

Sports Law & Sports Business (Part 2)

Regulatory Overview on Match-Fixing and Sports Betting in Japan

In this column, we provide an overview on how match-fixing and sports betting are regulated in Japan.

1. Match-Fixing

(1) Premise

Yaocho, or match-fixing, is defined as "a match, such as sumo or other sports, in which one party has agreed in advance to lose, and the match is fought for appearances only. A fixed match." (Kojien Dictionary [7th Edition]) As discussed later, match-fixing by athletes has taken place in the world of sports, but there is no law in Japan that comprehensively regulates the act of match-fixing in sports itself.

Since match-fixing is typically linked to gambling conducted on the relevant sporting match, whether such conduct constitutes an offense - for example, gambling under Article 185 of the Penal Code - must, in principle, be determined individually under the Penal Code.

(2) Government-Sanctioned Wagering Competitions and Match-Fixing

Match-fixing in government-sanctioned wagering competitions (horse racing, bicycle racing, boat racing, and auto racing) is subject to severe penalties under specific laws. For example, Article 31, item 3 of the Horse Racing Act provides that a jockey who, in order to obtain a financial benefit for himself or another person in connection with a race, fails to have the horse exert its full ability in the race is subject to imprisonment for up to three years or a fine of up to JPY 3 million.

With regard to horse racing, a separate system has been established, in addition to the above-mentioned law, to prevent match-fixing. A distinctive feature is the existence of the Jockeys' Quarters. Jockeys must enter the Jockeys' Quarters by 9:00 p.m. on the day before the race. The purpose of entering the Jockeys' Quarters is to ensure that jockeys remain in peak physical condition and to prevent them from coming into contact with outsiders before a race. For this reason, the use of mobile phones and other communication devices is restricted once after entry, and a jockey who violates this rule will be subject to a suspension from training or horse riding for a specified period or will be fined (see Article 147, Paragraph 19 of "The Japan Racing Association Rules of Racing"). With the spread of smartphones, etc., cases of improper use of communication devices within the Jockeys' Quarters have repeatedly become a problem in recent years. Most recently, on May 8, 2026, the Hyogo Urban Keiba imposed a 60-day horse riding suspension on seven jockeys for the improper use of communication devices¹. In an age where smartphones, etc. make it easy to contact others, raising jockeys' awareness of and compliance with the rules on the use of communication devices within the Jockeys' Quarters is considered important as a means of preventing match-fixing.

¹ <https://www.sonoda-himeji.jp/news/detail/2618>

In government-sanctioned wagering competitions other than horse racing, systems similar to the Jockeys' Quarters described above have been established, and measures to prevent match-fixing are in place.

(3) Non-Government Sanctioned Wagering Competitions and Match-Fixing

In sports other than the government-sanctioned wagering competitions, match-fixing is typically regulated by the rules of each sport's National Federations (NF) or professional sports organization, and a violation of those rules will result in penalties such as fines or suspension imposed by the federation or organization concerned.

For example, in professional baseball, "acts of throwing a game, such as deliberately losing or attempting to lose, or failing to make one's best effort to win," are classified as misconduct, and players and others who commit such misconduct are subject to permanent disqualification and other sanctions (Article 177, Paragraph 1, item 1 of the Nippon Professional Baseball Agreement 2025). Similarly, the J.League prohibits players and others from involvement in improper conduct that affects the outcome of a match, with violations subject to a fine of up to JPY 50 million (J.League Regulations, Article 89, Paragraph 1, item 7, and Article 151, item 4).

(4) Efforts to Control Match-Fixing

Match-fixing scandals have arisen repeatedly in the world of sports, past examples including the "Black Mist Scandal," a series of match-fixing incidents involving professional baseball personnel, and the sumo match-fixing scandal uncovered in 2011. Match-fixing is nothing other than a betrayal of fans, undermining trust in the sport in which it occurs. In fact, when the sumo match-fixing scandal came to light in 2011, the decline in sumo's popularity became a major topic of discussion. In light of this history, Japan's sports organizations are expected to maintain a rigorous response to match-fixing going forward.

This is not limited to professional sports - amateur competitions such as high school baseball are increasingly being made the subject of betting overseas, heightening the risk of minors and amateur athletes being solicited into match-fixing. Athletes themselves must, of course, stay vigilant, but competition organizers and coaches are also required to conduct ongoing awareness raising and education so that athletes do not get caught up in match-fixing.

The Third Sport Basic Plan², established by the Japan Sports Agency in 2022, designated securing sports integrity - encompassing the strengthening of sports organizations' governance and the thorough implementation of compliance through initiatives such as promoting the spread of the Governance Code for sports organizations - as one of the 12 measures to be addressed comprehensively and systematically over the next five years, and the formulation and revision of such governance codes have in fact advanced accordingly³. Such nationwide institutional reforms are believed to play a certain role in preventing match-fixing.

2. Sports Betting

(1) Premise

Sports betting refers to a form of gambling in which money is wagered on the outcome of a match or on particular plays within it; while it is legal in some countries overseas, engaging in sports betting in Japan is illegal, as it falls under the crime of gambling (Article 185 of the Penal Code), the crime of lottery offenses (Article 187 of the Penal Code), and similar provisions.

That said, government-sanctioned wagering competitions and the sports lottery are permitted to operate without falling under these offenses, provided that certain procedures are followed.

² https://www.mext.go.jp/sports/b_menu/sports/mcatetop01/list/1372413_00001.htm

³ https://www.mext.go.jp/sports/b_menu/sports/mcatetop10/list/1412105.htm

(2) Handling of Government-Sanctioned Wagering Competitions

Government-sanctioned wagering competitions are permitted by central organizations, prefectures, and municipalities under each of the respective government-sanctioned wagering competition laws (the Horse Racing Act, the Bicycle Racing Act, the Motorboat Racing Act, and the Auto Racing Act), and are positioned as revenue-generating businesses specially authorized under these laws for the purpose of promoting the public interest and contributing to local government finances. The enabling laws governing each type of government-sanctioned wagering competition impose strict restrictions on the operation of these businesses; examples of these restrictions are as follows:

- Setting the payout rate
- Restrictions on venues and the number of events
- A registration system for athlete and referees, the establishment of rules on operational standards and methods, government guidance and supervision, and strict penalties for anticipated wrongdoing, etc.

In addition, for local governments that conduct government-sanctioned wagering competitions, matters such as the establishment of racing venues, standards for the conduct of competitions (including the number of competitions held and the value of betting tickets), the responsibilities and authority of the organizer to maintain order on the premises, and structural standards for venues are set out in detail in the governing statutes and the ministerial orders issued under them. Local governments establish their own competition implementation ordinances (which set out matters necessary for government-sanctioned wagering competitions, such as the dates and times of competition, admission fee amounts, the types of betting tickets sold, and measures for maintaining order at such venues) based on the respective governing laws for each such competition.

In this way, government-sanctioned wagering competitions are subject to strict standards, based on laws and regulations, to ensure transparency.

(3) Handling of Sports Promotion Vote (Sports Lottery)

In addition to government-sanctioned wagering competitions, the Sports Promotion Vote (Sports Lottery, such as WINNER, toto, and BIG) is another form of legal sports betting. Under this system, the national government itself operates as the bookmaker, running a scheme in which participants wager on the result of designated football and basketball matches⁴, or on each team's point totals, and receive a payout if their prediction is correct. It is operated and administered by the Japan Sport Council, an Incorporated Administrative Agency (Article 3 of the Act on Carrying Out, etc. Sports Promotion Vote), and under the scheme, 50% of sales revenue, inclusive of necessary expenses, accrues as national revenue (Article 13 of the same Act).

In keeping with the purpose of the Act - to contribute to the promotion of sports (Article 1 of the same Act) - these funds are put to use for the promotion of sports. The actual use of these funds is disclosed on the Japan Sports Agency's website⁵; in FY 2024, more than JPY 16 billion in subsidies were granted, funding a wide range of initiatives such as grants for the development of local sports facilities, grants for sports organizations' activities, and grants for hosting international competitions. The recent upward trend in the number of Japanese medalists at international competitions such as the Olympics is thought to be attributable, in part, to the expansion of support for a wide range of sports as this funding has grown.

On the other hand, the Act is ultimately a special exception to the Penal Code, and the Sports Lottery's fundamental nature as a lottery under the Penal Code remains unchanged. For this reason, the purchase of lottery tickets by persons under the age of 19 is prohibited (Article 9 of the same Act), and players, managers, coaches, and referees registered with the J.League or B.League are likewise prohibited from purchasing or receiving tickets relating to the sport in which they are registered (Article 10, Paragraph 2 of the same Act). There was also a period when discussions took place over whether to expand the scope to include professional baseball games, with the aim of securing funding for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, but negative views prevailed and the expansion

⁴ The scheme covers the Japan Professional Football League's (J.League) league matches, the League Cup, the playoffs, and the Emperor's Cup (limited to matches between J.League teams), as well as the Japan Professional Basketball League's (B.League) league matches, the championship, and the playoffs.

⁵ https://www.mext.go.jp/sports/b_menu/sports/mcatetopo1/list/detail/1411476.htm

was ultimately not introduced. However, at the professional baseball owners' meeting held on July 16, 2026, the possibility of including professional baseball in the Sports Lottery was once again discussed⁶. In baseball as well, with the number of participants on the decline, the sport is considered to have reached the point where making full use of the Sports Lottery, as a way of securing funds for baseball promotion projects, warrants serious consideration.

(4) Other Types of Sports Betting

As described above, the circumstances under which sports betting/gambling become legal are strictly defined; in all other cases, such activities constitute gambling or lottery-related offenses. In recent years, wagering cash bets, etc. online on the outcomes of sports and other events (so-called "online casinos") has become a social problem, with a series of cases in which individuals who accessed online casino sites operated overseas from within Japan have been arrested.

Even if the online casino site itself is based overseas, so long as the person engaging in the conduct is located within Japan, the act is deemed to have taken place in Japan and is treated as gambling conducted domestically, thereby constituting the crime of gambling, etc. under the Penal Code. Even where an online casino site is operated using an overseas server, if it is determined that the service is, in substance, being provided to residents of Japan, this is considered to constitute running a gambling place for the purpose of profit (Article 186, Paragraph 2 of the Penal Code).

In light of the recent proliferation on the internet of content such as Japanese-language online casino sites targeting Japanese users and advertisements directing users to such sites, the government, too, has been stepping up measures to curb the spread of this kind of online casino-related content. In September 2025, the amended Basic Act on Measures Against Gambling Addiction was enacted, prohibiting the making available of websites or programs (apps) that provide platforms for illegal online gambling, including online casinos, to unspecified persons within Japan, as well as the dissemination of content directing people toward illegal online gambling. The amendment also expressly established, as an obligation of the national and local governments, the duty to take measures to ensure thorough public awareness that online casinos are prohibited, through education and outreach activities in the home, schools, workplaces, and communities⁷. This is expected to lead to a decrease in the establishment and operation of online casino sites, as well as in the dissemination of related content through leech sites and social media, etc.

The police have likewise begun taking the investigation and crackdown on online casinos seriously, and in 2024, 279 people were arrested for gambling-related offenses committed online⁸.

Although this approach differs from that of many countries, where the private sector takes on a more direct role, it is thought to be contributing, to some degree, to the deterrence of sports betting within Japan.

Meanwhile, although discussions on legalizing sports betting in Japan have grown more active in recent years, given the statement made as of December 2025 by Diet member and Acting Chairman of the Parliamentary League for Sports Toshiaki Endo that Japan "will not engage in sports betting at all," future developments in Japan are expected to be pursued not through the kind of legalization of sports betting seen in other countries, but through a uniquely Japanese approach centered on expanding the Sports Lottery.

3. The Macolin Convention

(1) Overview

Japan has not yet signed or ratified The Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions (the Macolin Convention)⁹, which went into effect in 2019 with the aim of countering the manipulation of

⁶ <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZOOKC16AJCoW6A710C2000000/?msocid=3cce19363b7362f519290f913a5163be>

⁷ <https://www.gov-online.go.jp/article/202411/entry-6786.html>

⁸ <https://www.npa.go.jp/bureau/safetylife/hoan/onlinecasino/onlinecasino.html>

⁹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/macolin>

sports competitions in order to safeguard the ethics and fairness of sport, in accordance with the principle of the autonomy of sport.

The Macolin Convention serves to establish an international legal framework aimed at preventing the manipulation of sports competitions, particularly match-fixing and gambling-related fraud, and obligates States Parties to consider adopting the measures best suited to fight illegal sports betting operators, such as blocking access to such operators, blocking of financial transactions between illegal operators and consumers, prohibiting advertising, and raising consumer awareness of the associated risks (Article 11 of the Macolin Convention).

In fact, States Parties such as France, Denmark, and Greece have implemented blocking measures against illegal sports betting pursuant to the Convention, achieving a certain degree of success in eliminating illegal operators.

(2) Outlook for the Future

Signing and ratifying the Macolin Convention could likewise serve as an effective measure for Japan in eliminating illegal operators conducting illegal sports betting.

As a recent development, on June 19, 2025, upon invitation from the Chairman of the Copenhagen Group, who is also the Council of Europe official responsible for the Macolin Convention, the Representative Director and the Head of International Affairs of the Council for Sports Ecosystem Promotion (C-SEP) participated in the biannual plenary meeting of the Copenhagen Group (a network that strengthens the establishment, operation, and development of national platforms in each country), engaging in exchanges and discussions with national platforms from other countries. Furthermore, at the request of the Council of Europe, Mr. Toshikazu Yamaguchi (Representative Director and President, The Yomiuri Shimbun Holdings) delivered a lecture on countermeasures against anti-social forces in Japanese professional baseball, further deepening this engagement¹⁰.

Amid growing concerns on the involvement of athletes and individuals in sports betting, etc., calls for the early signing and ratification of the Convention are growing in Japan as well, and discussions on the matter are ongoing. Going forward, Japan is expected to work in coordination with its partners and to actively pursue measures against sports betting and related issues, in step with other countries.

4. Summary

As described above, Japan has adopted a multifaceted approach to addressing match-fixing and sports betting.

Match-fixing is addressed strictly under laws and regulations as well as the rules of various sports organizations, and while legal frameworks such as government-sanctioned wagering competitions and the Sports Lottery have been established for sports betting, an equally strict approach, including through legislative amendments, is taken in all other contexts.

In addition, although Japan has not, at present, signed or ratified the Macolin Convention, it is believed that momentum toward a higher level of legal regulation is growing across society as a whole, driven by a series of past match-fixing scandals and heightened awareness of the problems posed by online casinos, including sports gambling.

Based on Japan's unique, multifaceted approach, it is important to continue maintaining the integrity of sports in Japan by expanding the legal framework in line with global standards.

¹⁰ https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/001036468.pdf

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