



COMPETITION ACT

CCI's Table Tennis Verdict: A New Framework for Competition Law in Indian Sports Governance

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Introduction

As Indian sports undergo rapid commercialization driven by private leagues, media rights, and athlete endorsements, the regulatory authority traditionally held by national federations is facing increasing legal scrutiny. One significant legal development in this context is the Competition Commission of India's (CCI) order in *TT Friendly Super League Association v. Table Tennis Federation of India*¹, which sets a critical precedent for how competition law applies to sports governance.

Delivered in December 2024, the CCI's ruling affirms that regulatory status and non-profit character do not shield sports bodies from antitrust scrutiny when they operate as market participants. The case is particularly instructive because it addresses a foundational question: Can a regulator also act as a competitor in the same market? The Commission's answer, rooted in statutory interpretation and economic logic, is a firm no.

Factual Background

The Informant, TT Friendly Super League Association (TTFSL), is a not-for-profit company that organizes informal, non-ranking table tennis tournaments aimed at encouraging broader participation beyond the conventional federation circuit.

The matter arose from a WhatsApp advisory dated 30 October 2020, issued by the Suburban Table Tennis Association (TSTTA). The advisory warned players, coaches, and affiliated clubs against participating in events organized by unaffiliated entities such as TTFSL and indicated that such participation could result in suspension or disqualification from official tournaments.

Alleging anti-competitive conduct under Sections 3 and 4 of the Competition Act, 2002, TTFSL approached the Competition Commission of India (CCI). The Commission directed an investigation into the conduct of four associations:

- The Suburban Table Tennis Association (TSTTA), the district-level governing body for Mumbai Suburban
- The Maharashtra State Table Tennis Association (MSTTA), the state-level federation
- The Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI), the national apex body recognised by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports
- The Gujarat State Table Tennis Association (GSTTA), the governing body for the sport in Gujarat

Relevant Market and Dominance

The Director General (DG) identified two relevant markets:

- The market for organising table tennis tournaments in India; and
- The market for the provision of player services in such tournaments.

The Commission accepted this delineation and held that:

- TTFI held dominance at the national level, being the sole federation recognized by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and affiliated with the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF).
- MSTTA, GSTTA, and TSTTA were found to be dominant within their respective jurisdictions, owing to the pyramidal governance structure that granted them de facto control over event organisation and player participation.

Further, the Commission reaffirmed that all four associations qualified as "enterprises" under Section 2(h) of the Competition Act, given their involvement in economic activities such as tournament organisation, fee collection, prize distribution, and sponsorship management.

Abuse of Dominance by Table Tennis Federations under Section 4

The Commission concluded that the conduct of all four associations amounted to abuse of dominance, violating Sections 4(2)(a)(i), 4(2)(b)(i), and 4(2)(c) of the Competition Act, 2002.

1. TSTTA's WhatsApp Advisory

The WhatsApp advisory issued by the Suburban Table Tennis Association served as a coercive directive, warning players and coaches against participating in unaffiliated tournaments. Though informally worded, it threatened disciplinary consequences, creating a chilling effect that restricted player participation and deterred independent organizers. Despite its withdrawal in February 2022, the Commission held that it had already achieved its exclusionary objective.

2. TTFI's Restrictive Clauses

The Commission scrutinized Clauses 24C(e), 24C(h), 27(a), and 28(a)-(b) of the Table Tennis Federation of India's Memorandum of Association, which:

- Prohibited unauthorized events
- Barred from participation in non-recognized tournaments
- Empowered disciplinary action for violations

These provisions were found to be overly restrictive and anti-competitive, foreclosing opportunities for independent organizers and curbing athletes' autonomy. Although amended in September 2024, the Commission noted that its earlier enforcement had caused substantial market harm.

3. MSTTA and GSTTA's Conduct

Both MSTTA and GSTTA engaged in similar restrictive practices. MSTTA issued public statements discouraging unaffiliated participation, while GSTTA required players to sign written undertakings pledging not to join unrecognized tournaments.

These actions were found to reinforce a closed and hierarchical structure, limiting entry for unaffiliated organizers and undermining competition. The Commission concluded that such practices effectively foreclosed the market and hindered alternative platforms for players.

Vertical Restraints under Section 3(4)

In addition to abuse of dominance, the CCI held that TSTTA's conduct also constituted vertical restraints under Section 3(4) of the Competition Act, 2002, specifically:

- Exclusive dealing [Section 3(4)(c)]; and
- Refusal to deal [Section 3(4)(d)]

The WhatsApp advisory operated as a binding instruction to players and affiliated clubs, effectively deterring engagement with unaffiliated organizers. This conduct was held to have caused an appreciable adverse effect on competition (AAEC). The Commission rightly observed that such vertical control could not be justified under the guise of sports federation governance.

Compliance and Cease-and-Desist Order

All four associations undertook remedial measures during the inquiry. TSTTA withdrew its advisory; TTFI amended its MoA; GSTTA repealed restrictive clauses and circulars; and clarificatory notices were issued assuring no penalties for unaffiliated participation.

Considering these steps and the fact that this was a first-time violation, the CCI refrained from imposing monetary penalties. Instead, it issued a cease-and-desist order under Section 27, with a warning that repeat violations would invite stricter consequences, including financial penalties and personal liability.

Legal and Policy Implications

Autonomy vs. Market Accountability

While widely seen as a pro-competition ruling, the decision raises legitimate concerns about the autonomy of [National Sports Federations](#) (NSFs), which derive their authority from the National Sports Development Code, 2011. However, the CCI made clear that such autonomy cannot shield federations from antitrust scrutiny when they engage in exclusionary economic conduct.

The order does not interfere with legitimate regulatory functions—it simply curbs the misuse of power that forecloses competition. In doing so, the Commission draws a clear line between governance and market control.

Recognition of Player Rights

The ruling also affirms athletes' right to compete, free from arbitrary sanctions for participating in unaffiliated events. This signals a shift toward player-centric regulation, in line with evolving global sports law standards. It reinforces the need for federations to adapt to a more open, innovation-friendly sporting ecosystem.

Key Takeaways

This ruling makes important contributions to the evolving interface of sports governance and competition law in India:

- Sports federations are subject to antitrust scrutiny when they engage in market-facing conduct.
- Regulatory control cannot justify exclusionary practices against players or independent organizers.
- The CCI affirms athlete autonomy and market access, reinforcing open competition in sports governance.

Conclusion

The CCI's ruling serves as a timely reminder that regulatory authority cannot be used to entrench a monopoly. Sports federations must now review their constitutions and align their practices with the principles of fair competition. Blanket bans and restrictive policies must be replaced by transparent and proportionate governance frameworks.

This verdict also sends a strong message to emerging leagues and independent organizers: India's legal regime is increasingly supportive of market access, innovation, and athlete choice. As sport continues to evolve as both an industry and a cultural force, this decision marks a necessary shift towards more inclusive and competitive regulation.

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