



DESPINA MAVROMATI

BianchiSchwald LLC

12, avenue des Toises, P.O. Box 5410, Lausanne, 1002, Vaud, Switzerland

Tel: +41 58 220 36 70

despina.mavromati@bianchischwald.ch

Dr. Despina Mavromati is a Swiss and Greek attorney with the Swiss law firm BianchiSchwald and has extensive experience in international sports law and arbitration, representing clubs, athletes and federations in international arbitration and court proceedings. Despina has acted as counsel, expert or arbitrator in numerous sports-related disputes in many jurisdictions, involving contractual, governance, doping-related and other ethics/disciplinary matters. A former managing counsel of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), Despina sits on various tribunals of international federations (including the UEFA Appeals Body, World Athletics and Gymnastics Ethics Foundation Disciplinary Tribunal) and teaches sports arbitration and sports contracts at the University of Lausanne.

What excites you most about the future of sports law practice?

Sports law is an ever-growing and interdisciplinary field of law. I am drawn to the diversity of issues included within the definition of “sports law”, which vary from purely contractual to media to doping-related, but also include disciplinary and human rights issues. I am also excited about the rapidly evolving sports governance ecosystem with its unique rules and structure.

What makes BianchiSchwald stand out from its competitors in the market?

BianchiSchwald is a mid-sized Swiss law firm that offers a wide range of legal services to its clients. With offices in Zurich, Bern, Lausanne and Geneva, our sports law team is strategically located in the Olympic capital and offers top-notch services whenever sports organisations or other stakeholders require legal assistance in virtually any sector —integrity, disciplinary, governance, anti-doping, regulation, contracts, IP, employment, tax, investigations, or finance. BianchiSchwald therefore blends true sports law expertise and specialisation with full-service legal advice.

Do you think international sporting events will continue to try and prevent athlete activism? Does there need to be reform in this area?

Sporting event organisers enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy in terms of setting up the conditions of athletes participating in their events. Athlete activism as a form of freedom of expression finds its limits in the organisers’ right to organise events in a smooth and safe manner. Striking a fair balance between the two should be the sought

objective, with rules allowing for athlete activism so long as there is no interference with the secure and good organisation of the events.

Given a perceived rise in international “sportswashing”, can and should there be greater human rights due diligence in awarding hosting rights in different sports? How could this be implemented and enforced?

Following recent scandals, there is an increasing pressure on international sports federations and the Olympic movement to improve their sports governance—including human rights due diligence in awarding hosting rights in different sports. Implementation and enforcement of such human rights due diligence rules is not an easy task, also given the wide autonomy of Olympic sports federations under Swiss law. Apart from a robust regulatory framework, it is important to increase the accountability of sports federations, also through the delegation of some investigation and dispute-resolution powers to independent agencies and tribunals.

What are some of the greatest challenges currently faced by athletes you represent, and how can they be best addressed?

The inherent inequality in bargaining power between athletes and sports federations or event organisers is a problem but also the natural consequence of the commercialisation of global sport. Even though each sport belongs to its athletes, it is also true that the large federations ensure an audience and bring a large revenue stream into sport. It is definitely a symbiotic relationship where both sides need the other to survive. However, this inequality is particularly reflected in the drafting of regulations and in the disputes between athletes and their respective federations. This shows up most clearly in doping cases, where athletes are much less equipped than their federations to challenge a ban.

How do your roles at various tribunals and sports governing bodies enhance the knowledge and experience you bring to practice?

These roles are definitely complementary to my practice, shaping the way I think and argue about a given case as a practicing lawyer. Even though I have wide experience as an arbitrator sitting on the tribunals of some of the biggest international sports federations, including the UEFA Appeals Body, learning from the different procedures never ceases. My experience as the chair of the ethics and disciplinary tribunal of the International Weightlifting Federation gave me the opportunity to come across several important governance issues, ranging from the drafting of disciplinary and ethics rules to effective enforcement of those rules, and the need for independent investigations and adjudication. By deepening my knowledge on the governance of sports institutions, I can better understand the specificities of each institution, including those of its judicial arm, and build strategies accordingly.

What advice would you give to younger practitioners hoping to one day be in your position?

Knowledge of the wider sports administration structure and regulatory framework along with sufficient flexibility and readiness to represent athletes or federations in urgent disciplinary, doping or selection matters. An understanding of sports arbitration is also necessary, since most sports-related disputes are typically resolved through arbitration. Similarly, the knowledge of Swiss law is also extremely useful due to the fact that most international federations have their seat in Switzerland and there are numerous links to Swiss law in their respective regulations, for instance the FIFA Rules on the Status and Transfer of Players (RSTP).

You have enjoyed a very distinguished career so far. How do you see your practice developing over the next five years?

In the last years that I have practiced as an arbitrator and counsel, I was privileged to have an international portfolio of clients, from North America, South America, Australia, Asia, Africa, and many European countries. However, since I work in an international context and notwithstanding their cultural differences, the cases that come to me share

some common characteristics: most cases are brought before a tribunal based in Switzerland, either the CAS or the internal tribunals. In this respect, Swiss law plays a predominant role in sports law internationally, both from a procedural perspective but also regarding the merits of, for example, contractual disputes or the interpretation of rules under Swiss law. Over the next five years I will concentrate on advising clients regarding the creation of fair and balanced policies and best practices, as well as teaching up-and-coming lawyers about how they can impact the sports industry.

WWL says: *Despina Mavromati is a leading name in sports law according to market commentators, who describe her as “an amazing lawyer with immense knowledge and expertise when it comes to disputes before the CAS”.*