



Sports Law & Taxation

CONTENTS

- 2023/19 **AI in sports. Tackling the legal issues**
- 2023/20 **Combatting match fixing in Switzerland. Latest legal situation and practice**
- 2023/21 **United States of America: Female athletes' struggle for professionalism!**
- 2023/22 **South Africa: The defence of volenti non fit iniuria in contact sports**
- 2023/23 **South Africa: Sexual offences in sport**
- 2023/24 **Image rights and the taxation of their exploitation in the Italian legal system. The case of Cristiano Ronaldo**
- 2023/25 **Image rights infringements and recommendations for legal certainty. A South African perspective**
- 2023/26 **Tax planning for sports events**
- 2023/27 **Italy changes the game. When the taxation of image rights turns the footballer into an influencer. The Cristiano Ronaldo case**



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Table of Contents

Vol. 14 No.3 September 2023

Editorial

4

Articles

2023/19 AI in sports. Tackling the legal issues

by David B. Hoppe

10

2023/20 Combatting match fixing in Switzerland. Latest legal situation
and practice

by Rafael Braegger

14

2023/21 United States of America: Female athletes' struggle for professionalism!

by Matthew Kaiser, Laura La Vigne and Madeline Maday

19

2023/22 South Africa: The defence of volenti non fit iniuria in contact sports

by Raheel Ahmed

22

2023/23 South Africa: Sexual offences in sport

by Anneli Hyman

26

2023/24 Image rights and the taxation of their exploitation in the Italian legal
system. The case of Cristiano Ronaldo

by Dr. Lucien W. Valloni And Sara Botti

33

2023/25 Image rights infringements and recommendations for legal certainty.
A South African perspective

by Layckan van Gensen

38

2023/26 Tax planning for sports events

by Kevin Offer

44

2023/27 Italy changes the game. When the taxation of image rights turns the
footballer into an influencer. The Cristiano Ronaldo case

by Alberto Brazzalotto and Federico Cagnola

48

EDITORIAL

It is with much pleasure that we welcome readers to the September 2023 edition (citation: *SLT* 2023/3) of our ground-breaking journal *Sports Law and Taxation* (*SLT*) and online database www.sportslawandtaxation.com.

Not surprisingly, association football (soccer) continues to dominate the sporting headlines and this is reflected in the *Editorial* of this issue of *SLT*.

At the end of May 2013, UEFA, the governing body of European association football, approved the membership of the Gibraltar Football Association. To mark this historic event, we invited Ian Felice and Gian Massetti of Hassans International Law Firm, Gibraltar, who act for the Gibraltar Football Association, to contribute to the *SLT Editorial* the following account of the phenomenal growth of association football in Gibraltar (known colloquially as “the Rock”) at the elite and grass roots levels, which, as you will read, has been no mean achievement:

“Football on the Rock: 10 years of UEFA membership
On 24 May 2013, at the 37th Ordinary Congress of the Union of European Football Associations (“UEFA”) in London, the Gibraltar Football Association (“GFA”) was admitted as the 54th full member of UEFA. Gibraltar became UEFA’s smallest member state by population (just under 33,000) and surface area (6.8 km²), behind San Marino, Liechtenstein and the Faroe Islands. The President of the Gibraltar Football Association at the time, Gareth Latin, described the development as “a momentous occasion for football in Gibraltar”, declaring that “UEFA membership means that we can begin the next chapter of Gibraltarian football”. This marked the end of a long and arduous process of over twenty years, from May 1991, when the GFA had first made representations seeking membership, which was resisted principally by Spain, which claims sovereignty over Gibraltar. In 2007, forty-eight UEFA member associations voted against Gibraltar’s application, with the only votes in favour coming from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Following an August 2011 ruling from the Court of Arbitration for Sport (“CAS”) in Gibraltar’s favour, it was accepted as a provisional member of UEFA in October 2012, with definitive admission approved unanimously in May 2013. That day was arguably the most significant in the long history of the GFA, which dates back to 1895. One of the oldest football associations in the world had finally achieved international recognition. Gibraltarians could now support their own national teams in competitive matches. Gibraltarian clubs were now able to compete in UEFA competitions, opening new opportunities and marking the

start of a new professional era for football in Gibraltar. FIFA membership was subsequently confirmed in 2016, and the GFA has since revolutionised its operational, administrative, and sporting structures, with the express intention of developing into a modern and forward-thinking organisation. The past ten years has seen significant development in grassroots, women’s football, youth football and futsal, as well as the elite-level sport.

Elite level

At the elite level, Gibraltar has punched above its weight with some historic moments on the pitch in the last ten years. Gibraltar played its first ever recognised international friendly at the Estadio Algarve in Faro, Portugal on 19 November 2013, drawing 0-0 with Slovakia, a nation with a population of over five million. A first ever victory in a recognised international followed in 2014, with a 1-0 win over Malta, again at the Estadio Algarve. The Gibraltar national team competed in European Championship qualifiers for the first time, drawn in Group D for the UEFA EURO 2016 tournament alongside Germany, Poland, Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Georgia, with their first match a 7-0 defeat to Poland. By quirk of fate, Gibraltar was initially drawn in Group C, but with Spain already in that group, UEFA moved Gibraltar to Group D. Despite disappointing results against higher ranked nations in qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup 2018, UEFA EURO 2020 and FIFA World Cup 2022, the introduction of the UEFA Nations League has given Gibraltar the opportunity to play against the continent’s smaller nations more frequently. With more competitive games against teams of roughly the same level, some noteworthy results have been achieved. Gibraltar completed another first in its international football history as they finished in a respectable third place in Group D4 in the UEFA Nations League 2018-2019, following memorable victories over Armenia and Liechtenstein. They then went one better in the UEFA Nations League 2020-2021, making history by achieving promotion to League C. Gibraltar finished top of Group D2 with a 1-1 draw against Liechtenstein at the Victoria Stadium in Gibraltar, having already beaten San Marino and Liechtenstein. Gibraltar’s international teams of all ages, women’s football and futsal now compete regularly in recognised UEFA tournaments, as do club sides who qualify for UEFA competitions by virtue of their performance in domestic competitions. In July 2014, European club football came to Gibraltar with Lincoln Red Imps FC and College Europa FC becoming the first Gibraltarian clubs to participate in qualifiers for the UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europa League

respectively. July 2016 saw perhaps one of the most memorable results in Gibraltar football history, with Lincoln Red Imps FC beating former European champions Celtic, 1-0 at the Victoria Stadium in the home leg of the UEFA Champions League second qualifying round. Lincoln Red Imps FC have also since become the first Gibraltarian club to reach the group stages of a European club competition after defeating Latvian champions Riga in a play-off round of the UEFA Conference League in 2021. The experience and exposure gained from participation in competitions of this level has naturally brought about further opportunities for Gibraltarian footballers to play at higher levels and in different countries. At senior level, a number of current Gibraltar internationals are contracted to clubs abroad, from EFL League One and below in England, to the League of Ireland Premier Division and the lower leagues in Spain. At youth level, there are over 150 Gibraltarians playing in the Spanish regional youth leagues.

Grassroots

Football has long been the most popular sport in Gibraltar, but UEFA membership has acted as a catalyst for the growth of football at grassroots level. The past ten years has seen increased participation in all forms of non-elite football, for children and adults of all ages and abilities. The GFA has worked with local schools to establish a Schools Programme, with futsal and football sessions offered for all ages. Programmes and events have become more frequent, as part of the curriculum, playing a big role in the GFA Grassroots programme. Qualified coaches visit schools to offer them bespoke coaching sessions as part of PE lessons. The Department of Education, in conjunction with the GFA, has organised football themed fun days in which pupils are encouraged to participate in pressure free football activities. The GFA Grassroots Department also organises annual inter school competitions, for boys and girls, which are always well attended and competitive. The GFA also organises mixed summer camps outside the school term, which have, in recent years, been booked to capacity. The GFA also launched the Gibraltar FA Youth Academy in 2021, starting with twice weekly sessions for children aged 4 and 5, with the intention to add an additional age group every year. The uptake for the Academy has been considerably higher than any in history for players of that age group. There has been a surge in the number of teams participating in development leagues, with over 800 children involved. Aimed at keeping the older generation actively involved in the game, walking football is becoming more and more popular in Gibraltar, with a national team already having competed in amateur tournaments in the UK and Portugal.

Women's football

The women's game has seen an increase in participation as has the level of interest from girls wishing to join football and registering. The inaugural Gibraltar Women's Football League was contested between three teams in 2018, growing to five teams in 2021. Away from the domestic league, a number of Gibraltarian women's footballers are competing in the lower leagues in Spain and at various

levels in the UK, up to the Women's Championship. Although the senior national women's team are yet to take part in a UEFA tournament, an under-19s squad was entered into qualification for the 2023 UEFA Women's Under-19 Championship, competing against Israel, North Macedonia and Georgia and becoming the first Gibraltar women's national football team to enter a UEFA competition. In May 2022, Gibraltar's Tercentenary Sports Hall hosted Group B of the preliminary qualifying round of the UEFA Women's Futsal EURO. Gibraltar's women's futsal team earned a point against Moldova and performed well in narrow defeats to Belgium and Slovakia.

Looking to the future

Undoubtedly, the biggest barrier to the development of football in Gibraltar is the infrastructure. With limited space in a densely populated area, there are only two full-size pitches in Gibraltar. All national league and youth league matches are played on an artificial pitch at the Victoria Stadium. There are additional training pitches at the Victoria Stadium, and the GFA works closely with the Gibraltar Sports and Leisure Authority towards maximising the use of other facilities in Gibraltar, including the Lathbury Barracks Sports Complex, the Europa Point complex, local school buildings and the Special Olympics Sport Complex, for smaller sided games and other football activities. The GFA has long been working towards the construction of a new national stadium. Initial plans for a stadium at the Lathbury Barracks or Europa Point did not materialise, but there are now plans for an 8,000-seater stadium to be built on the Victoria Stadium site. This is to be designed as a modern, functional football stadium, together with all the associated facilities and accommodation requirements as may be deemed necessary by the GFA for it to conduct its day-to-day operations. The stadium is to be fully compliant with the UEFA Infrastructure Regulations 2018 for Category IV stadiums and the relevant facilities requirements. In addition, the increased capacity will open opportunities to away fans attending matches in greater numbers. It is anticipated that the new stadium, once constructed, will be the next step for the growth of Gibraltar's football. The state-of-the-art facilities will host the domestic league and international fixtures, hopefully inspiring the next generation of Gibraltarian footballers by ensuring that home matches in UEFA and FIFA qualifying tournaments can be played in Gibraltar and not in Faro, Portugal."

Saudi Arabia aims to become a so-called football powerhouse!

Saudi Arabia has a very ambitious project to make the kingdom an international football hub and it began with the transfer in January 2023 of Cristiano Ronaldo to the Al Nassr club on a two-and-a-half deal, reputedly worth for the player the sum of more than US\$ 400 million in wages. In June 2023, Karim Benzema moved to the Al Ittihad Club and in August 2023, Neymar Junior joined the Saudi Arabia's most decorated club Al Hilal. Also, during the current summer "transfer window", several other high-profile players from the European leagues have joined the Saudi Pro League. These