

From Kickoff to Consensus: The 2026 FIFA World Cup and North American Cross-Border Cooperation

March 13-14, 2026

Session Abstracts

Session I: Legal and Institutional Frameworks

Moderator: Yigal Saghian

Attorney, Greenberg Traurig

Alberto Ugarte

Title: The Soccer Boom in North America: How the 2026 World Cup Redefines Cooperation, Good Governance, and Transparency in Professional Leagues

Abstract

In 1994, the United States hosted its first World Cup. In the same year, North America deepened its regional integration through the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Although the agreement did not include sports cooperation, the following three decades displayed a notable case of sports integration and mobility. The consolidation and expansion of professional leagues in Mexico and the United States, coupled with cultural proximity, fostered increased investment and cooperation among Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Since 2020, however, the trilateral framework has lacked institutional mechanisms for sports governance, cooperation, and transparency under the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), even as global dynamics and the organization of mega-events have demanded stronger coordination. The 2026 FIFA World Cup will set the agenda for a broader debate about transnational cooperation to prevent corruption and enhance regulatory harmonization across stakeholders. Drawing on the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’s Global Report on Corruption in Sport, this article argues that while each country has pursued individual initiatives, greater trilateral cooperation is necessary to build good governance in North American soccer leagues. Specifically, the article highlights disparities between Mexico and the United States in ethics protocols and transparency in the soccer industry. According to the 2025 report

between FIFA and the World Trade Organization (WTO), the economic impact of hosting the 2026 World Cup is estimated to be \$47 billion. Therefore, this study suggests that North America’s soccer leagues are reluctant to adopt and follow mechanisms and legal frameworks that strengthen cooperation and dialogue between stakeholders and institutions. The investigation will compare how Major League Soccer and La Liga MX meet international standards on ethics, compliance, and conflicts of interest. In doing so, the findings will contribute to the broader debate about the current regional instruments of governance and the role of local institutions in preventing systemic corruption and safeguarding sport’s governing bodies and national sports organizations

Alina Gamboa Combs

Title: Regional Governance in North America: Local Responses to Global Pressures in the World Cup Context

Abstract

The Mexico–United States–Canada (MEXUSCAN) 2026 FIFA World Cup represents an unprecedented case of cross-border governance and regulatory alignment in North America. As the first World Cup jointly hosted by three countries, the event requires the coordination of multiple institutional, legal, and administrative frameworks across diverse federal and subnational jurisdictions. This paper examines the governance challenges and opportunities that emerge from organizing a mega-event within the context of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), evolving security and migration regimes, and transnational sports governance led by FIFA.

The analysis highlights three interrelated dimensions. First, it investigates the mechanisms of regulatory alignment in areas such as infrastructure investment, labor mobility, customs facilitation, and security coordination, where the harmonization of standards is critical to ensuring operational efficiency. Second, it assesses the political and institutional dynamics shaping intergovernmental cooperation, including the role of trilateral task forces, cross-border municipal partnerships, and public-private consortia. Third, it considers the implications for regional governance, particularly how the World Cup may serve as a testing ground for institutional innovation and trust-building among the three states.

The paper argues that the 2026 World Cup extends beyond the realm of sports, functioning as a laboratory of cross-border governance under conditions of heightened geopolitical uncertainty. While regulatory misalignments—such as differing visa regimes, policing standards, and public health protocols—pose risks, the collaborative frameworks developed for the event have the potential to leave a lasting legacy of improved institutional coordination in North America. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader debates on mega-events, regional integration, and the politics of regulatory convergence, suggesting that the governance of MEXUSCAN 2026 may provide valuable insights for both international sport management and comparative regionalism.

Session II: Trade, Labor, and Mobility

Moderator: Julian Cardenas

Director, Center for U.S. and Mexican Law

University of Houston Law Center

Cato Willems

Title: Women in Football: Equality and Labor Rights from a European Perspective

Abstract

The sports world's shortcomings in paying full and systematic attention to equality based on sex contrast sharply with the importance of equality (law) in major societal areas, such as employment and the labour market. With the emergence of sex equality as a concept, the labour market has been a core concern and a focal point of attention. On the one hand, the structures and mechanisms that prevent women from building careers in sport are similar to the barriers that exist in the labour market. On the other hand, sports markets are also labour markets, where equality law designed for the labour market would, in principle, apply. The basic aim of this paper is to deepen the knowledge about the combination of labour law and the sports world. With a focus on professional sport, an area where the rich arsenal of labour market equality legislation is expected to apply, the greater scope of the paper is to examine how the specific nature of sport influences the implementation of the fundamental right to gender equality and compliance with gender equality legislation in sport, taking into account sport-specific characteristics, social-ethical norms and economic contexts in relation to sport.

The concrete aim of this paper is to explain whether and, if so, how the provisions of European labour law on equality between men and women can be applied in professional sport. It will also highlight the bottlenecks that arise from the application of these regulations. The paper will focus on the problem of equal pay for male and female professional athletes, not only because the bottlenecks are evident, but also because this issue has already led to clear cases. This immediately brings to mind the case of the US Women's National Team and superstar Megan Rapinoe, who reached a settlement with the US Soccer Federation following a lawsuit over unequal pay with men's team players. The paper, therefore, aims to examine the extent to which the European approach to equal pay, and in particular its application in the context of professional sport, is in line with the American vision of equal pay in the world of sport. In this assessment, the paper will examine both the case law related to the equal pay settlement in the US and the case law of the European Court of Justice of the European Union. Finally, a comparison will be made between both systems/views to see what can be learned from each other to achieve effective application of the principle of equal treatment of men and women in the broader world of sport.

Rodolfo Rueda Ballesteros and Santiago Isusi Jiménez

Title: Mega Sporting Events and International Collaboration: The 2026 World Cup as a Catalyst for Regional Integration in North America

Abstract

Mega sporting events are often associated with narratives of unity, cooperation, and international understanding; however, their capacity to generate lasting regional integration remains uncertain. This article examines the 2026 FIFA World Cup as a key case through which to assess whether such events can catalyze regional cooperation beyond merely symbolic or temporary coordination. The tournament's trilateral organization—among Mexico, the United States, and Canada—coincides with a period of political tension and the ongoing review of the USMCA, providing a particularly revealing context for analysis.

Drawing on the literature on sports diplomacy, soft power, and mega events as arenas of informal governance, the article adopts a comparative and documentary approach. It analyzes previous cases, including the 2002 Korea–Japan World Cup, among others, in order to identify the factors that could enable the 2026 World Cup to represent an opportunity for integration in North America.

The article argues that mega sporting events do not guarantee regional integration; rather, they open conditional windows of opportunity for cooperation. Their long-term impact depends on political will, institutionalization strategies, and deliberate post-event follow-through.

Session III: Human Rights, Ethics, and Dispute Resolution

Moderator: Matt Mitten

Executive Director, National Sports Law Institute, Marquette University Law School

Karen L. Jones

Title: From Symbolic Compliance to Enforceable Oversight: Human Rights Due Diligence and the 2026 FIFA World Cup

Abstract

The 2026 FIFA World Cup, jointly hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, marks not only the first cross-border World Cup of its scale but also a significant shift in how human rights are addressed in global sport governance. For the first time, prospective host cities were required to submit human rights strategies and due diligence assessments as part of the selection process—an important step toward aligning international sport with contemporary standards of accountability.

Yet an important question remains: does this form of due diligence meaningfully reduce human rights risks, or does it risk becoming another exercise in symbolic compliance? This Article situates the symposium’s theme of “From Kickoff to Consensus” within this tension. Drawing on corporate governance reforms such as the Sarbanes–Oxley Act of 2002 and the oversight model of the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board (“PCAOB”), it examines how enforceable and independent oversight mechanisms might strengthen and operationalize human rights due diligence in global sport governance.

Using the 2026 World Cup host city process as a case study, the Article analyzes the opportunities and limitations of FIFA’s evolving human rights framework. It highlights where due diligence reporting has created new avenues for accountability—and where structural gaps remain in enforcement, transparency, and remedial mechanisms.

Ultimately, the Article argues that consensus in global sport governance will not emerge solely from shared aspirational commitments but from embedding enforceable oversight and binding human rights obligations into tournament governance. The North American World Cup presents a timely opportunity to test whether human rights due diligence can evolve from a procedural requirement into a systemic regulatory tool capable of safeguarding rights, restoring institutional legitimacy, and strengthening trust in international sport.

Frea de Keyzer

Title: The Reach of EU Law in Sport Arbitration: Reassessing the Boundaries of Lex Sportiv

Abstract

The Seraing case represents a landmark in the evolving interaction between sports governance, (compulsory) arbitration, and European Union law. What began as a dispute over FIFA's ban on third-party ownership in football contracts, developed into a fundamental question on the relationship between sporting autonomy and the overarching requirements of EU law.

The CJEU held that arbitral awards concerning activities within the EU must remain open to review by national courts for compliance with European public policy. The Court reaffirmed that effective judicial protection is a fundamental requirement of the Union's constitutional order. Private parties may submit disputes to arbitration, yet such mechanisms cannot be insulated from judicial review where EU-guaranteed rights and freedoms are implicated.

This contribution analyses how Seraing reshapes the transnational authority of the CAS and demonstrates the extraterritorial diffusion of EU law through *lex sportiva*. It argues that the judgment induces a gradual Europeanisation of global sports arbitration, as CAS panels must anticipate EU public-policy standards to ensure enforceability within Member States.

Ultimately, Seraing signals a paradigm shift: *Lex sportiva* can no longer operate in isolation. This redefines the dialogue between autonomy and accountability, embedding proportionality, transparency, and rights-based reasoning at the heart of global sports arbitration.

Session IV: Technology, Media, Cybersecurity & Infrastructure

Moderator: Karen Jones

Executive Director, Global and Graduate Programs

University of Houston Law Center

Guillermo Mendoza

Title: Toward the Construction of a North American Intelligence Community Beyond Security: Trade, Investment, and Technology – A Mexican Perspective

Abstract

This paper examines the possibilities and benefits of building a North American intelligence community that extends beyond traditional security concerns to include mechanisms of intelligence sharing regarding trade and investment. The study explores the strategic value of intelligence cooperation as a way to improve trust and collaboration among the three North American countries in an era of stressed relations. The paper explores the investment screening mechanisms currently implemented in the United States and Canada which provide frameworks for assessing foreign investments with implications for national security and economic interests and compare them with Mexican more relaxed one in order to analyze the possibility to draw a common regulatory base acceptable for the three countries. It includes a section on exploratory scenarios where alternative trajectories of trilateral intelligence cooperation are examined, situating them within the structural conditions that characterize the region: deep economic interdependence, persistent regulatory asymmetries, and the institutional constraints derived from the USMCA. The analysis pays particular attention to Mexico's position, not only as the partner with the greatest institutional lag in economic security, but also as the actor with the greatest potential for adaptive transformation.

Dionne Koller

Title: Sportswashing and American Law

Abstract

The term “sportswashing” is frequently used in popular and political discourse. It is also the subject of academic inquiry, with scholars concluding that sportswashing is indeed a distinct phenomenon. Sportswashing most often refers to the use of sport by authoritarian regimes to launder the country’s image in an effort to achieve, if not actual, at least a veneer of international legitimacy.

The concept’s popular and scholarly significance presents an important and timely opportunity to consider how law might play a role in the practice. Current conceptions of sportswashing largely provide for two seemingly benign roles for law, aligning it with the widespread belief in the virtue of Western sport. The first is that law operates in the background, as it does in nearly every other area of modern life, by ordering the commercial arrangements that underpin the sports industry. In this sense, contract law, intellectual property law, and other areas of law are necessarily implicated in sportswashing, but generally do not take on the moral stigma of the sportswashing event. A second role for law is outlined by legal and other scholars who assert that law can be a corrective for sportswashing, by, for instance, prohibiting problematic regimes from purchasing sports teams or hosting sports mega-events. Law, in this account, can play a significant role in protecting the virtue of sport by denying actors the ability to use it in an attempt to “wash,” for instance, human rights abuses.

This essay argues that in addition to these accounts, law plays a far more central, and unappreciated role in sportswashing. It does so by endorsing private sport sponsors’ power over sport, conferring legitimacy that boosts the industry’s commercial value and secures the supply of athletes necessary for the games to exist. In this way, law strengthens the sports industry’s claim to moral superiority, so that law, it can be argued, serves to wash sports.

James Gengaro

Title: Money Over Meaning: Infrastructure, Procurement, and the Cost of the Game 2

Abstract

This paper discusses the modern day monopolies that have been created by major sports institutions such as FIFA, the NFL, the NBA, and MLS. An inside look at these entities dissects how these monopolies took shape, what they look like today, the consequences related to them, and what to expect in the future. Such monopolies have crowded out the competition by adding more games, more teams and more cities. This institutionalizes a plethora of issues such as gambling, human rights violations, decreased consumer/fan value, frequent injuries to players, a watered down game value, and even legal issues such as antitrust law and anticompetitive tying.

The Sherman Act was created in order to stop such monopolies from occurring and continuing to grow, but modern day examples point to loopholes, lack of legal action and strong defense work to protect the monopolies that are seen today in sports. These sports leagues have monopoly powers, making the games worse and creating a butterfly effect of consequences. Fans have no choice but to follow along if they want to continue supporting the sports they love because these monopolies leave fans with no choice but to watch their league if the fans want professional sports.

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