lower evidentiary threshold (Pielke, 2016). While such an approach can facilitate timely resolution, it may also result in reliance on indirect evidence or inferences rather than comprehensive investigative findings, which can raise concerns about procedural fairness. For example, in the Pobeda case (CAS 2009/A/1920), the team was disqualified after abnormal betting patterns coincided with unexpected match outcomes, despite the absence of direct evidence of bribery involving the players. As McNamee (2020) notes, when judgments rely heavily on statistical indicators and assumptions about human behaviour, the boundaries of “fairness” can become difficult to define. Such situations highlight the importance of ensuring both the integrity of sport and the protection of the rights of those involved, particularly individuals in more vulnerable positions.

Another critical dilemma is the ambiguity of governance responsibilities and authority. Manipulating matches often involves violations of internal sports regulations as well as issues of fraud and corruption at the level of national criminal law. However, in most cases, sports organizations tend to keep investigations within their internal systems, avoiding the introduction of criminal justice procedures. This approach of “sports justice first” has its efficiency and professional considerations, but it can also easily lead to conflicts of interest and lack of transparency. For example, some organizations worry that public criminal investigations could damage their image, and thus tend to resolve issues internally or impose low-profile penalties (Forster, 2010). The most serious ethical flaw lies in the lack of sufficient transparency and appeal mechanisms during the governance process. In most cases, the accused cannot effectively obtain all the evidence of the case, the investigation process is not public, and legal assistance is insufficient. The absence of procedural justice makes the manipulation of sports governance not only morally problematic but also legally fragile. As Young (2011) stated, “Institutional justice is not only reflected in the correctness of outcomes, but should pay more attention to the fairness of the process. If the voices of vulnerable groups are systematically excluded during decision-making or governance, even if the outcomes are reasonable, it is difficult to call it true justice.” These dilemmas affect the effectiveness of governance. If reforms are not carried out at a structural level, the manipulation of matches will be difficult to truly curb, and governance itself will become a mere performance.

III. The Vulnerability of Athletes and Ethical Dilemmas

Economic factors can be an important background condition influencing athletes' involvement in match manipulation. Kihl et al. (2017) observe that athletes facing limited income and financial insecurity may be more vulnerable to monetary inducements. In some lower-profile sports, athletes often need to self-fund participation and may have minimal sponsorship support. Those ranked outside the top tier sometimes struggle to cover basic travel and training costs. In 2011, Austrian tennis player Köllerer received a lifetime ban for accepting payments to manipulate match outcomes. During his appeal, he remarked that "even covering travel expenses is a challenge" for athletes in his position. While this does not excuse the misconduct, it illustrates how broader financial pressures can intersect with individual ethical risk (CAS 2011/A/2490).

The inherent instability of an athletic career can also heighten decision-making vulnerabilities. Many sports have relatively short peak performance periods, with a high risk of injury. The Grey-Thompson report (2017) highlights that "a lack of support during transition periods" can contribute to psychological strain and, in some cases, increase susceptibility to unethical influences. When facing career decline or prolonged exclusion from competition, some athletes may be approached by individuals seeking to exploit these circumstances. For example, football goalkeeper Labuts was accused of "intentionally making mistakes" late in his career; although the case did not result in a conviction due to insufficient evidence (CAS 2018/A/6075), it demonstrates the potential challenges athletes face when their income opportunities diminish.

Another relevant consideration is the limited representation and influence athletes often have within governance structures, which can make it more difficult to defend their interests. By contrast, clubs, referee committees, or other institutional stakeholders may have access to legal counsel, media channels, and political resources. This imbalance can leave athletes with fewer avenues to respond to allegations. For example, in the Pobeda case (CAS 2009/A/1920), the club was sanctioned for match manipulation, but the decision did not fully explore the possible role of organizational dynamics in the athletes' actions, and responsibility was attributed primarily to individuals. McNamee et al. (2020) note that in sport ethics governance, organisational and individual responsibilities are not always addressed in equal measure, which can raise questions about proportionality.

From an ethical standpoint, scholars such as Young (2011) have argued that when individual actions are shaped or constrained by structural conditions, accountability considerations may benefit from examining the broader institutional context. In match-fixing cases, overlooking the situational pressures athletes face could mean that governance efforts remain focused on retrospective sanctions rather than preventive measures. Strengthening the ethical legitimacy of governance frameworks may involve both procedural safeguards—such as whistleblower protections, transparent investigation processes, and accessible appeal mechanisms—and measures that address underlying conditions, such as improving career support and financial security for athletes. Examples include establishing an independent Athlete Integrity Protection Office, similar to the Athlete Ombudsman in the anti-doping system, to offer psychological and legal assistance, as well as developing policies such as minimum salary standards, retirement security funds, and legal aid initiatives at the national level.

IV. The conflict between commercial interests and ethics in the gambling industry

The rapid expansion of the gambling industry has provided sport with a significant new source of funding and public engagement. While this has contributed to the commercial growth of many sports, it has also introduced complex ethical considerations. In the current governance landscape, sports organisations can occupy a dual role—both benefiting from the gambling industry and overseeing the regulation of match-fixing. This intersection can present challenges in maintaining public trust. The integration of betting interests into the sports economy is well documented; for example, data from the European Gaming and Betting Association (EGBA, 2022) indicate that over 65% of top clubs in Europe's five major football leagues have betting-related sponsorships, including shirt advertising, training kit branding, and official partnerships. Such commercial arrangements provide substantial revenue streams but can also raise questions about dependence on a particular industry.

Complicating this relationship is the role of betting operators in the detection of suspicious activity. Many cases of match-fixing have relied on information from bookmakers' abnormal betting monitoring systems, with reports from third-party organisations such as Sportradar forming a significant basis for some CAS proceedings (McLaren, 2016). While these systems can be effective in identifying irregularities, they are primarily designed to protect the commercial interests of betting operators. As such, governance processes relying exclusively on this form of evidence may face challenges in demonstrating full independence and neutrality.

Manoli & Antonopoulos (2015) describe this as a structural moral tension: gambling companies, in pursuing regulatory legitimacy, also operate under a business model that inherently seeks to maximise profit, which can in turn create opportunities for behaviours at the margins of ethical standards. Without robust public-interest safeguards, there is a risk that governance norms could gradually shift away from sport's core values. This is of particular relevance for athletes, who may be subject to significant oversight and sanctioning but have limited influence over institutional rule-making. As Pielke (2013) notes, long-term partnerships between regulators and commercial actors can shape governance frameworks in ways that may affect their perceived alignment with public values.

Addressing these challenges may involve clarifying the boundaries between sports governance and the gambling industry. This could include the creation of independent integrity oversight bodies with funding, staffing, and decision-making structures that are demonstrably separate from gambling sector interests. In addition, clearer ethical guidelines could be established—such as restrictions on athletes betting on related competitions and policies to limit the proportion of sponsorship derived from gambling sources. Finally, further research and public discussion may be warranted regarding the cultural effects of what some scholars term the “gamblification” of sport, where competitions are increasingly framed through betting odds rather than athletic performance. Understanding these dynamics is important in supporting governance approaches that protect both the integrity and the public value of sport.

V. A Critical Analysis of the Guangdong University of Technology Match-Fixing Scandal: Ethical and Institutional Failures in University Sports Governance

In 2019, a Chinese university basketball game drew public attention after a widely shared video showed a series of unusual plays. In the Chinese University Basketball League, the men's team from Guangdong University of Technology made several noticeable errors—such as missed open shots, uncollected passes, and minimal defensive pressure—which prompted discussion among spectators and online audiences. The Chinese University Sports Association (CUA) later described the incident as “unsportsmanlike conduct” and issued disciplinary measures to the university. While this may be interpreted as a matter of tactical or technical decisions, it also offers an opportunity to reflect on aspects of governance, oversight, and values education in university sport.

In this match, the outcome determined the next stage's pairings, with the winners potentially meeting a stronger opponent. The discussion surrounding the incident centred not on gambling, but on whether the result might have been influenced by considerations unrelated to performance. From a behavioural perspective, some of the plays could be viewed as coordinated rather than accidental, which aligns with general frameworks for identifying manipulation based on both actions and intent. As McNamee et al. (2020) observe, even without financial motives, perceived deliberate losses may affect audience expectations, influence opponents, and raise questions about fairness.

The case also highlights possible areas for further development in university sports governance. For example, in-match officials and technical representatives did not intervene when atypical patterns of play occurred, suggesting a potential area for review in real-time oversight protocols. In addition, post-match communications focused on team-level outcomes, with limited public information regarding the roles of different stakeholders. Governance in sport involves not only enforcing rules but also providing clear guidance on acceptable conduct. In this instance, the CUA's response was primarily disciplinary, without an accompanying broader policy discussion.

Similar circumstances have been discussed in other contexts, where teams might adopt strategic approaches to influence tournament progression. In such situations, student-athletes may feel limited in their ability to make independent choices. As Young (2011) notes, when certain behaviours become part of established practice, responsibility may be understood as both individual and collective.

From an educational perspective, the incident raises questions about how competitive goals align with value-based teaching. In its response, Guangdong University of Technology stated that it “respects the tactical arrangements of students,” which affirms student decision-making while also potentially reducing emphasis on competitive integrity. In university sport, the pursuit of competitive performance can be combined with broader educational aims such as promoting integrity and respect, thereby supporting the overall development of student-athletes.

At the governance level, preventive measures could complement disciplinary actions. These might include ethics training for athletes, coaches, and administrators, as well as clearer guidance for decision-making in

competition settings. Establishing an independent oversight function for university sport, with responsibilities for match observation, early risk alerts, and investigative processes, could support transparency. In addition, representation mechanisms for student-athletes could provide a channel for raising concerns and receiving institutional support in situations where integrity might be at risk.

VI. Ethical Reform Path and Future Governance Suggestions

The current sports governance framework faces ongoing challenges in strengthening ethical standards, refining institutional design, and ensuring effective implementation. If governance responses remain primarily focused on post-event sanctions and incremental adjustments, it may be difficult to address the evolving nature of manipulative behaviours. From an ethical governance perspective, there is value in exploring forward-looking and systematic approaches to reform.

One possible direction is the establishment of an independent and trusted integrity oversight mechanism. Drawing on the experience of systems such as the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), a “Competition Integrity Bureau” or “Anti-Manipulation Alliance” could be considered, with clearly defined investigative and sanctioning powers. To safeguard impartiality, it would be important to ensure that such a body’s funding is independent of event organisers and the gambling industry.

Enhancing the ethical awareness and risk recognition of athletes and other stakeholders is equally important. Integrity education could be embedded into athlete development pathways, including regular training, scenario-based exercises, and case-study analyses, particularly for young athletes and university students. Coaches, club administrators, referees, and other relevant groups could also benefit from targeted ethics programmes.

Revisiting representation mechanisms within governance structures may further strengthen decision-making processes, ensuring that athletes, coaches, and referees have meaningful input in the formulation of rules and policies. Finally, a restorative approach to ethical governance could be promoted. In addition to holding individuals accountable, this approach would provide opportunities for psychological support, educational engagement, and reintegration into the sporting community. Recognising that manipulative behaviour can arise from complex systemic and personal factors, governance measures that combine accountability with restoration may better reflect the humanistic values of sport and contribute to reducing repeat offences.

VII. Conclusion

The issue of game manipulation is one of the most challenging ethical issues in contemporary sports governance. It not only undermines the fairness of the rules and results of competition, but also deeply reflects the power asymmetry, institutional loopholes and evasion of ethical responsibilities in the governance system. This paper introduces the lack of institutional response to the vulnerability of athletes, the distortion of

governance logic caused by the commercialization of betting, and the lack of transparency and independence of organizational governance. Taking the match-fixing case of Guangdong University of Technology as an example, the manipulation of the game has penetrated into the field of college sports, which is not only a manifestation of individual anomie, but also a warning of the failure of institutional and cultural linkage. To solve this problem, we cannot rely on the punishment of one thing, but need to promote a systemic governance transformation. Ethical governance should not only be about moral education, but also about integrating fairness, respect and responsibility into the daily operation of the sports system through institutional design, role participation and mechanism innovation. As Pielke (2016) puts it, "If we can't govern the integrity of the movement, then we can't really govern the movement itself."

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