



POLICY PAPER
ON STRENGTHENING LEGAL GROUNDS FOR MANDATORY MEDICAL SCREENING
IN SPORTS AND TRAINING PROCESS AND IMPROVING NATIONAL LEGISLATION

The investigations and analyses carried out under the Azerbaijan Ombudsman's independent monitoring mechanism (IMM) revealed the necessity of improving the current mechanisms and applicable legislation to better protect the health and safety of athletes, particularly young athletes in sports, including high-risk and combat sports.

For instance, 16-year-old athlete Ali Rushanov (b.2010), a resident of Mingachevir city and bronze medalist in boxing at the third CIS games held in Azerbaijan in September 2025, fainted during a sparring session on 14 February 2026, leading to his death, which has brought the effectiveness and adequacy of medical safety in sports into sharp focus.

According to the official information, this incident occurred as noted above in 2026 during the preparation for the Azerbaijan Youth Championship, when two teen athletes in boxing, Vagif Mahammadli and Ali Rushanov, held a practice sparring session initiated by both of their trainers. During the session, which lasted 6 or 7 minutes, A. Rushanov lost his consciousness and fell down. The emergency medical team immediately treated the athlete and transported him to the Baku City Clinical Research Center No. 1.

Notwithstanding, the medical assistance rendered by the doctors, he could not be saved. Azerbaijan Boxing Federation also confirmed the information, stating that the athlete was preparing for the upcoming national championship and the fatal incident has happened during the sparring session.

This incident creates a number of questions regarding the effectiveness of medical control mechanisms, accountability of sport federations and organizers, and quality and adequacy of medical screenings in all stages of sportive activities, including the pre-competition preparation phase, throughout sparring, training sessions and competitions themselves, as well as the adoption of a systematic legal and institutional approach, which has taken on new urgency.

In this regard, the death of A. Rushanov should not be viewed only as a fatal incident, but rather a critical signal that necessitates the implementation of significant legal and institutional measures for the assessment and strengthening of the effectiveness of existing mechanisms.

Sport activities, particularly combat disciplines, exert high intensive physical and neurological stress on the human body.

In contact sports such as boxing, mixed martial arts (MMA), kickboxing, wrestling, and others, repeated head and neck microtrauma, including subclinical concussions and spinal injuries can cause irreversible damage that often remains asymptomatic until revealed by high-resolution imaging.

In this regard, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is of paramount importance.

As a noninvasive, radiation-free modality, MRI accurately detects structural changes in the brain, spinal cord, ligaments, and soft tissues.

Crucially in combat sports, conditions such as occult intracranial hemorrhages, microhemorrhages, early signs of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), and cervical disc degeneration can only be identified via MRI. Standard clinical examinations and routine

medical certificates are wholly inadequate to detect these risks.

Furthermore, a significant proportion of sudden cardiac deaths among athletes stems from cardiovascular pathologies. Conditions such as hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, arrhythmias, congenital heart defects, and other structural abnormalities can remain asymptomatic for extended periods.

Only comprehensive cardiological evaluations, including electrocardiograms (ECG), echocardiograms (ECHO), and stress testing where necessary can detect these pathologies at an early stage.

Consequently, the concept of a medical examination cannot be limited to a mere formal health clearance; it must encompass a complete diagnostic assessment.

International practice demonstrates that comprehensive, multi-tiered medical screening mechanisms prior to cleared participation in competitions and intensive training have long been systematically implemented as an indispensable element of sports safety.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) establishes the mandatory implementation of the 'pre-participation medical examination' (PPE) as a fundamental principle for athlete health protection.

This framework entails a thorough medical assessment of an athlete's physical and psychophysiological condition encompassing complex evaluations of the cardiovascular system, neurological status, respiratory system, musculoskeletal apparatus, and other vital organs with the primary objective of proactively identifying and mitigating life-threatening risks during athletic activity.

International medical safety standards in combat sports are even more stringent and detailed.

The 'AIBA 2020 medical rules for ringside doctors,' approved by the international boxing association, establishes concrete and mandatory procedures regarding the medical examination and competition clearance of athletes.

Under clause 8.5.5 of those rules, a boxer who has sustained multiple head blows or suffered several consecutive knockdowns is deemed to be at high risk. In such cases, by decision of the medical jury, the athlete is suspended from boxing and sparring activities for a minimum of 30 days. Upon the expiration of this suspension period, the athlete's clearance to resume competition or sparring is contingent upon undergoing specialized medical evaluations, including a brain computed tomography (CT) or MRI scan and obtaining an official medical clearance from a physician or neurologist declaring the athlete fit to return.

This norm clearly confirms that MRI and other high-precision diagnostic examinations are internationally recognized as necessary and mandatory medical tools for safeguarding athlete health and safety.

Furthermore, under clause 10.1 of the 'AIBA medical rules,' the annual mandatory medical examination for boxers must be comprehensive in nature. It mandates analyzing family and medical histories, assessing prior surgical interventions, conducting full evaluations of cardiovascular, respiratory, and neurological functions, checking vital signs such as blood

pressure, heart rate, and oxygen saturation performing ophthalmic exams, assessing neuropsychological and neurocognitive changes, and conducting laboratory tests for HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), hepatitis, and other infectious diseases.

Only when an athlete's health status is deemed fully safe based on the results of these examinations is the 'fit-to-box' status granted. Without this status, allowing an athlete to participate in competition or sparring is strictly prohibited.

Furthermore, under clause 10.2 of those rules, presenting an additional medical certificate prior to competition clearance is mandatory. This medical certificate is given to prevent athletes from competing while suffering from recent injuries, illnesses, or concussions. The validity of this document is restricted and must be officially endorsed by a physician in the athlete's medical record. This approach demonstrates that international sports organizations view medical safety not as a mere formality, but as a multi-tiered, systemic process grounded in science and law.

Thus, analysis of international practice demonstrates that in the modern sports system, clearing athletes for competition and sparring is contingent upon comprehensive medical screening, including MRI and other high-precision diagnostic evaluations where necessary rather than a mere formal medical certificate.

The primary objective of this approach is the early detection of underlying pathologies that pose potential risks to athlete health and safety, thereby preventing severe or fatal outcomes during athletic activity.

Furthermore, medical regulations established by FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) and UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) mandate regular cardiovascular screenings for professional football players. Designed to mitigate sudden cardiac death, these measures have been formally enacted into law across numerous jurisdictions.

In Azerbaijan, the legal framework governing sports safety is established by the laws of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On physical education and sports' and 'On protection of public health,' alongside regulatory legal acts adopted to enforce these laws.

Specifically, Article 51 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On physical education and sports' establishes the legal foundation for the medical provision of individuals engaged in sports, defining the obligations of the state, sports organizers, and other relevant entities in this domain. Pursuant to Article 51.1 of the said law, medical provision for sports participants entails regular medical monitoring of their health (51.1.1), evaluating whether physical exertion corresponds to their health status (51.1.2), implementing preventive measures, treating injuries and illnesses, and providing medical rehabilitation (51.1.3), as well as carrying out medical interventions aimed at health recovery (51.1.4).

These statutory provisions demonstrate that safeguarding athlete health is established at the legislative level as a priority legal and institutional duty.

Furthermore, pursuant to Article 51.2 of the aforementioned law, sports event organizers must not permit individuals who have not undergone medical examination, or who have been deemed medically unfit as a result of such examination, to participate in competitions and

other sports events.

This provision confirms that evaluating an athlete's medical condition is not a mere formal procedure, but rather functions as a mandatory legal prerequisite for their participation in sports activities. Furthermore, under Article 51.4 of the law, individuals engaged in sports must undergo mandatory initial, periodic, and pre-competition medical examinations, and only those who pass these screenings acquire the right to participate in competitions. This clause explicitly establishes medical clearance as an indispensable legal component of athletic activity.

Pursuant to Article 51.5 of the same law, authority to suspend sports competitions and events lacking proper medical support, as well as authority to remove unexamined individuals from training and athletic processes is vested in the relevant executive body, namely the Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan. This provision underscores the state's role as the primary subject overseeing medical safety in sports.

Furthermore, the 'Rules on material-technical, scientific-methodological, medical-biological, medical, and anti-doping provision of national teams' approved by Cabinet of Ministers' Decision No. 198 on December 24, 2009, establishes more concrete and systematic mechanisms regarding the medical provision of athletes.

Under clause 4.4 of the said rules, medical provision for national team members entails comprehensive medical examinations, evaluating their physical development level, health status, and functional indicators, as well as executing medical treatment and health monitoring measures.

Pursuant to clause 4.5 of the said rules, the objective of a comprehensive medical examination is to establish the level of an athlete's functional capacities, detect illnesses and pathological conditions that may impede the training process, identify risk factors, evaluate the dynamics of physical development, and make appropriate adjustments to the athlete's individualized training plan based on the acquired medical data.

The results of these examinations are officially recorded in the athlete's medical documentation, serving as the legal and medical basis for issuing a decision on their clearance for athletic activity.

However, while the existing regulatory framework establishes the general principles and mandatory nature of athlete medical examinations, it does not explicitly mandate MRI, CT scans, advanced cardiological screenings, neurological imaging, or other high-precision diagnostic procedures across all sports, particularly for high-risk combat sports.

In practice, medical evaluations are frequently limited to routine medical certificates and basic clinical examinations. These standard checks are wholly insufficient for the timely detection of underlying pathological conditions that may exist within the brain, cardiovascular system, and other vital organs.

Particularly in combat sports, subclinical brain traumas resulting from repetitive impacts to the head and neck, cardiac arrhythmias, and other life-threatening conditions can only be reliably diagnosed through MRI and advanced instrumental diagnostics.

Thus, while existing legislation establishes the legal foundation for athlete medical care,

enacting explicit statutory provisions that mandate MRI and comprehensive instrumental medical examinations taking into account modern medical technology and international safety standards, especially for combat and other high-risk sports is imperative to safeguard athletes' right to health and ensure the safety of athletic activity.

Inadequate medical supervision regarding the protection of athletes' right to health may give rise to civil, administrative, or criminal liability in the future.

This issue is not confined strictly to professional sports. In recent years, high-intensity workouts have become widespread in fitness centers and gyms. Heavy weightlifting, crossfit, and other intensive training programs pose severe risks to the cardiovascular system and the musculoskeletal apparatus. The absence of a pre-participation medical screening mechanism in this domain creates potential hazards.

In light of the above, and to enhance national legislation, we deem it expedient to introduce a dedicated article to the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Physical education and sports' to address and regulate this issue.

This proposed article should mandate that athletes undergo compulsory, comprehensive medical examinations prior to competition clearance across all sports. For combat and other high-risk sports, it should explicitly require additional mandatory screenings, including brain and cervical spine MRI, advanced cardiological evaluations, and neurological clearance. Furthermore, an interim medical monitoring mechanism must be established to assess athlete health during sparring and intensive training phases.

In addition, a unified electronic medical oversight registry for sports federations should be established to create a centralized and traceable system for medical records. This will strengthen both transparency and accountability mechanisms.

In conclusion, medical examination in sports is not a mere formal procedure, but an indispensable safety measure aimed at protecting the fundamental right to health.

The death of young boxer A. Rushanov due to injuries sustained during pre-competition training further underscores that in the absence of systematic, normatively grounded preventive medical measures applied in international practice, severe risks will persist regarding the safeguarding of athletes', including children's right to health and physical safety.

International experience proves that mandatory and expanded medical screening mechanisms play a vital role in reducing sudden cardiac deaths and severe trauma in sports. For this reason, codifying compulsory requirements for MRI and other diagnostic examinations, specifically for combat sports as a direct statutory provision in the national legal system is indispensable.