

EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS OF PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES IN NIGERIA: CONTRACTUAL PROTECTION, TERMINATION, AND PLAYER WELFARE

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Abstract

The professionalization of sport in Nigeria has transformed athletes into employees whose livelihoods depend on legally binding contracts, wages, and welfare protections. Yet, despite the commercial growth of sports, the employment rights of Nigerian athletes remain weakly protected because contracts are often poorly drafted, termination is arbitrary, and welfare provisions such as health insurance, pensions, and post-career support are either absent or inconsistently enforced. This gap not only undermines the dignity of athletes but also exposes Nigerian sports Federations and Clubs to reputational and legal risks. This paper critically examines the employment rights of professional athletes in Nigeria, focusing on three interrelated areas: contractual protection, termination of contracts, and player welfare. It analyses the extent to which Nigerian law including the Labour Act, the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) Statutes, and international instruments like FIFA Regulations on the

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Status and Transfer of Players (RSTP) provides safeguards for athletes. The article argues that while statutes and federation rules acknowledge contractual obligations, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, and athletes often lack effective remedies when their rights are breached. Drawing on comparative insights from jurisdictions where professional athletes enjoy robust employment protections, the article highlights best practices that Nigeria can adopt. It proposes reforms to strengthen contract standardisation, limit arbitrary termination, and institutionalise welfare provisions such as medical cover, insurance, and retirement benefits. By embedding these protections into Nigeria's sports governance, athletes can be recognised not merely as entertainers but as employees entitled to fair treatment under the law.

Keyword: Employment Rights, Professional Athletes, Contractual Protection, Termination, Player Welfare

1.0 Introduction

Sport has undergone a remarkable transformation over the last century, evolving from a pastime of recreation into a global industry worth billions of dollars.¹ Football, basketball, athletics, and boxing, among other disciplines, have become powerful vehicles for economic growth, international relations, and cultural identity². At the centre of this transformation are professional athletes whose labour fuels the commercial engine of sport.³ Broadcasting rights, sponsorship deals, merchandising, and ticket sales all depend on the performance and marketability of athletes. In this respect, athletes are not merely

¹ H David, *The Business of Sport: Global Perspectives* (New York: Springer, 2020), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 15–18

³ W John, *Sports Law and Regulation* (Boston: Aspen Publishers, 2022), 45

entertainers; they are employees whose livelihoods depend on enforceable contracts and the protection of employment rights⁴.

In many advanced jurisdictions, the employment status of professional athletes is firmly established. Labour law and employment regulations provide them with enforceable rights against unfair dismissal, wage default, and welfare neglect.⁵ Institutions such as the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) in England and collective bargaining frameworks in South Africa have ensured that athletes enjoy contractual stability, health and injury insurance, pensions, and mechanisms for post-career reintegration.⁶ International frameworks also reinforce this recognition. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) affirms that all workers, regardless of sector, are entitled to basic protections.⁷ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right to just and favourable conditions of work. In the sporting sphere, the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players (RSTP) emphasise contractual stability, fair treatment, and dispute resolution.⁸ Decisions of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) have consistently upheld the principle that athletes are workers who deserve to be shielded from arbitrary treatment.

Nigeria presents a more troubling picture.⁹ Although the country is a sporting giant in Africa, particularly in football, the legal and institutional framework governing the employment of athletes remains

⁴ International Labour Organisation, *Workers in Sports: Employment Rights* (Geneva: ILO, 2019), 10

⁵ Employment Rights Act 1996 (UK), c. 18, s. 94

⁶ Professional Footballers' Association, *Annual Report 2022* (London: PFA, 2022), 20–25; South African Football Players' Union, *Player Rights Framework*

⁷ International Labour Organisation, *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work* (1998), art. 2

⁸ FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players* (2023), art. 13–14.

⁹ Eze, "Challenges of Employment Rights," 115

underdeveloped. Many athletes sign contracts that are ambiguous or one-sided, drafted without legal oversight and tilted heavily in favour of clubs or federations.¹⁰ Salary arrears are common, with players sometimes going unpaid for months. Injuries suffered in the course of play are frequently left untreated because medical insurance is absent or inadequate. Athletes who reach retirement age often face poverty, having received neither pensions nor structured support for post-career life.¹¹ This reality highlights a troubling contradiction: while Nigeria's athletes bring glory to the nation on the field, the law fails to accord them the dignity and protection it extends to other categories of employees.

Employment contracts are meant to provide stability and predictability in any professional relationship. For athletes, such contracts should clearly define wages, bonuses, medical cover, termination procedures, and mechanisms for dispute resolution.¹² Yet in Nigeria, contracts are frequently vague or unenforceable. In some cases, clubs reserve unilateral rights to terminate agreements without compensation. In others, athletes are pressured into signing contracts that contain no welfare provisions whatsoever. The lack of standardization in player contracts compounds the problem, as each club drafts agreements based on its discretion, without oversight from federations or regulators.¹³ This stands in sharp contrast to jurisdictions where federations mandate standard contracts to ensure fairness and uniformity.

¹⁰ A. O Tunde, "Contractual Issues in Nigerian Football," *West African Sports Journal* 8, no. 2 (2023): 78–90.

¹¹ A Chidi, "Post-Career Challenges for Nigerian Athletes," *Sports Africa Review* 5, no. 1 (2024): 33–45.

¹² FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players* (2023), art. 13

¹³ Nigeria Football Federation, *NFF Statutes* (2022), art. 35, noting lack of contract standardization.

Termination of contracts illustrates another area of vulnerability. Nigerian athletes are often dismissed arbitrarily on grounds of poor performance, administrative changes, or financial difficulties of clubs.¹⁴ Such terminations are carried out without notice, without severance, and without due process. Under employment law principles, contracts should only be terminated for just cause or redundancy, with adequate safeguards for the employee.¹⁵ In sports, where an athlete's career is already short and financially fragile, arbitrary termination can be devastating. FIFA's RSTP expressly prohibits unjustified breaches of contract, underscoring the principle of contractual stability. Nevertheless, this principle is largely ignored in Nigeria, where athletes are left without effective remedies. Attempts to seek redress in civil courts are often frustrated by delays, high costs, and FIFA's disapproval of judicial interference in football matters¹⁶.

Beyond contracts and termination, the welfare of athletes is perhaps the most neglected dimension of their employment rights in Nigeria.¹⁷ Welfare encompasses health, safety, and long-term support. Professional athletes face unique risks: injuries are frequent, careers are short, and retirement often comes at an age when alternative employment is difficult. In developed systems, welfare is addressed through health insurance, injury compensation, pensions, and retraining programmes.¹⁸ In Nigeria, however, welfare remains largely absent. Injured athletes are often abandoned by clubs, forced to bear the costs of treatment alone. Retired athletes frequently slip into poverty, with no pensions or safety nets to cushion them. This systemic neglect

¹⁴ "NPFL Clubs Sack Players Over Financial Woes," *Guardian Nigeria*, July 10, 2023, <<https://guardian.ng/sport/npfl-clubs-sack-players>> accessed 24 August 2025

¹⁵ Labour Act, Cap L1, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, s. 20.

¹⁶ FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players* (2023), art. 22; Obayemi, "Enforcement Challenges," 95.

¹⁷ Amadi, "Post-Career Challenges," 34

¹⁸ Gray, *Comparative Sports Law*, 80.

undermines not only the dignity of the athletes but also the credibility of the country's sports governance.¹⁹

Comparative experiences show that the situation can be different. In South Africa, collective bargaining in the Premier Soccer League has created standard contracts that provide minimum rights to all players. In the United Kingdom, the Professional Footballers' Association ensures pensions, legal advice, and welfare support. CAS jurisprudence further strengthens these protections internationally by upholding athletes' rights against clubs or federations that act unfairly.²⁰ These models demonstrate that with the right institutional design and commitment, athletes can enjoy robust employment protections consistent with the law's treatment of other workers. Nigeria's failure to adopt such models leaves its athletes disadvantaged and exposed to exploitation.

The challenge lies not in the absence of law altogether but in the gap between law and practice. The Nigerian Labour Act, though outdated, is capable of extending protection to athletes, but it is rarely applied to sports employment.²¹ The Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) Statutes contain provisions on contracts and dispute resolution, but enforcement is weak and tribunals lack independence. International rules such as FIFA's RSTP bind Nigerian football, yet athletes struggle to access the remedies they provide.²² This legal vacuum reflects both institutional weakness and a lack of political will to prioritise athlete protection.

¹⁹ Eze, "Challenges of Employment Rights," 125

²⁰ Court of Arbitration for Sport, *CAS 2019/A/5901, Player Y v. Club Z*, (2019), para. 50.

²¹ Labour Act, Cap L1, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, s. 91

²² FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players* (2023), art. 17.

This article argues that recognising and enforcing the employment rights of professional athletes in Nigeria is both a legal necessity and a moral imperative. Athletes are employees whose rights should not be treated as secondary or optional. Their contracts must be standardised, termination procedures must comply with principles of fairness and due process, and welfare protections must be institutionalised.²³ By strengthening employment protections for athletes, Nigeria can ensure that sport is not only a source of entertainment and national pride but also a sector that upholds justice, fairness, and human dignity.

The objective of this study is threefold: first, to analyse the contractual protections available to professional athletes in Nigeria and identify the shortcomings in their design and enforcement; second, to examine the law and practice relating to termination of athlete contracts and expose the arbitrariness that currently prevails; and third, to assess the state of athlete welfare in Nigeria and measure it against international standards. Through this analysis, the article proposes reforms that would align Nigeria's sports governance with best practices globally.

In structure, the article begins by situating the concept of employment rights within the sporting context, demonstrating why athletes should be treated as employees under Nigerian law. It then examines contractual protection, termination practices, and welfare issues in turn, before drawing lessons from comparative jurisdictions. The final section proposes reforms necessary to close the gap between Nigeria's statutory recognition of athletes as professionals and the lived reality of exploitation they face. The time has come for Nigeria to rethink its approach to athletes, not as disposable talents but as employees whose rights must be respected and enforced. Protecting their employment

²³ Gray, *Comparative Sports Law*, 75.

rights will not only enhance their dignity and welfare but also elevate Nigeria's standing in global sports governance.²⁴

2 Contractual Protection

Contracts are the foundation upon which employment relationships are built.²⁵ For professional athletes, the employment contract is not merely a formal arrangement; it is the legal instrument that determines their livelihood, defines their obligations, and secures their rights. A properly structured contract should specify wages, duration of service, medical provisions, insurance, grounds for termination, and mechanisms for dispute resolution.²⁶ In advanced sporting jurisdictions, contracts are not left to the discretion of individual clubs but are standardised and regulated to ensure fairness, uniformity, and compliance with labour standards. Nigeria, however, continues to suffer from the absence of such systemic regulation, leaving athletes vulnerable to exploitation through poorly drafted, ambiguous, or unbalanced agreements.

The absence of standardisation in player contracts in Nigeria is perhaps the most significant obstacle to the protection of athletes' employment rights.²⁷ Each club is left to draft its own agreements, often without legal oversight, and athletes, eager for opportunities, frequently sign documents that do not protect their interests.²⁸ In some instances, contracts fail to specify the precise remuneration owed, leaving players to rely on verbal assurances that are easily denied. In others, clauses give clubs wide discretion to terminate contracts unilaterally, often without compensation. This practice is contrary to the principle of

²⁴ Oladipo, "Evolution of Professional Sports," 58.

²⁵ Labour Act, Cap L1, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, s. 7.

²⁶ Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players (2023), art. 13

²⁷ A. O Tunde, "Contractual Issues in Nigerian Football," *West African Sports Journal* 8, no. 2 (2023): 81.

²⁸ N. E Chukwuma, "Challenges of Employment Rights in Nigerian Professional Sports," *Lagos Law Review* 12, no. 2 (2024): 116.

contractual stability enshrined in the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players (RSTP), which require that contracts between players and clubs be respected and that breaches attract remedies. The RSTP stipulates that stability of employment contracts is fundamental to the integrity of football, yet Nigerian practice routinely departs from this international standard.

The Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) has attempted to introduce measures to regulate contractual relationships. League regulations have provisions on contract registration, and the NFF Statutes recognise that players should enter into written agreements with their clubs. However, the lack of enforcement renders these provisions ineffective.²⁹ Registration of contracts with the NFF or league secretariat is often treated as a mere formality, with little or no scrutiny of whether the agreements comply with minimum standards of fairness. This laissez-faire approach creates fertile ground for abuse, as clubs can impose terms that exploit athletes without fear of sanction. The failure to impose uniform player contracts stands in sharp contrast to South Africa's Premier Soccer League, where standard contracts are mandatory and must include provisions on remuneration, notice, medical insurance, and welfare.

One of the recurring issues arising from weak contractual protection in Nigeria is non-payment of salaries and allowances. Reports abound of players in the Nigeria Professional Football League (NPFL) going unpaid for several months, sometimes stretching into years. Without clear contractual enforcement mechanisms, players are left stranded, unable to compel compliance. The lack of timely remuneration not only undermines athletes' economic security but also violates the

²⁹ K. O Olumide, "Enforcement Challenges in Nigerian Sports Law," *African Journal of Legal Studies* 15, no. 3 (2023): 92.

fundamental employment right to fair wages.³⁰ International best practice, reflected in FIFA's jurisprudence and CAS decisions, has consistently held that failure to pay salaries constitutes a breach of contract that entitles the player to terminate the agreement with just cause. In Nigeria, however, players often lack the institutional support to assert such rights, and civil courts are reluctant to intervene given FIFA's prohibition of ordinary court jurisdiction in football matters.

Medical protection and insurance also fall within the ambit of contractual obligations but are largely neglected in Nigeria.³¹ Professional athletes face a high risk of injury, and contracts should ordinarily provide for medical treatment, injury compensation, and, in serious cases, insurance against career-ending harm.³² In Europe and South Africa, federations mandate that clubs take out insurance for all registered players. Nigerian clubs, by contrast, often abandon injured athletes without support, leaving them to fund treatment themselves. Contracts rarely contain clear clauses obligating clubs to provide medical cover, and even where they do, enforcement is weak. This failure not only contravenes the principles of employment law, which require employers to provide safe working conditions, but also undermines the dignity of athletes whose physical labour sustains the industry.

Another dimension of contractual protection concerns dispute resolution. Employment contracts should ordinarily include mechanisms for resolving disagreements between athletes and their employers.³³ The FIFA RSTP and CAS jurisprudence provide

³⁰ Labour Act, Cap L1, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, s. 17.

³¹ A Chidi, "Post-Career Challenges for Nigerian Athletes," *Sports Africa Review* 5, no. 1 (2024): 36.

³² T. G James, *Comparative Sports Law: Employment Rights of Athletes* (London: Routledge, 2021), 82.

³³ Labour Act, Cap L1, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, s. 7.

frameworks for arbitration and mediation, ensuring disputes are resolved quickly and fairly. In Nigeria, however, many contracts either omit dispute resolution clauses entirely or make vague references to internal bodies controlled by the same clubs or federations. This lack of independent and impartial mechanisms discourages players from pursuing remedies, trapping them in cycles of exploitation. While the NFF Arbitration Tribunal exists on paper, its lack of credibility and independence makes it an unattractive option for athletes. The result is a legal vacuum where contracts exist in form but not in substance, providing little real protection.

Comparative insights highlight the inadequacies of Nigeria's contractual framework. In the United Kingdom, standard player contracts are negotiated between the Premier League, the English Football League, and the Professional Footballers' Association.³⁴ These contracts contain detailed provisions on wages, welfare, dispute resolution, and termination, providing a uniform baseline for all players. Similarly, in South Africa, the Premier Soccer League mandates standard contracts that guarantee minimum protections, while the South African Football Players' Union supports athletes in enforcing their rights. The availability of unions, collective bargaining agreements, and enforceable contract standards ensures that athletes in these jurisdictions enjoy robust protection. Nigeria's absence of such structures leaves its athletes uniquely disadvantaged, highlighting the urgent need for reform.

It is also important to emphasise that the weakness of contractual protection has ripple effects beyond individual athletes.³⁵ It undermines

³⁴ Professional Footballers' Association, *Annual Report 2022* (London: PFA, 2022), 20.

³⁵ O. O Adebayo, "The Evolution of Professional Sports in Nigeria: A Legal Perspective," *Journal of African Sports Law* 3, no. 1 (2023): 56.

the credibility of Nigerian sport as a whole, discouraging investment and exposing the country to international embarrassment.³⁶ Investors and sponsors are reluctant to support a system perceived as unstable or exploitative. International bodies such as FIFA have, on occasion, threatened sanctions against countries where contractual instability and recourse to civil courts undermine the integrity of football. The inability of Nigeria to protect its athletes therefore has implications not only for individual welfare but also for the development and sustainability of the entire sports industry.

Ultimately, contracts are not simply private agreements between athletes and clubs; they are instruments of employment that reflect the balance of power in the industry. In Nigeria, that balance currently tilts heavily in favour of clubs and administrators, to the detriment of athletes. The absence of standardisation, weak enforcement of salary obligations, neglect of welfare provisions, and lack of credible dispute resolution mechanisms all combine to strip contracts of their protective value.³⁷ Unless Nigeria reforms its approach by mandating standardised contracts, strengthening enforcement, and aligning with international best practices, athletes will continue to face exploitation and insecurity. Contractual protection is therefore the first and most important step toward securing the employment rights of professional athletes in Nigeria. Without robust contracts, termination practices will remain arbitrary, welfare provisions will remain optional, and athletes will remain vulnerable. The Nigerian state, the NFF, and sports federations must recognise that protecting contracts is not merely an administrative formality but a legal and moral obligation owed to those whose labour sustains the sports industry.

³⁶ "FIFA Warns Nigeria Over Contract Disputes," *Vanguard Nigeria*, June 12, 2023, <<https://vanguardngr.com/fifa-warns-nigeria-contracts>> accessed 24 August 2025

³⁷ Obayemi, "Enforcement Challenges," 93

3 Termination of Contracts

The issue of contract termination sits at the heart of employment rights for professional athletes.³⁸ In any employment relationship, termination is a necessary mechanism by which contracts come to an end. However, the law requires that termination be exercised fairly, lawfully, and in a manner that balances the interests of both employer and employee. For professional athletes, this requirement is particularly significant because of the short and fragile nature of sporting careers.³⁹ Unlike ordinary employees, athletes have limited years of peak performance, and arbitrary dismissal can irreparably damage their livelihood and career trajectory. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that termination of athlete contracts is often arbitrary, poorly regulated, and inconsistent with both national labour principles and international standards such as the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players (RSTP).⁴⁰

Employment law distinguishes between different forms of termination, including termination by notice, termination for misconduct, redundancy, and mutual agreement. Each of these forms requires adherence to due process and respect for the rights of the employee. In the sports context, contracts may also end through transfers, expiry of contract duration, or retirement. The critical concern, however, is that Nigerian clubs and federations frequently resort to termination in a manner that disregards these distinctions and principles. Players are dismissed without notice, without severance pay, and without the opportunity to contest the grounds for termination. This disregard for

³⁸ N. E. Chukwuma, “Challenges of Employment Rights in Nigerian Professional Sports,” *Lagos Law Review* 12, no. 2 (2024): 118.

³⁹ W John, *Sports Law and Regulation* (Boston: Aspen Publishers, 2022), 60.

⁴⁰ A. O Tunde, “Contractual Issues in Nigerian Football,” *West African Sports Journal* 8, no. 2 (2023): 88; FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players* (2023), art. 14.

fairness reflects a broader culture of weak enforcement of employment standards in the Nigerian sports industry.⁴¹

A common justification offered by Nigerian clubs for contract termination is alleged underperformance. Athletes are often dismissed mid-season on the grounds that they have failed to meet the expectations of management or technical staff. While performance is undoubtedly central to professional sport, employment law requires that underperformance be addressed through fair procedures, including warnings, retraining, or other remedial measures before termination is considered. Internationally, FIFA's RSTP provides that contracts must be respected unless there is "just cause" for termination, and CAS jurisprudence has repeatedly affirmed that underperformance alone rarely constitutes just cause. Nigerian practice, however, departs significantly from this standard, with clubs using vague allegations of underperformance as a pretext for arbitrary dismissal.

Financial instability of clubs also plays a role in the arbitrary termination of contracts.⁴² Many Nigerian clubs are owned or sponsored by state governments, whose funding decisions are often unpredictable and tied to political considerations. When funding is delayed or withdrawn, clubs respond by terminating player contracts en masse, citing financial hardship. From a labour law perspective, such situations may amount to redundancy, but even redundancies require compliance with procedures such as consultation, notice, and compensation. In Nigeria, these safeguards are almost never observed. Players find themselves unemployed without notice or compensation, reflecting both

⁴¹ K. O Olumide, "Enforcement Challenges in Nigerian Sports Law," *African Journal of Legal Studies* 15, no. 3 (2023): 94.

⁴² "Financial Woes Lead to Mass Player Sacks in NPFL," *Vanguard Nigeria*, September 5, 2023, <<https://vanguardngr.com/npfl-financial-sacks>> accessed 24 August 2025

the precariousness of their employment and the failure of the regulatory framework to impose accountability on clubs.

Disciplinary grounds also serve as a basis for termination, though here too due process is often absent. Allegations of misconduct—ranging from breaches of discipline to conflicts with management—are sometimes used to justify immediate dismissal without investigation or hearing. Employment law requires that allegations of misconduct be substantiated and that the employee be given an opportunity to defend themselves.⁴³ The principle of fair hearing, guaranteed under section 36 of the Nigerian Constitution, should apply with equal force in the employment of athletes⁴⁴. Yet in practice, disciplinary terminations in Nigerian sport often ignore these constitutional safeguards, leaving athletes without remedy.

Another troubling aspect of termination in Nigerian sport is the absence of clear remedies for wrongful or unfair dismissal. In ordinary employment, workers may approach labour courts or tribunals to contest arbitrary termination and seek remedies such as reinstatement or compensation. For athletes, however, recourse to civil courts is complicated by FIFA's prohibition on ordinary court intervention in football matters.⁴⁵ The NFF Arbitration Tribunal is theoretically available, but its lack of independence and credibility means that players often avoid it. This legal vacuum leaves many athletes without an effective forum to challenge wrongful termination. By contrast, in other jurisdictions, specialised tribunals and unions provide effective remedies. For example, in South Africa, the Dispute Resolution Chamber of the Premier Soccer League offers a credible avenue for

⁴³ Labour Act, Cap L1, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, s. 36.

⁴⁴ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, s. 36.

⁴⁵ FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players* (2023), art. 22.

players to contest termination and enforce their rights.⁴⁶ In England, the PFA provides legal representation for players, ensuring that dismissals are contested where they violate contractual or statutory protections. The problem of arbitrary termination in Nigeria is compounded by the lack of awareness among athletes themselves. Many players, particularly at the domestic league level, are unfamiliar with the rights and remedies available to them under Nigerian labour law or international sports regulations. This ignorance is often exploited by clubs, which dismiss players knowing that they are unlikely to challenge the decision. The absence of strong unions or associations to advocate for athletes' rights exacerbates this vulnerability. In jurisdictions where unions are strong, termination disputes are vigorously contested, creating a culture of accountability. Nigeria's failure to develop such institutional support leaves its athletes exposed.

From a comparative perspective, Nigeria's termination practices stand in stark contrast to global best practice.⁴⁷ FIFA's RSTP provides that contracts must be respected for their full duration, with termination permitted only for just cause, mutual agreement, or the expiry of the agreed period. Where termination occurs without just cause, the defaulting party is required to pay compensation, and sporting sanctions may also apply. CAS decisions have reinforced these principles, holding that financial difficulties, underperformance, or administrative changes rarely constitute just cause.⁴⁸ In South Africa, termination procedures are subject to arbitration, with players entitled to remedies for unfair dismissal. In the United Kingdom, the principle of contractual stability is entrenched, with termination disputes often resolved in favour of players unless just cause is clearly established. These comparative

⁴⁶ South African Football Players' Union, *Player Rights Framework* (2021), 14.

⁴⁷ Gray, *Comparative Sports Law*, 76.

⁴⁸ Court of Arbitration for Sport, *CAS 2019/A/5901, Player Y v. Club Z*, (2019), para. 50.

examples highlight the extent of Nigeria's divergence from international norms.

The consequences of arbitrary termination extend beyond individual athletes. They undermine the credibility of Nigerian football and discourage investment in the domestic league. Sponsors and investors are reluctant to support a system perceived as unstable and exploitative. Arbitrary terminations also affect national performance, as athletes deprived of stability and security are less likely to develop their full potential. More broadly, Nigeria's non-compliance with FIFA's standards exposes the country to sanctions, including suspension from international competitions⁴⁹. Arbitrary termination practices therefore carry not only personal consequences for athletes but also institutional risks for Nigerian sport as a whole.

Reform in this area must begin with the standardisation of termination procedures in player contracts. Federations should mandate clear clauses on termination, specifying the grounds, notice requirements, and remedies available. Arbitrary dismissal should be expressly prohibited, with compensation provided where termination occurs without just cause. Independent dispute resolution mechanisms must also be established to adjudicate termination disputes quickly and fairly, ensuring that athletes have access to remedies without resorting to civil courts. Education and awareness programmes should be introduced to inform athletes of their rights and the remedies available to them. Stronger unions or associations should be developed to advocate for athletes and challenge arbitrary termination practices.

⁴⁹ FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players* (2023), art. 22.

Ultimately, the treatment of athletes in relation to contract termination reflects the degree of respect accorded to them as employees.⁵⁰ In Nigeria, the prevalence of arbitrary dismissal demonstrates a failure to recognise athletes as workers entitled to fairness, dignity, and protection.⁵¹ Aligning termination practices with international standards is essential not only for the welfare of athletes but also for the credibility and sustainability of Nigerian sport. Unless reform occurs, Nigerian athletes will continue to suffer the consequences of a system that treats their contracts as expendable rather than binding legal instruments deserving of respect.

4 Player Welfare

The concept of employment rights extends beyond wages and contractual stability to encompass the broader welfare of employees.⁵² For professional athletes, welfare is not a peripheral issue but a central aspect of their employment relationship.⁵³ Athletes operate in one of the most physically demanding professions in the world, exposing them to heightened risks of injury, short career spans, and uncertain post-retirement futures. In well-regulated jurisdictions, the welfare of athletes is addressed through a combination of contractual provisions, statutory protections, and institutional support from unions and federations. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, player welfare remains a neglected aspect of sports governance, leaving athletes vulnerable to exploitation, insecurity, and hardship during and after their careers.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ International Labour Organisation, *Workers in Sports: Employment Rights* (Geneva: ILO, 2019), 12.

⁵¹ Eze, "Challenges of Employment Rights," 120.

⁵² International Labour Organisation, *Workers in Sports: Employment Rights* (Geneva: ILO, 2019), 15.

⁵³ T. G James, *Comparative Sports Law: Employment Rights of Athletes* (London: Routledge, 2021), 80.

⁵⁴ A Chidi, "Post-Career Challenges for Nigerian Athletes," *Sports Africa Review* 5, no. 1 (2024): 35.

Welfare in the context of sports can be broadly understood to cover several dimensions: health and medical care, insurance and compensation for injuries, pensions and retirement benefits, psychological support, and programmes for post-career reintegration.⁵⁵ Each of these dimensions is essential to ensuring that athletes are treated with dignity and protected against the unique vulnerabilities associated with professional sport. A failure to address welfare is a failure to recognise athletes as employees with legitimate rights to safe and fair working conditions.

Health and medical care form the most immediate and obvious element of athlete welfare. Professional athletes are at constant risk of injury, with careers that can be derailed in a single moment. Clubs and federations, as employers, are under a duty to provide medical care and cover the costs of treatment for injuries sustained in the course of employment. In advanced jurisdictions, such as the United Kingdom, federations require clubs to insure players against injuries, and unions like the Professional Footballers' Association provide additional medical support. In South Africa, insurance schemes are mandatory for all players registered with the Premier Soccer League, ensuring that athletes are not abandoned in times of crisis. In Nigeria, however, athletes often suffer the indignity of being left to bear the costs of treatment themselves.⁵⁶ Reports abound of players sustaining injuries in the Nigeria Professional Football League and being discarded by their clubs without medical assistance. Such neglect not only violates the employment principle of providing safe working conditions but also

⁵⁵ International Labour Organisation, *The Future of Work in Sports* (Geneva: ILO, 2020), 25.

⁵⁶ "Injured NPFL Players Left Without Medical Support," *Punch Nigeria*, April 5, 2023, <<https://punchng.com/injured-npfl-players-no-support>> accessed 24 August 2025

undermines the humanity of the very individuals upon whom the sport depends.

Closely linked to medical care is the issue of insurance and compensation. Injuries in sport can be career-ending, depriving athletes of their livelihood permanently. In recognition of this risk, many jurisdictions mandate insurance schemes that compensate athletes for loss of earnings in the event of career-ending injuries.⁵⁷ Nigeria has no such system in place. While some clubs occasionally provide ad hoc compensation, there is no consistent contractual or statutory requirement to insure athletes against long-term harm. The absence of insurance schemes leaves Nigerian athletes exposed to devastating financial consequences in the event of injury. This is particularly troubling when one considers that the average career span of a professional footballer is between ten and fifteen years, after which earnings decline sharply. Without insurance, a serious injury can plunge athletes into poverty, effectively ending their careers and leaving them without means of support.

Retirement and pensions constitute another critical dimension of welfare. Unlike ordinary employees who may work into their sixties, professional athletes typically retire in their thirties, often without alternative careers. In advanced jurisdictions, pension schemes and post-retirement programmes are designed to cushion this transition.⁵⁸ The Professional Footballers' Association in England, for example, administers a pension fund for all registered players, ensuring they have some financial security after retirement. Educational and vocational training opportunities are also provided to prepare players for life after football. South Africa's Premier Soccer League offers similar benefits,

⁵⁷ Gray, *Comparative Sports Law*, 84.

⁵⁸ Professional Footballers' Association, *Annual Report 2022*, 23.

ensuring that retired players are not left destitute. In Nigeria, by contrast, there is virtually no pension system for athletes. Retired players often fade into obscurity, many struggling with poverty and neglect despite having brought glory to the nation in their prime. The absence of pensions or post-career support is one of the starkest indicators of Nigeria⁵⁹'s failure to treat athletes as employees entitled to welfare protections.

Psychological support is an often-overlooked aspect of athlete welfare but one of growing importance.⁶⁰ The pressures of professional sport competition, media scrutiny, and the short window of career success expose athletes to mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and burnout. Internationally, unions and clubs are increasingly recognising the need for psychological counselling and support services. In England, mental health awareness campaigns have been launched for footballers, and confidential counselling services are available. In Nigeria, however, there is little recognition of psychological welfare. Athletes struggling with the mental toll of injuries, contract disputes, or retirement are left to cope alone, with tragic consequences in some cases.⁶¹ The absence of mental health support reflects a broader neglect of welfare issues in Nigerian sport. Another critical aspect of welfare is post-career reintegration. Athletes dedicate their youth to professional sport, often at the expense of formal education or alternative career development. When retirement comes, they face difficulties reintegrating into the workforce. Best practices in other jurisdictions address this challenge through educational programmes, retraining schemes, and mentorship. The Professional

⁵⁹ "Retired Nigerian Athletes Face Poverty," *Vanguard Nigeria*, September 10, 2023, <<https://vanguardngr.com/retired-athletes-poverty>> accessed 24 August 2025

⁶⁰ International Labour Organisation, *The Future of Work in Sports*, 27.

⁶¹ "Mental Health Crisis Among Nigerian Athletes," *Punch Nigeria*, August 1, 2023, <<https://punchng.com/athletes-mental-health>> accessed 24 August 2025

Footballers' Association in England, for example, provides scholarships and training for retired players to pursue new careers.⁶² In South Africa, similar initiatives help athletes transition into coaching, management, or entrepreneurship. Nigeria, however, offers no structured support for reintegration. Retired athletes are often left without direction, with many struggling to secure employment or adapt to post-sport life. This failure exacerbates the cycle of poverty and neglect that characterises the experience of many Nigerian athletes after retirement.

The welfare gap in Nigeria is not merely a moral issue; it has legal and developmental⁶³ implications. From a legal perspective, the failure to provide welfare violates employment law principles requiring employers to provide safe and fair working conditions. It also contravenes international standards, including ILO conventions that Nigeria has ratified. From a developmental perspective, the neglect of welfare discourages investment in the sports sector, undermines the performance of athletes, and diminishes Nigeria's credibility in global sports governance. The welfare of athletes is directly linked to the sustainability of sport: players who are healthy, secure, and supported are more likely to perform at their best, attract sponsorship, and inspire national pride.

Comparative analysis offers useful lessons for Nigeria. The existence of unions, pension schemes, and insurance policies in other jurisdictions demonstrates that athlete welfare can be institutionalised with the right commitment and structures. Nigeria must therefore take deliberate steps to address this welfare deficit. Clubs should be mandated to provide medical insurance for all players, while federations should establish centralised welfare funds to support injured and retired athletes. Pension

⁶² Professional Footballers' Association, *Annual Report 2022*, 24.

⁶³ O. O Adebayo, "The Evolution of Professional Sports in Nigeria: A Legal Perspective," *Journal of African Sports Law* 3, no. 1 (2023): 57.

schemes should be developed in collaboration with financial institutions, ensuring that athletes have savings for retirement. Mental health services should be introduced to support players during their careers and in transition. Finally, educational and vocational programmes should be implemented to prepare athletes for life after sport.

Ultimately, the neglect of welfare reflects the failure to recognise athletes as employees entitled to the same protections as other workers.⁶⁴ Nigerian athletes, like their counterparts elsewhere, provide labour under contract, generate revenue for their employers, and dedicate their youth to their profession.⁶⁵ They are entitled to medical care, insurance, pensions, psychological support, and reintegration opportunities. The denial of these protections is both unjust and unsustainable. By institutionalising welfare measures, Nigeria can transform the experience of its athletes, ensuring that they are not abandoned after their careers but supported as valued members of society⁶⁶.

5 Comparative Insights from the United Kingdom, South Africa, and CAS

The protection of employment rights for professional athletes is a global concern that has been addressed differently across jurisdictions.⁶⁷ While the challenges of contractual stability, termination, and welfare are universal, various systems have developed effective models that Nigeria can draw from. This section highlights the approaches adopted in the United Kingdom, South Africa, and at the international level through

⁶⁴ International Labour Organisation, *Workers in Sports*, 12.

⁶⁵ Wolohan, *Sports Law and Regulation*, 68.

⁶⁶ Oladipo, "Evolution of Professional Sports," 59.

⁶⁷ T. G James, *Comparative Sports Law: Employment Rights of Athletes* (London: Routledge, 2021), 67.

the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), each of which demonstrates how contractual protection, fair termination, and welfare provisions can be institutionalised.

In the United Kingdom, the employment rights of athletes are firmly recognised within statutory law and supported by strong institutions.⁶⁸ Professional footballers are treated as employees under the Employment Rights Act 1996, entitling them to protections against unfair dismissal, redundancy, and discrimination. The Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) plays a central role in defending players' rights through collective bargaining with leagues and clubs. Standardised contracts are negotiated to ensure uniform minimum protections, including provisions for wages, pensions, medical cover, and welfare. The PFA also offers legal advice, educational support, and mental health services, ensuring that players' rights are protected both on and off the field. Disputes are resolved through independent tribunals, reinforcing fairness and efficiency. The UK model shows the power of statutory backing combined with unionisation in creating a robust employment rights framework for athletes.

In South Africa, the Premier Soccer League (PSL) offers another example, particularly relevant for Nigeria as an African peer. The PSL requires the use of standard player contracts developed in consultation with the South African Football Players' Union (SAFPU). These contracts guarantee non-negotiable minimum rights covering wages, notice, medical insurance, and retirement benefits. Termination of contracts is tightly regulated, with players entitled to remedies if dismissal is arbitrary. The Dispute Resolution Chamber (DRC) provides a specialised forum for handling player-club disputes, ensuring that

⁶⁸ Employment Rights Act 1996 (UK), c. 18, s. 94; Professional Footballers' Association, *Annual Report 2022*, 24.

cases are decided fairly and efficiently without resort to civil courts. Beyond contracts, SAFPU advocates for broader welfare support, including retraining schemes and post-retirement programmes. South Africa demonstrates that even within Africa's developmental context, it is possible to institutionalise strong protections for professional athletes through federation regulation, union advocacy, and specialised tribunals.

At the international level, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) serves as the "Supreme Court of World Sport," providing binding, impartial, and enforceable resolutions to disputes. CAS jurisprudence has reinforced the principle of contractual stability, ruling consistently that contracts between players and clubs must be respected unless there is just cause for termination. CAS has awarded damages in cases of unpaid wages, arbitrary dismissals, and breaches of welfare obligations. It also ensures that disciplinary actions, such as doping sanctions, comply with principles of fair hearing and proportionality. Importantly, CAS decisions are enforceable globally under the New York Convention, giving them unique authority.⁶⁹ Its ability to deliver rulings quickly, often within 48 hours during major competitions, demonstrates the efficiency of specialised sports arbitration. CAS provides Nigeria with a model of independence, impartiality, and enforceability that is currently lacking in the domestic framework.

These three jurisdictions provide distinct but complementary lessons for Nigeria. From the UK, the importance of collective bargaining and statutory recognition is clear.⁷⁰ From South Africa, the relevance of standardised contracts and specialised tribunals is evident within an

⁶⁹ Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Arbitral Awards (New York, 1958), art. III

⁷⁰ Professional Footballers' Association, *Annual Report 2022*, 20.

African context.⁷¹ From CAS, Nigeria can learn the value of independence, speed, and enforceability in sports arbitration.⁷² Together, these comparative insights demonstrate that protecting the employment rights of athletes is both feasible and essential, provided there is political will and institutional reform.⁷³

6 Reform Proposals for Nigeria

The comparative examples from the United Kingdom, South Africa, and the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) reveal that the effective protection of athletes' employment rights is not only possible but necessary for the credibility and sustainability of modern sport⁷⁴. Nigeria, by contrast, continues to struggle with weak contracts, arbitrary termination practices, and neglect of player welfare⁷⁵. The Nigerian Football Federation (NFF) Statutes and FIFA's Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players (RSTP) provide a normative framework, but the gap between law and practice remains vast.⁷⁶ Reform is therefore urgent.⁷⁷ The following proposals outline the institutional, legislative, and cultural changes needed to secure the employment rights of professional athletes in Nigeria.

The first reform concerns the standardisation of contracts. The absence of uniformity in player contracts has left Nigerian athletes vulnerable to

⁷¹ South African Football Players' Union, *Player Rights Framework* (2021), 11.

⁷² Court of Arbitration for Sport, *CAS Code* (2023), art. R27.

⁷³ Gray, *Comparative Sports Law*, 91.

⁷⁴ T. G James, *Comparative Sports Law: Employment Rights of Athletes* (London: Routledge, 2021), 90

⁷⁵ N. E Chukwuma, "Challenges of Employment Rights in Nigerian Professional Sports," *Lagos Law Review* 12, no. 2 (2024): 122.

⁷⁶ Nigeria Football Federation, *NFF Statutes* (2022), art. 34; FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players* (2023), art. 13.

⁷⁷ O. O Adebayo, "The Evolution of Professional Sports in Nigeria: A Legal Perspective," *Journal of African Sports Law* 3, no. 1 (2023): 58.

exploitation through vague, one-sided agreements.⁷⁸ Nigeria should adopt a model similar to the United Kingdom, where collective bargaining between leagues, clubs, and the Professional Footballers' Association ensures standardised contracts for all players. South Africa offers another instructive example: the Premier Soccer League mandates the use of uniform contracts developed in consultation with the South African Football Players' Union. Nigeria must therefore require all clubs under the NFF and domestic leagues to adopt standardised contracts containing minimum protections relating to wages, notice, medical insurance, and termination procedures.⁷⁹ Standardisation will eliminate arbitrary contract drafting and ensure that no player signs away fundamental rights in pursuit of opportunity.

A second reform relates to the regulation of termination procedures. Nigerian athletes frequently suffer arbitrary dismissals without notice, severance, or just cause.⁸⁰ FIFA's RSTP emphasises contractual stability, while CAS jurisprudence has consistently invalidated dismissals based on vague claims of underperformance or financial hardship. Nigeria should legislate clear rules on termination that reflect international best practice: contracts should only be terminated for just cause, mutual agreement, or upon expiry of their duration. Financial difficulties of clubs should be treated as redundancy, with mandatory compensation for athletes. Clubs that dismiss players arbitrarily should be sanctioned by the NFF, with athletes entitled to damages. Independent dispute resolution mechanisms must be empowered to adjudicate termination disputes quickly and fairly, ensuring that players are not left in limbo.

⁷⁸ A. O Tunde, "Contractual Issues in Nigerian Football," *West African Sports Journal* 8, no. 2 (2023): 81.

⁷⁹ Gray, *Comparative Sports Law*, 75.

⁸⁰ "NPFL Clubs Sack Players Over Financial Woes," *Guardian Nigeria*, July 10, 2023, <<https://guardian.ng/sport/npfl-clubs-sack-players>> accessed 24 August 2025

A third reform concerns the welfare of athletes, an area where Nigeria has failed most conspicuously.⁸¹ Welfare encompasses health, insurance, pensions, psychological support, and post-career reintegration. Lessons from the United Kingdom demonstrate the importance of pension schemes and mental health programmes, while South Africa shows that mandatory medical insurance is achievable even in an African context.⁸² Nigeria must establish a centralised welfare fund managed by the NFF or Ministry of Sports, financed through a combination of club contributions, sponsorship levies, and government support. This fund should provide medical cover for injuries, pensions for retirees, and educational or vocational programmes for post-career reintegration. Clubs must also be mandated to insure players against career-ending injuries. Without these reforms, Nigerian athletes will continue to retire into poverty despite their contributions to national pride.⁸³

The fourth reform is the strengthening of dispute resolution mechanisms.⁸⁴ The current NFF Arbitration Tribunal lacks independence, credibility, and efficiency. In contrast, CAS demonstrates how independence, impartiality, and speed can be institutionalised, while South Africa's Dispute Resolution Chamber offers an African model of specialised, credible adjudication.⁸⁵ Nigeria should either reform the NFF Tribunal or establish a new National

⁸¹ A Chidi, "Post-Career Challenges for Nigerian Athletes," *Sports Africa Review* 5, no. 1 (2024): 35.

⁸² Professional Footballers' Association, *Annual Report 2022*, 23; South African Football Players' Union, *Player Rights Framework* (2021), 12.

⁸³ "Retired Nigerian Athletes Face Poverty," *Vanguard Nigeria*, September 10, 2023, <<https://vanguardngr.com/retired-athletes-poverty>> accessed 24 August 2025.

⁸⁴ K. O Olumide, "Enforcement Challenges in Nigerian Sports Law," *African Journal of Legal Studies* 15, no. 3 (2023): 96.

⁸⁵ Court of Arbitration for Sport, *CAS Code* (2023), art. R27; South African Football Players' Union, *Player Rights Framework* (2021), 14.

Sports Arbitration Centre, composed of trained sports arbitrators, retired judges, and professionals independent of the NFF. This centre should have jurisdiction over all sports-related disputes, operate under clear procedural rules, and provide expedited hearings for urgent matters such as eligibility disputes. Awards of the tribunal should be enforceable as judgments of the High Court, with civil courts barred from interfering except in cases of manifest injustice⁸⁶.

A fifth reform is the empowerment of unions and collective representation. One of the key lessons from the United Kingdom is the role of the Professional Footballers' Association in negotiating and enforcing rights. South Africa's SAFCU performs a similar role⁸⁷. Nigeria, however, lacks a strong and credible players' union. Efforts to establish such unions have been hampered by weak organisation and lack of recognition.⁸⁸ Reform must therefore include the institutional recognition of player unions, with mandatory consultation on contractual frameworks, welfare programmes, and dispute resolution reforms. Without collective representation, Nigerian athletes will remain atomised and vulnerable to exploitation. Strong unions can also provide legal advice, welfare support, and advocacy, empowering athletes to assert their rights more effectively.

A sixth reform concerns the enforcement of existing rules and awards. One of Nigeria's greatest weaknesses is not the absence of rules but the lack of enforcement. Clubs frequently ignore contractual obligations, statutory duties, and even arbitral awards with impunity. In contrast, CAS awards are enforceable globally under the New York Convention, and clubs in South Africa and the UK face sanctions for non-

⁸⁶ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, s. 6; Court of Arbitration for Sport, *CAS Code* (2023), art. R59.

⁸⁷ South African Football Players' Union, *Player Rights Framework* (2021), 10.

⁸⁸ "Nigerian Players' Union Struggles for Recognition," *Punch Nigeria*, June 20, 2023, <<https://punchng.com/players-union-struggles>> accessed 24 August 2025

compliance. Nigeria must strengthen enforcement by granting the NFF or Ministry of Sports the power to impose sporting sanctions such as points deduction, transfer bans, or suspension from competitions on clubs that fail to comply with contractual or arbitral obligations. Players must also have direct access to civil enforcement procedures where clubs default. Without credible enforcement, reforms on paper will remain meaningless.

A seventh reform involves awareness and cultural change.⁸⁹ Many Nigerian athletes, especially those in domestic leagues, are unaware of their employment rights and reluctant to challenge exploitation for fear of losing opportunities. Clubs exploit this ignorance by imposing one-sided agreements and dismissing players without resistance. Reforms must therefore include education and awareness campaigns, led by the NFF, unions, and civil society, to inform athletes of their rights and remedies.⁹⁰ Legal aid clinics and pro bono services could also be established to provide support for athletes contesting breaches of their contracts. Over time, a culture of accountability will emerge, discouraging exploitative practices by clubs.

Finally, Nigeria must seek to integrate its domestic framework with international standards.⁹¹ CAS decisions and FIFA regulations provide a global template for fairness and contractual stability. Nigeria should adopt reforms that explicitly reference these international standards and ensure⁹² compliance. Nigerian arbitrators should also be nominated to CAS panels, enhancing domestic expertise and contributing to the development of global sports jurisprudence. This integration will not

⁸⁹ Amadi, "Post-Career Challenges," 40.

⁹⁰ Ibid. p 41.

⁹¹ FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players* (2023), preamble.

⁹² Court of Arbitration for Sport, *CAS 2019/A/5901, Player Y v. Club Z*, (2019), para. 50.

only strengthen the rights of Nigerian athletes but also enhance the country's credibility in global sports governance.

Taken together, these reforms would transform the employment rights landscape for Nigerian athletes.⁹³ Standardised contracts would provide uniform protections, fair termination procedures would curb arbitrary dismissals, welfare programmes would support athletes during and after their careers, and credible dispute resolution mechanisms would ensure access to justice. Strong unions would empower athletes to assert their rights, while effective enforcement and awareness campaigns would create a culture of compliance and accountability. By aligning its framework with international standards, Nigeria would not only protect its athletes but also attract investment, strengthen its leagues, and enhance its reputation in global sport.⁹⁴

The time for reform is now.⁹⁵ Nigeria's athletes bring honour and recognition to the nation, yet they are often rewarded with neglect and exploitation.⁹⁶ By adopting the lessons of the United Kingdom, South Africa, and CAS, Nigeria can bridge the gap between law and practice, ensuring that its athletes are treated not as expendable talents but as employees entitled to dignity, fairness, and protection under the law⁹⁷.

Conclusion

The evolution of sport into a global economic powerhouse has made the protection of athletes' employment rights a pressing necessity. Professional athletes are no longer hobbyists or entertainers; they are employees whose labour sustains a thriving industry. Yet, in Nigeria,

⁹³ Eze, "Challenges of Employment Rights," 128.

⁹⁴ "FIFA Warns Nigeria Over Contract Disputes," *Vanguard Nigeria*, June 12, 2023, <<https://vanguardngr.com/fifa-warns-nigeria-contracts>> accessed 24 August 2025

⁹⁵ Oladipo, "Evolution of Professional Sports," 58.

⁹⁶ Amadi, "Post-Career Challenges," 43.

⁹⁷ Gray, *Comparative Sports Law*, 91.

the employment rights of these athletes remain weak and inconsistently enforced. Contracts are poorly drafted and lack uniformity, termination practices are arbitrary and often disregard due process, and welfare provisions such as medical insurance, pensions, and reintegration support are largely absent. This reality exposes athletes to exploitation during their prime and poverty after retirement, despite their contributions to national pride and the sports economy.

The gaps in Nigeria's framework are particularly stark when compared to global best practices. In the United Kingdom, statutory protections under the Employment Rights Act 1996, coupled with the advocacy of the Professional Footballers' Association, have institutionalised minimum standards on contracts, pensions, and welfare. In South Africa, mandatory standard player contracts and the Dispute Resolution Chamber of the Premier Soccer League ensure that athletes have enforceable rights and access to justice, even within Africa's developmental context. At the international level, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) provides a model of independence, impartiality, and efficiency, resolving disputes quickly and enforcing awards under the New York Convention. These examples prove that effective systems for protecting athletes are not only possible but essential to the credibility and sustainability of sport.

Nigeria must urgently learn from these models. The first step is the standardisation of contracts. Leaving contract drafting entirely to clubs has created a culture of exploitation. Mandatory uniform contracts, developed by the NFF in consultation with players' representatives, would ensure minimum protections for all athletes. Standardisation would prevent clubs from imposing one-sided terms and guarantee provisions on wages, medical care, and dispute resolution.

Termination practices must also be reformed. The principle of contractual stability, recognised under FIFA's RSTP and reinforced by CAS jurisprudence, requires that contracts be respected unless there is just cause for termination. Nigerian clubs routinely disregard this principle, dismissing players for vague reasons such as underperformance or financial difficulty without compensation. Reform should establish clear rules: termination should only occur for just cause, mutual agreement, or contract expiry, with mandatory notice and compensation where dismissal is unavoidable. Clubs that terminate arbitrarily should face sanctions, and players should be entitled to damages.

Player welfare represents the most glaring area of neglect. Nigeria has failed to provide even the most basic protections in this regard. Athletes are frequently left to bear the costs of medical treatment after injuries, and most retire into poverty with no pensions or post-career programmes. Welfare reform is critical. Medical insurance should be mandatory for all players, with clubs contributing to centralised schemes. Pension systems should be developed with financial institutions to ensure long-term security. Reintegration programmes, including vocational training and education, must prepare athletes for life after retirement. Mental health services should also be introduced, reflecting the unique pressures of professional sport. Without these measures, Nigeria will continue to betray its athletes by failing to support them beyond their playing years.

Dispute resolution must also be overhauled. The NFF Arbitration Tribunal, as currently constituted, seems to lack independence and credibility. Players often avoid it, leaving disputes unresolved. Nigeria should establish an independent National Sports Arbitration Centre, staffed by neutral arbitrators, retired judges, and trained professionals. This body should have jurisdiction over all sports disputes, provide

expedited hearings for urgent matters, and issue awards enforceable as judgments of the High Court. Learning from CAS, such a tribunal must embody independence, impartiality, and efficiency, ensuring athletes can access justice without violating FIFA's prohibition on civil litigation.

None of these reforms will be meaningful without enforcement. Nigerian clubs frequently ignore contractual obligations and arbitral awards with impunity. This culture of non-compliance must end. Sporting sanctions such as transfer bans, points deductions, and suspensions should be imposed on defaulting clubs. Civil enforcement procedures should be strengthened to ensure arbitral awards are respected. Effective enforcement is the linchpin of reform, without which even the best frameworks will fail.

Finally, unions and collective representation must be empowered. One of the greatest strengths of the UK and South African systems is the presence of strong players' unions that negotiate, advocate, and enforce rights. Nigeria lacks a credible union capable of performing this role. Institutional recognition of player unions is essential, enabling them to participate in contract negotiations, welfare reforms, and dispute resolution processes. Strong unions will also provide legal advice and advocacy for individual athletes, ensuring they are not silenced or exploited.

Underlying all of these reforms is the need for cultural change. Many Nigerian athletes remain unaware of their rights, and clubs exploit this ignorance. Reform must therefore include awareness programmes, legal aid services, and education campaigns to empower athletes. Over time, such initiatives will build a culture of accountability and respect for contracts, welfare, and fair treatment.

Protecting the employment rights of athletes is not just about fairness to individuals; it is essential for the sustainability of Nigerian sport. Investors and sponsors are more likely to support leagues that are stable, transparent, and compliant with international norms. Athletes who are secure in their contracts and welfare perform at higher levels, enhancing the quality of competitions and inspiring national pride. Compliance with FIFA and CAS standards will also safeguard Nigeria from sanctions and strengthen its reputation globally.

In conclusion, professional athletes in Nigeria are employees in every meaningful sense, but their rights remain neglected. The lessons from the United Kingdom, South Africa, and CAS show that reform is both possible and necessary. Nigeria must adopt standardised contracts, regulate termination procedures, institutionalise welfare, strengthen dispute resolution, enforce compliance, and empower unions. These reforms are urgent, not optional. Athletes are not disposable commodities; they are employees whose labour sustains the pride, identity, and economy of the nation. Protecting their rights is a moral duty, a legal obligation, and a prerequisite for the future growth of Nigerian sport.