

Reflections on Sports Law Issues Raised During the Final of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (Morocco)

By
Khadija Elmadmad & Chama Belehsen¹

The final of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON), held in Morocco, raised several significant issues related to sports law. These included the withdrawal of the Senegalese national team and its technical staff following the contestation of a penalty awarded after VAR consultation, the pitch invasion by Senegalese supporters and their attacks on security personnel and volunteers, as well as the resumption of the match in a context of serious insecurity.

This situation raises several important questions:

- What violations of sports law were committed during this final?
- What responsibilities may be incurred?
- How can justice be served, the situation remedied, and the rules of sports law applied in such a context?

I. Violations of Sports Law Committed During the 2025 AFCON Final

Several breaches of sports law were observed during this match, including the following:

1. Contestation of the Referee's Decisions

In accordance with the rules of sports law, the referee's decisions concerning facts related to the game (fouls, penalties, cards, etc.) are final. The referee has the authority to impose disciplinary sanctions from the moment he enters the field of play until he leaves it after the final whistle.

A team is not entitled to refuse to continue playing due to a refereeing decision, even if it considers that decision unjust.

The challenge to the awarded penalty and the pressure exerted on the referee constitute an infringement within the meaning of Article 82 of the CAF Disciplinary Code and Article 11 of the FIFA Disciplinary Code. These provisions prohibit any attempt to influence or destabilize match officials.

2. Withdrawal of the Senegalese Team and Its Head Coach

According to Article 148 of the CAF Disciplinary Code and Article 14 of the FIFA Disciplinary Code, refusing to continue a match constitutes a serious disciplinary offence.

The withdrawal of the Senegalese players and their head coach during the final of 18 January, without an order from the referee, amounts to an unlawful abandonment of the match, regardless of

¹ Khadija Elmadmad is Professor of Law at the Casablanca Law Faculty and Attorney at the Rabat Bar Association in Morocco

Chama Belehsen is a postgraduate student in Sports Law in Spain. She holds a Master's degree in "Sports Law" obtained at the Real Madrid School of Sports Sciences of the European University of Madrid and she is also a « *Unified Tennis Olympic* » champion and a « *Special Olympics* » coach.

the number of players involved or the duration of the withdrawal (see FIFA jurisprudence *Rojas, Chile v. Brazil, 1989*).

Leaving the field of play during a match constitutes a breach of the sporting competition contract, in accordance with Article 84 of the AFCON Regulations. Any subsequent return to the pitch cannot erase this infringement. The Senegalese team left the field for more than fifteen minutes before resuming play.

3. Psychological Impact and Sporting Prejudice

The withdrawal of the Senegalese team had a negative psychological impact on the Moroccan players who remained on the pitch, particularly on Brahim Díaz, who had been designated to take the penalty kick.

Moreover, pressure is alleged to have been exerted on him not to score, a condition reportedly imposed by the Senegalese team in order to resume the match. According to *Lex Sportiva* (international sports law), any advantage or disadvantage obtained through unlawful means constitutes a violation of the principle of sporting fairness.

4. Pitch Invasion and Violence by Supporters

The refusal of the Senegalese team to continue the match prompted its supporters to invade the pitch, assault security personnel and volunteers, and create a climate of widespread insecurity.

This incident could have escalated into violent clashes between supporters of both teams. However, Moroccan fans showed restraint, thereby preventing a further escalation of violence.

II. Responsibilities Incurred During the 2025 AFCON Final

Several types of responsibility may arise because of these events:

1. Responsibility of the Senegal National Team

Under CAF and FIFA regulations, a team is held responsible for the conduct of its supporters, players, and technical staff when such conduct causes a match interruption or disturbances to sporting public order.

2. Responsibility of the Senegalese Football Federation

The Senegalese Football Federation is accountable for the actions of its representatives (coach, players, supporters) and may be subject to sanctions, including fines, suspensions, or exclusion from future competitions.

3. Responsibility of the Referee

The referee of this final had the authority to declare the definitive termination of the match following the withdrawal of the Senegalese team and the pitch invasion, by noting the impossibility of continuing the match under acceptable safety conditions and by submitting an official report.

Failing to declare the end of the match despite such an insecure context could engage the referee's disciplinary or professional responsibility. Waiting more than fifteen minutes before resuming the match, without taking into account the preceding incidents, constitutes wrongful conduct.

III. Respect for Sports Law and the Application of Its Rules

All teams participating in competitions must respect sporting public order, guaranteed by the regulations of international and continental governing bodies.

No team may contest refereeing decisions or withdraw from an ongoing match without facing disciplinary consequences.

Sports law is based on strict compliance with regulations and on fairness. It cannot reward a team that seeks to hold a competition hostage, as demonstrated by the jurisprudence of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in the case *Wydad Casablanca v. Espérance de Tunis* (CAF Champions League Final, 2019).

Furthermore, pursuant to Article 10 of the CAF Disciplinary Code, when a team withdraws from a competition, the result obtained is annulled and a forfeit (3–0) is awarded in favor of the team that remained on the field. The duration of the interruption or the subsequent resumption of the match has no bearing on this decision.

The violation of sports law observed during the final of the 2025 AFCON raises serious concerns for the future of this legal discipline and may have repercussions for upcoming international and continental sporting competitions. It is therefore necessary to clarify the situation, sanction those responsible, and ensure compliance with regulatory provisions.

Material evidence shows that sports law was disregarded and its rules ignored, as illustrated by the conduct of the Senegalese coach, goalkeeper, certain players, and their supporters.

For his part, the referee failed to comply with the applicable rules following the withdrawal of the Senegalese team and the contestation of his decisions.

Conclusion

The final of the 2025 AFCON in Morocco revealed that sports law remains insufficiently known and understood by key stakeholders. It is therefore urgent to strengthen legal training for coaches, players, referees, and officials in order to promote a genuine culture of sports law within sporting institutions and professional sports environments.

The missed penalty (whether intentional or not) by Brahim Díaz may have temporarily saved the 2025 AFCON final from a potential upheaval, at the cost of crowning the opposing team as winners in disregard of certain fundamental principles of sports law.

However, while the battle on the field for the title ended on 18 January 2025, another battle—this time a legal one—has begun to safeguard sports law from collapse and to ensure its proper application in the future. The Royal Moroccan Football Federation (FRMF) has referred the matter to the CAF and FIFA regarding the withdrawal of the Senegalese national team from the field during the 2025 AFCON final. The CAF and FIFA have condemned the incidents that occurred during the Morocco–Senegal final and could initiate disciplinary proceedings.

Specialized lawyers will await the relevant decisions in order to draw future legal consequences in the field of sport.