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Lost In Time: The Cruel Irony Of Justice In The Winter Olympics 2026

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Introduction: A Win That Came Too Late

The Delhi High Court's judgment in **W.P.(C) 936/2026 (Manjeet v. Indian Olympic Association)** is a powerful indictment of arbitrariness in Indian sports governance. It is also, tragically, a reminder that in elite sport, time is as decisive as talent.

While the Court unequivocally held that Manjeet, the highest-ranked Indian cross-country skier, was wrongfully excluded from selection for the **Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics**, the rigid Olympic timelines mean that this judicial vindication may never translate into participation on snow.

The judgment therefore occupies a deeply unsettling space: a triumph for the rule of law, but potentially a defeat for the athlete.

Table of contents

- [Introduction: A Win That Came Too Late](#)
- [The Athlete at the Centre: Merit Without Representation](#)
- [The Legal Battlefield: Constitutional Mandates vs. Institutional Discretion](#)
- [Eligibility vs. Quota: A Fundamental Legal Error](#)
- [The Long List Controversy: Procedure as a Tool of Exclusion](#)
- [Conflict of Interest and Institutional Breakdown](#)
- [Judicial Restraint Ends Where Arbitrariness Begins](#)
- [The Cruel Irony: Olympic Timelines Do Not Pause for Justice](#)
- [Ministry as a Mute Spectator: A Failure of Oversight](#)
- [Debate for the Future: Should Courts Redefine Their Role in Sports?](#)
- [Conclusion: Beyond Medals and Rankings](#)

The Athlete at the Centre: Merit Without Representation

Manjeet's sporting credentials were never in doubt. He occupied the top position in India on the official FIS rankings for the relevant assessment period, achieved through cumulative performance across multiple valid international races. Under the FIS Qualification System for the XXV Olympic Winter Games, eligibility is governed by objective, points-based criteria, where lower FIS points signify superior performance.

Yet, despite meeting every notified international eligibility requirement, Manjeet was excluded from Olympic consideration. The reason lay not in performance, but in process.

The Legal Battlefield: Constitutional Mandates vs. Institutional Discretion

At the heart of *Manjeet v. IOA* lies a constitutional contest between institutional discretion in sports governance and the guarantees of fairness embedded in Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution of India. While sporting bodies enjoy autonomy in technical and expert matters, that discretion is not unfettered. Article 14 operates as a safeguard against arbitrariness, requiring selection processes to be transparent, objective, and non-discriminatory. Article 21, expansively interpreted by Indian courts, protects not merely physical liberty but also the right to pursue a meaningful vocation, particularly significant in professional sports, where opportunities are rare, time-bound, and often irretrievable.

The Court recognised that Olympic selection is not a routine administrative decision but one with grave civil consequences, capable of permanently foreclosing an athlete's career trajectory. Where discretion degenerates into opacity, retrospective rule-making, or conflict of interest, constitutional oversight becomes not merely permissible, but imperative.

Eligibility vs. Quota: A Fundamental Legal Error

The IOA justified Manjeet's exclusion by asserting that participation in the March 2025 Nordic World Championships, through which India earned its Olympic quota, was an implicit prerequisite for selection. The High Court rejected this argument as a fundamental misreading of the FIS Qualification System.

The distinction is crucial:

- **Eligibility (Section C of Qualification System for XXV Olympic Winter Games)** operates at the athlete level and is governed by age, medical fitness, and FIS points.
- **Quota allocation (Section D of Qualification System for XXV Olympic Winter Games)** operates at the national level, determining how many slots a country receives, not who fills them.

By conflating quota acquisition with individual eligibility, the IOA effectively rewrote binding international rules, a power it does not possess. An athlete cannot be rendered ineligible merely because another athlete earned the quota.

The Long List Controversy: Procedure as a Tool of Exclusion

The IOA further relied on the “Long List” deadline of 26 September 2025, arguing that Manjeet’s absence from this administrative list foreclosed any future consideration. This contention was equally unsustainable.

The Court clarified that:

- The Long List is not a merit-based filter, but an inclusive administrative mechanism.
- It is intended to include all potential athletes, regardless of their qualification status at that stage.
- No rule required participation in the World Championships as a condition for inclusion.

Compounding the illegality was the fact that the NOC Accreditation and Sports Entries Manual was never disclosed to athletes, violating transparency and natural justice. Procedure, the Court observed, cannot be used to extinguish substantive rights.

Conflict of Interest and Institutional Breakdown

The selection process was further tainted by the constitution of an **Ad-hoc Committee**, unratified by the IOA Executive Committee, where two of three members were active athletes. These members participated in, and benefitted from, the very selection decisions they controlled.

Such structural conflicts strike at the heart of fair governance. Selection processes must not only be fair but must inspire confidence in their fairness. Anything less undermines institutional legitimacy.

Judicial Restraint Ends Where Arbitrariness Begins

The IOA invoked the familiar shield of expert autonomy, citing precedents urging courts not to interfere in sporting selections. The High Court accepted this principle, but drew a firm boundary.

This was not a case of courts second-guessing technical assessments. It was a case of:

- applying criteria not found in any governing document,
- ignoring notified international rules, and
- denying the athlete procedural fairness.

Where arbitrariness supplants expertise, judicial restraint yields to judicial duty.

The Cruel Irony: Olympic Timelines Do Not Pause for Justice

Despite granting relief, the Court confronted a grim reality. Olympic participation is governed by rigid, unforgiving timelines:

- Long List submission by 26 September 2025,
- accreditation, anti-doping oversight, and quota confirmation months in advance,
- arrival, validation, and final accreditation deadlines enforced by the IOC and Organising Committee.

By the time judgment was delivered on **30 January 2026**, many of these deadlines have expired. The Court therefore directed the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports to make “all reasonable efforts” to facilitate Manjeet’s participation. Yet international sporting frameworks offer little elasticity. Accreditations cannot be retroactively manufactured, nor compliance regimes bypassed.

Thus emerges the central tragedy of the case: Manjeet may be right in law, yet absent in fact.

Ministry as a Mute Spectator: A Failure of Oversight

The Court also expressed displeasure at the Ministry’s attempt to distance itself from the controversy. As the nodal authority overseeing sports administration, the Ministry cannot abdicate responsibility when merit is sacrificed at the altar of administrative

convenience.

Oversight does not end with issuing policy circulars; it extends to ensuring institutional compliance and athlete protection, particularly when careers hinge on timely and lawful decision-making.

Debate for the Future: Should Courts Redefine Their Role in Sports?

Pro-interventionist View: Courts must protect fundamental rights, even in sports, because careers are ephemeral and opportunities are limited.

Pro-restraint View: Judicial intervention risks undermining expert discretion, possibly affecting team strategy, preparation, and international competitiveness.

The Manjeet case suggests a balanced path: courts do not dictate strategy but ensure adherence to law and fairness.

Conclusion: Beyond Medals and Rankings

W.P.(C) 936/2026 is more than a judgment about a single athlete, it is a clarion call for fairness, transparency, and accountability in sports governance.

- Athletes like Manjeet dedicate their lives to representing their nation; procedural arbitrariness should never thwart such dedication.
- Institutions must remember: every decision affects not just the athlete, but the credibility of Indian sports on the world stage.
- Courts, in turn, must safeguard the fine line between respecting expertise and preventing abuse of power, a balance that defines the integrity of governance itself.

As India prepares for global competitions, this judgment reminds us that meritocracy, law, and fairness are as important as training, stamina, and medals.

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