

World IPR Day 2026

IP and Sports: Ready, Set, Innovate!

Celebrated annually on April 26, World Intellectual Property Day highlights the crucial role of intellectual property in fostering innovation and creativity. In 2026, the focus is on trademarks and how important they are in the sports world. Trademarks help teams, leagues, and events build their identity, protect their brand, and earn value across countries. Big events like the Olympic Games and leagues like the UEFA Champions League rely on trademarks to keep their branding unique and protect their reputation.

They enable:

- Global merchandising and licensing
- Sponsorship and endorsement deals
- Protection against counterfeiting and ambush marketing

For athletes, trademarks go beyond logos; they encompass names, initials, signatures, and personal branding, transforming individuals into commercial entities.

Landmark Cases in International Sports Trademark Law

The following cases illustrate how courts across jurisdictions have addressed the complex intersection of personal reputation, pre-existing rights, and trademark registration in the world of sports.

Case	Jurisdiction	Core Issue	Legal Basis	Significance	Citation
Lionel Messi vs. EU Intellectual Property Office	Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU)	Registration of "MESSI" opposed due to similarity with earlier mark "MASSI"	Likelihood of confusion vs. global personal reputation	Average consumer associates "MESSI" with the footballer, not "MASSI," reputation can outweigh phonetic similarity in sports personal branding	Lionel Andrés Messi Cuccittini and JM Evé Hijos SRL v European Union Intellectual Property Office (C-449/18 P and C-474/18 P) EU:C:2020:722.
Neymar Jr. vs. EU Intellectual Property Office	EUIPO European Union	Registration of "BATMAN" & "SUPERMAN" for clothing opposed by DC Comics	Bad faith registration; exploiting pre-existing famous marks	Consumers universally associate Batman & Superman with DC Comics even top athletes cannot register marks tied to pre-existing famous IP	Carlos Moreira v European Union Intellectual Property Office.
Michael Jordan vs. Qiaodan Sports Co.	Supreme People's Court of China	Use of Chinese transliteration of "Jordan" with similar brand identity	Personality rights + trademark misappropriation	Use of Jordan's name in Chinese misled consumers about brand origin highlights intersection of trademark law and personality rights across borders.	Michael Jeffrey Jordan v. Trademark Review and Adjudication Board and Qiaodan Sports Co., Ltd. (2016) ZGFXZ No. 27, SPC

Emerging Challenges in Sports Trademarks

Digital infringement

Unauthorized streaming, counterfeit goods sold via online marketplaces, and social media misuse are rapidly outpacing traditional enforcement mechanisms.

Ambush marketing

Non-sponsors continue to exploit the goodwill of major events through associative advertising, bypassing official licensing frameworks.

Cross-border enforcement

Differing national standards for personality rights, bad-faith registration, and confusion likelihood create significant gaps in global trademark protection.

Conclusion

Trademarks are at the heart of modern sports, transforming teams, events, and athletes into globally recognized brands. International trademark law continues to evolve in response to the growing commercial power of sports. Protecting these rights ensures identity, economic value, and fairness in the global sports industry.