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# The Final Whistle Must Mean Final

*The 2025 AFCON Debacle Must Serve As a Learning Moment*

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The controversy surrounding the CAF Appeal Board's 17 March 2026 decision to strip Senegal of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations title following an appeal from Morocco has caused great consternation in African football circles, raising questions that go far beyond the outcome of a single match. At its core lies a fundamental issue: can a tribunal overturn what happens on the field of play, or does the authority of the referee remain sacrosanct?

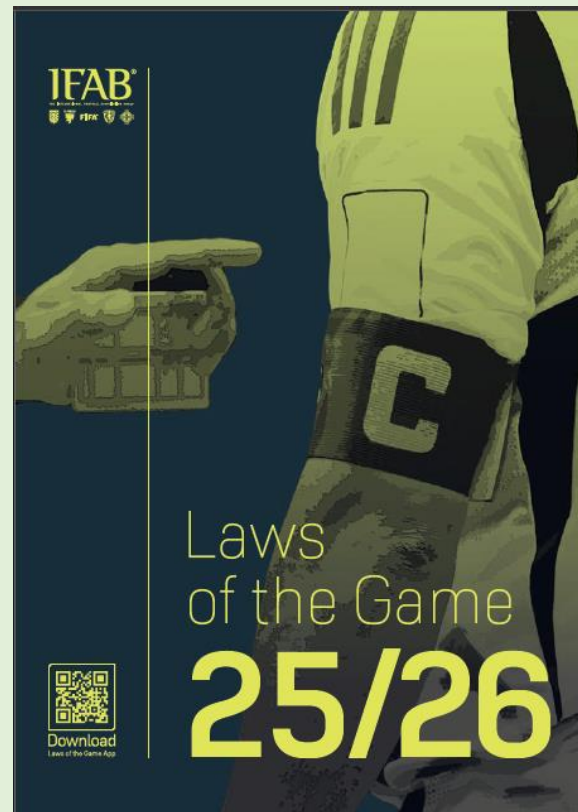
**To allow a rule to override the universal code of football would be to subordinate it to fragmented regulatory interventions**

My view is necessarily tempered by the absence of the motivated decision of the Appeal Board. Without it, one is left to infer the legal and regulatory logic that underpins such a far-reaching outcome. Yet, even on the limited information available, the case presents a profound and troubling contradiction — one that will ultimately have to be resolved by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

## A Clash of Philosophies

At the heart of the dispute lies an apparent conflict between CAF's competition regulations and the *Laws of the Game*, promulgated by the International Football Association Board (IFAB).

This is not a technical disagreement between parallel legal instruments. It is, more fundamentally, a clash between subordinate regulatory provisions and the foundational philosophy of football itself.



The *Laws of the Game* are not just a simple rulebook. They embody the universal philosophy and spirit of football, ensuring that the game remains fair, coherent and recognisable across all levels — from the FIFA World Cup to a match played in the most remote village. This universality is not incidental; it is the very strength of football as a global game.

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As the introduction to the *Laws* makes clear, fairness is the “crucial foundation” of the game and a defining feature of its spirit. Equally important is the recognition that not every situation can be prescribed in advance. In such cases, the referee is entrusted to decide in accordance with the spirit of the game, guided by the question: *what would football expect?*

This philosophical framework places the referee at the centre of the game’s integrity — not merely as an official, but as the custodian of its spirit in real time.

### **The Finality of Field of Play Decisions**

It is within this philosophical context that Law 5 must be understood.

Law 5 does more than assign authority; it establishes a principle essential to the functioning of the sport:

- The referee has full authority to enforce the *Laws of the Game*
- Decisions are made according to both the *Laws* and their spirit
- Decisions on facts connected with play — including the result — are final
- Crucially, once play has restarted, a decision cannot be revisited

These provisions are not procedural technicalities. They are structural safeguards designed to preserve the flow of the game; the authority of match officials; and the finality and certainty of outcomes.

To depart from these principles is not merely to reinterpret a rule — it is to undermine the architecture of football itself.

### **The Legal Contradiction**

If Articles 82 and 84 of the Regulations of the CAF Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) are interpreted to allow a tribunal to revisit and overturn a match result arising from a referee’s decision after play has restarted, then a direct and irreconcilable contradiction arises.

On the one hand, the *Laws of the Game* insist that the referee’s decisions are final and non-reviewable.

On the other, the Appeal Board appears to permit precisely such a review.

This is not a matter of interpretation — it is a matter of hierarchy.

### **The response mandated by the spirit of the game is not retrospective correction by tribunals**

Competition rules exist to organise tournaments. They cannot, and must not, override the foundational law of the game itself. To allow them to do so would be to subordinate the universal code of football to fragmented regulatory interventions.

More fundamentally, it would violate the spirit of the *Laws*, which demands that the referee’s authority be respected — even when decisions are controversial or, indeed, incorrect.

The *Laws* explicitly acknowledge that referees, being human, will make mistakes. Yet the response mandated by the spirit of the game is not retrospective correction by tribunals, but acceptance in the interest of

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preserving the integrity and continuity of the match.

### **The Danger of Retrospective Refereeing**

To allow a tribunal to alter the outcome of a match based on a perceived refereeing error is to introduce the deeply problematic notion of retrospective refereeing.

This shifts decision-making from the immediacy of the field of play to the abstraction of post-match legal processes.

Such an approach undermines one of football's most essential principles: finality.

The game depends on the certainty that, once the final whistle is blown, the result stands. Without this, every controversial decision becomes a potential legal dispute, and every match a provisional outcome subject to later revision. The consequences for the integrity and stability of competitions would be catastrophic.

It is precisely for this reason that international sports jurisprudence has consistently maintained a clear distinction between:

- Non-reviewable field-of-play decisions, and
- Reviewable administrative or regulatory breaches

The Morocco – Senegal matter falls squarely within the non-reviewable category.

### **Accountability Without Distortion**

None of this suggests that referees should be immune from criticism and accountability. Where serious errors occur, they must be

addressed firmly through performance reviews; sanctions; and training and development.

But the correction must be prospective, not retrospective.



To alter a match result is to punish the participants for an error they did not commit. It distorts the competition and shifts responsibility away from those entrusted with applying the *Laws*.

### **The Role of the Tribunal**

A tribunal does not create the game's laws; it interprets and applies them within their proper limits.

Its legitimacy depends on obedience to the hierarchy of laws that govern football. If the Appeal Board has elevated competition rules above the *Laws of the Game*, it risks acting beyond its mandate.

### **A Moment for Institutional Reflection**

Beyond the immediate dispute, this episode presents a critical learning opportunity for CAF.

This calls for proactive communication. I am led to believe that the CAF President sharply raised the incident with officials and committee members after recognising the exceptional nature of the incident.

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There is therefore a need to reinforce referee training and technical guidance.

CAF should also consider clarifying or amending its regulations for future scenarios to prevent the apparent blurring of authority presented by Article 82 of the AFCON rules.

This approach would align with both the letter and the spirit of the *Laws of the Game*, while demonstrating institutional maturity and foresight.

### **The Road to Lausanne**

The central question that CAS needs to address – once again:

Does the philosophy and authority embedded in the *Laws of the Game* prevail – or can it be overridden by competition regulations?

CAS case law has already answered the question of the finality of referees' decisions in all sports unequivocally. It has defined the limits of institutional intervention in football and reaffirmed the foundational principle that governs sports worldwide.

### **What Was the Appeal Board Thinking?**

One is left to reflect, uneasily, on the mindset of the Appeals Board in arriving at its decision. Faced with a situation in which the referee had clearly allowed the match to continue – thereby exercising his authority under the *Laws of the Game* – and in which those same *Laws* explicitly prohibit both the referee and any subsequent authority from revisiting a restart decision once play has resumed, what legal or conceptual pathway led the Board to a different conclusion?

Does this decision suggest a troubling willingness to set aside the primacy of the *Laws of the Game*, or does it reveal a misapprehension of their clear provisions?

Alternatively, did the Board rely on an entirely different metric – perhaps construing the temporary departure of the Senegalese players from the field as an abandonment of the match – despite the absence of a final whistle or formal termination of the match by the referee?



If so, such reasoning would not only contradict the facts on the ground but risk introducing a precedent in which the subjective interpretation of events supersedes the objective authority of the referee and the binding framework of the *Laws*.

For now, one truth remains self-evident: Football cannot function if the final whistle is no longer final.

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