

Antitrust Considerations Amid Cricket's US Expansion

By **Stacey Anne Mahoney, Rishi Satia and Sujal Shah** (August 4, 2025, 4:22 PM EDT)

Entities across industries face mounting antitrust scrutiny from enforcers, legislators and the plaintiffs' bar. Sports teams and leagues are no exception, especially those experiencing increased attention or growth, such as professional cricket leagues in the U.S.

As the volume of sports commerce expands globally, so too does scrutiny from antitrust enforcers and litigants alike. Amid rising investment in and expansion of professional cricket in the U.S., it is prudent for companies operating in this space to monitor ongoing developments and to consider potential risks associated with certain business practices.

While antitrust risks in cricket may appear in a range of different scenarios, this article focuses on four primary issues: league operations and regulations, broadcasting, licensing, and player labor and mobility.

As discussed below, each of these considerations requires a nuanced assessment of the realities of competition. And as cricket continues to grow in popularity in the U.S., leagues, teams and enterprises operating in adjacent spaces should consider the potential antitrust risks associated with their business decisions.

Cricket Today

Cricket originated in rural 16th century England and evolved into an organized sport by the 18th century. Today, there are an estimated 10 million to 20 million cricket fans in the U.S., up from about 30,000 only two decades ago, and a latent fan base of an estimated 30 million to 50 million fans.[1]

While this represents a fraction of U.S.-based fans for legacy American sports — approximately 83 million soccer fans, 123 million golf fans, 136 million hockey fans, 155 million basketball fans, 170 million baseball fans and 188 million football fans — the popularity of cricket in the U.S. continues to surge.

This growth is a product of, among other things, increased streaming and network coverage of matches, easier access to international broadcasts, social media coverage, the shortened T20 format, access to live matches around the country, increased integration into college athletics, and growing youth and



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amateur leagues.

Cricket's expansion in the U.S. is not unprecedented. For example, while early U.S. soccer leagues, such as the American Soccer League of the 1920s and the North American Soccer League created in the late 1960s, failed due to financial losses and lack of interest, the relatively recent rise of Major League Soccer shows that new sports leagues in the U.S. are finding commercial success. After the U.S. hosted the FIFA World Cup in 1994, soccer viewership swelled and MLS thrived.

Cricket in the U.S. is following a similar trajectory. In 2023, the American cricket governing body, USA Cricket, sanctioned the country's first professional T20 league, Major League Cricket. The inaugural season featured six teams representing major cities, and a tournament that exceeded financial expectations, generating approximately \$8 million in revenue.

In 2024, the U.S. and the West Indies co-hosted the T20 World Cup raising an estimated \$61 million in sponsorship revenue from advertisers.[2] It was recently announced that the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics will feature cricket as an Olympic sport for the first time in over a century.

Cricket's continued growth is also evident at the grassroots level. Recent estimates indicate that there are over 400 cricket leagues across the country, encompassing more than 200,000 active players.

Sports Antitrust and Cricket

Antitrust laws are designed to promote and protect competition and to prevent unfair business practices that harm consumers and stifle innovation. While to some, sport may not seem like an obvious target for the antitrust laws, at their core, sports teams and leagues, including cricket leagues, are commercial enterprises that can face accusations of unfair competition and anticompetitive business practices.

A unique challenge in sports, however, is that leagues and their governing bodies necessarily require a certain level of coordination and collaboration among independent actors. Such coordination can be problematic under the antitrust laws, but it arguably serves the procompetitive purpose of enabling the functioning of a league.

Thus, balancing the potential anticompetitive impact associated with business collaborations against the required collaborative framework of leagues, creates potential gray areas where antitrust risks may arise. This is particularly relevant to nascent professional sports, like cricket, in the U.S.

More specifically, antitrust risks in all sports are present in a variety of contexts, including, for example, the sanctioning and formation of leagues, selecting venues for matches, licensing and broadcasting deals, and restrictions on team and player mobility. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but it is designed to give you a sense of the types of issues that could result in antitrust risk.

League Operations and Regulations

As cricket continues to grow in popularity in the U.S., it is prudent for entities contemplating forming new leagues to consider these potential antitrust risks.

Operating a league may invite antitrust scrutiny because leagues operate as collective entities comprising multiple independent stakeholders, including teams that compete against one another.

While these leagues are essential for establishing a governing framework for the league and organizing matches, among other things, their structure can implicate antitrust issues.

For example, leagues often place limitations upon who may participate in a particular league, where teams can play matches, or the timing or conditions of athletes moving from one team to another. While such limitations may be justified for several reasons, they may still result in accusations of anticompetitive exclusionary conduct from rival leagues, nascent teams or enterprises seeking to participate in the league.

Antitrust claims can also arise in the formation of a league. For example in *American Cricket Premier League LLC v. USA Cricket* in 2019, USA Cricket was sued under the antitrust laws by a losing bidder when USA Cricket selected a partner to operate Major League Cricket in the U.S.[3]

That plaintiff accused USA Cricket of conspiring with the winning bidder to exclude it. However, the lawsuit was dismissed by a federal judge who found that the plaintiff, as the losing bidder, had not alleged a viable claim, and that USA Cricket had the right to select a partner to work with to develop the league.

Antitrust risk can be faced by existing leagues as well. For example, in 2019 in *Relevant Sports LLC v. U.S. Soccer Federation Inc.*, FIFA and the U.S. Soccer Federation faced an antitrust complaint in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York over their alleged adoption and enforcement of a market-division policy that prohibited staging unsanctioned official season matches off home soil.[4]

The plaintiff in that lawsuit, an international sporting events promoter, alleged that the USSF's policy was anticompetitive because it thwarted efforts by entities like the plaintiff to organize foreign league professional soccer matches in the U.S., in favor of USSF's preferred promotion entity.

The plaintiff ultimately settled the lawsuit with FIFA in October 2024 and with USSF in April.

Similarly, in 2023 in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Tennessee in *Fusion Elite All Stars v. Varsity Brands LLC*, the Varsity Cheer League settled with a class of plaintiffs who alleged that Varsity unlawfully acquired and maintained monopoly power in the competitive cheerleading market by impairing and buying up potential rivals and imposing exclusionary agreements on venues.[5]

A successful league can also face claims of attempted monopolization by new rival leagues. For example, in *North American Soccer League LLC v. U.S. Soccer Federation Inc.*, USSF and MLS were accused of colluding to exclude the upstart North American Soccer League.[6] NASL argued that the USSF's decision to grant Division I status only to MLS amounted to an unlawful conspiracy to monopolize an alleged market for top-tier men's professional soccer leagues in the U.S. and Canada.

A jury, however, rejected NASL's claims. NASL moved for a new trial arguing inter alia that the verdict form and jury instructions were improper, prejudicial evidence tainted the verdict, and the court made erroneous evidentiary rulings. The court denied NASL's motion for a new trial, and NASL subsequently appealed the lower court's decision to the Second Circuit.[7]

Broadcasting

As new cricket leagues and teams emerge in the U.S., it is important to consider potential antitrust risks associated with broadcasting rights. Sports leagues and television networks or streaming platforms

often negotiate exclusive broadcasting contracts, which can result in accusations of limiting consumer choice, creating barriers to entry for competing media providers, and/or increasing costs for consumers to access content.

For example, in the June 27, 2024, decision *In re: National Football League's Sunday Ticket Antitrust Litigation*, a jury in the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California found that the NFL had constrained consumer choice and inflated prices because its Sunday Ticket subscription service was offered only through a satellite provider and required subscribers to pay for a package that included all teams rather than allow subscribers to pay only for teams of their choosing.[8]

In the 2012 *Laumann v. National Hockey League* case, the National Hockey League faced a similar complaint in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, which it ultimately settled in 2015, after agreeing to offer an unbundled package of games at discounted prices.[9]

Licensing

The growing popularity of cricket in the U.S. presents an exciting opportunity for new sponsorship, branding and licensing deals. But merchandising, licensing or sponsorship agreements may present risks, especially if the agreements contain exclusivity terms, and/or are otherwise perceived as restricting other businesses from accessing opportunities.

Licensing team merchandise can raise potential antitrust concerns, particularly when it involves exclusive agreements, collusion or practices that restrict competition. For example, in *American Needle Inc. v. National Football League* in 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the NFL's exclusive 10-year licensing deal with Reebok International Ltd. was an unlawful conspiracy among the teams to restrict other vendors' ability to obtain licenses for the teams' intellectual property.[10]

Agreements among teams to set price floors for licensed merchandise or agreements not to license team branding to a specific manufacturer can similarly amount to unlawful price-fixing and boycotting.

Player Labor and Mobility

Cricket leagues and teams should also be aware of the antitrust risks associated with alleged mobility restraints on players and/or teams, including draft systems, salary caps, free agency restrictions and franchise relocation rules. While these mechanisms are generally intended to promote the competitive balance within a league, they can be challenged as anticompetitive practices if they limit the ability of players to negotiate their terms freely.

The Supreme Court determined, in the 1945 decision in *Associated Press v. U.S.*, that rules imposing duties and restrictions on the conduct of members can violate the antitrust laws.[11] Other courts have done so as well.

For example, in 1984., the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in *Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Commission v. National Football League* struck down an NFL rule that required approval from three-fourths of team owners before a team could move cities [12]

In *Le v. Zuffa LLC* in 2014, various mixed martial arts fighters filed an antitrust claim in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California against the Ultimate Fighting Championship league, alleging, in part, suppression of fighters' earnings through exclusionary contracting terms. [13] The UFC settled

the lawsuit earlier this year.

Conclusion

As cricket continues to grow and expand in the U.S., it is prudent for leagues, teams and enterprises operating in adjacent spaces to consider the potential antitrust risk associated with their business decisions.

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[1] See <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-history-of-cricket-in-the-united-states-132185661/> and <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/sport/cricket/t20-world-cup-analysis-the-iccs-calculated-risk-behind-cricket's-great-american-bash/news-story/08aec59a13e370b0c697e4673a7ddd22>.

[2] See <https://www.globaldata.com/media/sport/2024-icc-mens-t20-world-cup-generates-estimated-61-million-sponsorship-revenue-reveals-globaldata/>.

[3] American Cricket Premier League, LLC v. USA Cricket et al., No. 1:19-cv-01521 (Colo.).

[4] Relevant Sports LLC v. US Soccer Fed'n Inc., No. 19-cv-08359 (S.D.N.Y.).

[5] Fusion Elite All Stars v. Varsity Brands LLC, No. 20-cv-02600 (W.D. Tenn.).

[6] N. Am. Soccer League LLC v. US Soccer Fed'n Inc., No. 17-cv-05495 (E.D.N.Y.).

[7] N. Am. Soccer League, LLC v. US Soccer Fed'n, Inc., No. 25-1225 (2d Circ.).

[8] In re Nat'l Football League's Sunday Ticket Antitrust Litig., No. 15-ml-02668 (C.D. Cal.).

[9] Laumann v. Nat'l Hockey League, No. 12-cv-1817 (S.D.N.Y.).

[10] Am. Needle Inc. v. Nat'l Football League, 560 U.S. 183 (2010).

[11] Associated Press v. United States, 326 U.S. 1 (1945).

[12] Los Angeles Mem'l Coliseum Comm'n v. Nat'l Football League, 726 F.2d 1381 (9th Cir. 1984).

[13] Le v. Zuffa LLC, No. 14-cv-05484 (N.D. Cal.).