South African Sport: The Crisis Is Not on the Field, It Is in the Boardroom

Rebuilding the governance architecture of sport to protect athletes, restore institutional credibility and secure the future of South African sport

By Dennis A. Mumble
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The announcement by Tatjana Smith that she will henceforth represent the Netherlands in international swimming is a moment that should prompt considerably more reflection than the usual expressions of disappointment, patriotism and speculation that accompany an athlete's change of sporting nationality.

Smith has given South Africa extraordinary service. Her four Olympic medals, including two gold medals, have made her the country's most decorated Olympic athlete. She has delivered moments of immense national pride, and nothing about her decision can diminish those achievements or the place she occupies in South African sporting history. Her Dutch heritage, including her family connections to the Netherlands, is equally part of her identity. There should be no suggestion that choosing to explore that heritage through sport represents a rejection of South Africa.

Her explanation, however, deserves serious consideration. Financial and practical challenges, together with the prospect of better high-performance support and a more sustainable sporting career, have informed her decision. These concerns acquire additional significance against the background of Swimming South Africa's institutional difficulties and the provisional suspension, on 24 August 2026, of its President, Alan Fritz, and CEO, Shaun Adriaanse, by the Aquatics Integrity Unit over potential violations of the World Aquatics Integrity Code, including abuse of power and the provision of false information and fake documents. These remain allegations subject to the relevant proceedings, not findings of guilt.

The question is not whether South Africa should begrudge an accomplished athlete the opportunity to pursue her ambitions elsewhere. It is why a country capable of producing athletes of such exceptional ability should struggle to create an institutional environment in which they can develop, compete and sustain their careers at home.

Smith's decision should therefore be understood as a warning about something considerably bigger than swimming. It exposes the relationship between the quality of sports administration and the country's ability to retain, develop and protect its sporting talent.

The institutional problem behind the sporting results

The recent difficulties experienced by several national sporting organisations suggest that South African sport is confronting a systemic governance problem. The suspension of SASCOC President Barry Hendricks in September 2026, the continuing crisis at Athletics South Africa, the provisional suspension of the Swimming South Africa leadership, and the World Karate Federation's intervention in Karate South Africa are not isolated developments that can simply be dismissed as unfortunate leadership disagreements. Netball South Africa has also experienced a prolonged governance crisis, including the suspension of its former president by World Netball. Each situation has its own circumstances and procedural history, and no assumption of guilt should be made in respect of unresolved proceedings. Nevertheless, the recurrence of institutional instability across different sporting codes should concern everyone with an interest in the future of South African sport.

In April 2026, Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Sport, Arts and Culture recommended the dissolution of the Athletics South Africa board, citing persistent governance failures, inadequate financial controls, leadership instability and the failure to protect athletes' interests. World Athletics subsequently identified serious deficiencies in the federation's governance and functioning. Such interventions are particularly troubling because they suggest that the institutions entrusted with developing sport are increasingly becoming preoccupied with managing their own internal conflicts.

The underlying problem, in my view, is partly structural. South African sports organisations have become excessively dependent on political popularity as the principal determinant of leadership. Electoral success, factional support and the ability to secure positions within organisational structures frequently carry greater weight than demonstrable expertise in the disciplines necessary to govern a modern sports organisation.

There is nothing inherently wrong with democratic elections. Indeed, democracy is indispensable to the legitimacy of sporting institutions. However, democracy determines who is entitled to elect leadership; it does not, by itself, establish that those elected possess the collective competence required to discharge their responsibilities. A federation may have a perfectly legitimate electoral mandate and still be profoundly deficient in its capacity to govern.

The administration of modern sport requires an understanding of financial management, sports science, high-performance systems, athlete welfare, commercial development, law, risk management, safeguarding, ethics and institutional accountability. These are specialised disciplines. They cannot simply be acquired through political experience, personal influence or long-standing involvement in a particular sporting code.

The consequence is that governing bodies too often become political organisations concerned with the preservation of positions and influence rather than institutions dedicated to serving their members and athletes. The interests of the organisation become confused with the interests of those who control it. In that environment, accountability becomes inconvenient,

independent oversight is resisted and internal dispute resolution can become an instrument of institutional power rather than an avenue for justice.

Governance must become a professional discipline

Governance is not the same thing as administration, and neither is synonymous with sporting performance. Governance concerns the systems through which an organisation is directed, controlled, held accountable and required to fulfil its purpose. It establishes the boundaries of authority, determines how decisions are made, protects the rights of stakeholders and ensures that organisational resources are deployed responsibly.

The philosophical foundations are particularly important in sport. Competition requires a level playing field, agreed rules, impartial officials and certainty about the outcome of disputes. Those same principles must apply in the boardrooms of sporting organisations. There can be no credible expectation of fairness on the field where fairness, legality and accountability are absent from the institutions responsible for administering the game.

This is why good governance must be understood as a fundamental condition of sporting development, rather than an administrative obligation that can be attended to after the medals have been won.

Internationally accepted frameworks already provide a substantial foundation for reform. ISO 37000:2021 establishes principles for the governance of organisations, including accountability, ethical leadership, stakeholder engagement, effective oversight and organisational sustainability. The International Partnership Against Corruption in Sport (IPACS) has developed a sport governance benchmark built around transparency, integrity, democracy, development and solidarity, and checks and balances. The National Sports Governance Observer (NSGO) provides a useful methodology for assessing governance performance in sports organisations, while South Africa's King V Report, effective for financial years beginning on or after 1 January 2026, offers an important domestic reference for ethical and effective organisational leadership.

These frameworks should not be treated as decorative references in federation constitutions or annual reports. They should inform the actual architecture of sports organisations.

The first reform must therefore be structural. SASCOC itself needs to be reconsidered. An organisation intended to coordinate and provide leadership to national sporting federations cannot function effectively if its own governing arrangements are predominantly political and representative without sufficient regard to the collective expertise required to oversee a complex national sporting system. Democratic representation must be preserved, but it should be complemented by a properly constituted governing board with demonstrable expertise in finance, law, sports administration, high-performance sport, commercial development, ethics and integrity, and athlete welfare.

The same principle should apply to national federations. Their constitutions should prescribe minimum collective competency requirements for governing bodies, supported by transparent nomination processes, skills matrices, independent audit and risk committees, and properly constituted ethics and integrity functions. Athletes must also have meaningful representation in decisions affecting their careers and welfare.

This does not mean replacing elected representatives with technocrats or allowing professional administrators to displace democratic authority. It means recognising that elected leaders govern collectively and must ensure that the organisation has the expertise necessary to discharge its responsibilities. Professional management should execute policy, while the governing body provides strategic direction, oversight and accountability. The distinction between governance and management must be respected.

Professionalising the administration of sport

There is an equally compelling case for introducing formal education and accreditation requirements for sports administrators. The administration of a national sporting federation is a professional responsibility with potentially enormous consequences for athletes, public resources, commercial partners and the country's international sporting standing.

It is unreasonable to expect individuals to assume these responsibilities without an adequate understanding of the legal, financial, ethical and institutional obligations attached to their positions.

South Africa should establish a National Sports Governance and Administration Accreditation Framework, underpinned by a recognised professional qualification and continuing development requirements. The framework should distinguish between elected office-bearers and professional executives, while prescribing appropriate competency standards for both.

The analogy with admission to the legal profession is instructive, although the regulatory model need not be identical. One would not ordinarily permit an individual to practise as an attorney without satisfying prescribed professional requirements. Equally, those entrusted with the management of national sporting institutions should demonstrate a minimum level of competence before assuming professional administrative responsibilities. Elected officials should undertake compulsory governance education and demonstrate competency in their fiduciary, constitutional and ethical responsibilities.

This should not become another bureaucratic barrier to participation. It should be a mechanism for professionalising sport, strengthening institutional capacity and ensuring that those who exercise authority understand the responsibilities that accompany it.

The missing institution: an independent national sports tribunal

Perhaps the most urgent structural reform is the establishment of a fully independent National Sports Dispute Resolution Tribunal.

I have argued elsewhere that South African courts have frequently failed to appreciate the particular institutional and regulatory characteristics of sport. Sports disputes are often time-sensitive, technically specialised and governed by constitutions, regulations and international sporting rules that require a particular understanding of the sporting environment. Ordinary litigation can be prohibitively expensive, excessively protracted and, in some instances, incapable of providing an effective remedy before an athlete's opportunity to compete or an organisation's electoral process has passed.

This is not an argument that the courts should be excluded from sports disputes. Constitutional rights and the supervisory jurisdiction of the courts must remain protected. It is an argument for developing a specialised first-line mechanism that can resolve disputes more efficiently and with a better understanding of the environment in which they arise.

The current arrangement, in which many federations effectively control their own internal dispute resolution mechanisms, creates an inherent vulnerability. Where the leadership of an organisation controls its resources, disciplinary structures and internal appeals processes, an individual member or athlete may find themselves confronting an institution with considerably greater financial and organisational power. The very machinery intended to provide justice can become a means of frustrating it.

The asymmetry is real. An athlete, coach, club or regional association may have a legitimate grievance but lack the financial resources to sustain prolonged litigation against a well-resourced federation. The ability to exercise one's rights should not depend on one's capacity to finance a legal battle.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) has recognised the importance of access to justice through mechanisms such as its Football Legal Aid Fund, which provides qualifying football stakeholders with financial assistance in proceedings. South Africa should take the underlying principle further by establishing a statutory national tribunal, with jurisdiction over appropriate sporting disputes, including elections, disciplinary matters, governance, membership rights and contractual disputes.

The Australian National Sports Tribunal provides a particularly useful model. It offers independent arbitration, mediation, conciliation and appeals through specialised divisions. South Africa could adapt this approach to its own constitutional and sporting environment.

The proposed tribunal must be genuinely independent of both government and the federations whose disputes it would adjudicate. Its members should be appointed through a transparent, merit-based process, with appropriate legal, sporting, financial and technical expertise. It should

have secure funding, accessible procedures, expedited hearings where sporting deadlines demand them, and a costs structure that does not deter ordinary participants. Its decisions should be reasoned, binding within its lawful jurisdiction and subject to appropriate judicial oversight.

Such a mechanism would not only reduce the cost of resolving disputes; it would also diminish the capacity of powerful administrators to exploit institutional and financial inequalities to frustrate legitimate claims.

Legislation, accountability and the state's responsibility

These reforms cannot depend entirely on the goodwill of sporting federations. South Africa's National Sport and Recreation Act 110 of 1998 should be substantially reconsidered to establish a more coherent statutory framework for governance in sport.

The Companies Act provides a useful legislative reference in the way it regulates directors' responsibilities, financial accountability and corporate conduct. Sporting organisations are not necessarily companies, and their democratic and membership-based character must be respected. Nevertheless, the absence of a conventional corporate structure should not create an accountability deficit.

The revised sports legislation should prescribe minimum governance standards for recognised national federations, including financial disclosure, independent auditing, conflict-of-interest management, safeguarding, ethical leadership, democratic participation and effective dispute resolution. Access to public funding should be linked to demonstrable compliance, with proportionate intervention mechanisms where serious institutional failures arise. Such interventions must themselves be lawful, transparent and procedurally fair.

The Minister's role must also be properly understood. Government should not become the political protector of federation presidents or interfere arbitrarily in the internal administration of sporting codes. Its responsibility is to protect the public interest, promote equitable access to sport, ensure responsible use of public resources and hold institutions accountable for their obligations. The distinction between respecting sporting autonomy and tolerating institutional impunity must be clearly understood.

This requires a change in the way public and private investment in sport is approached. Funding should not be directed exclusively towards national teams and the immediate pursuit of international medals. Investment must extend to facilities, coaching education, scientific support, athlete development, grassroots programmes, sports medicine, safeguarding and sustainable administrative capacity. Private-sector partners should be encouraged to invest in a system that offers credible financial management, transparent reporting and institutional stability.

Good governance is not an expense that competes with sporting development. It is the infrastructure that makes sustainable sporting development possible.

Rebuilding sport around its purpose

Ultimately, the purpose of a sports federation is not to provide positions, prestige or political influence to those who govern it. Its purpose is to develop and administer its sport, create opportunities for participation, protect its athletes, promote fair competition and ensure that the sport remains sustainable for future generations.

This requires a fundamental realignment of priorities. Governance must be measured not by the number of meetings held, the constitutional positions occupied or the electoral victories achieved, but by the quality of the institutions created and the service they deliver to the sporting community.

I have written extensively about governance in South African football (https://safootball.net), but the underlying concerns are not confined to football. The same principles apply across every sporting code. My continuing anxiety is that we have allowed the institutional administration of sport to become disconnected from the very people and purposes it exists to serve.

Tatjana Smith's decision should not be interpreted as a national sporting tragedy in isolation. It should be an opportunity to ask why the country struggles to provide the conditions in which exceptional athletes can fulfil their potential without having to confront unnecessary financial, administrative or institutional obstacles.

South Africa should never expect athletes to compensate for the shortcomings of the institutions that govern them. Nor should we accept that sporting success is sufficient evidence that those institutions are functioning properly. Athletes can win medals despite poor governance, just as organisations can retain international recognition while failing the people they are supposed to serve.

The real test of a sporting nation is not simply how many champions it produces, but whether it builds institutions capable of developing, supporting and retaining those champions, while creating opportunities for the generations that follow.

Competitive balance on the field must be matched by certainty, fairness and the rule of law in the boardrooms of sport. Until South Africa understands that these are inseparable elements of sporting excellence, we will continue to celebrate the achievements of our athletes while neglecting the institutional conditions that make those achievements possible.

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