



Age Restrictions in Professional Soccer:

A Legal and Sports Analysis

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Professional soccer, besides being a sporting spectacle that impacts society, also forms a fully recognized work environment where players are workers with fundamental rights. In this context, several federations and leagues have implemented regulations that limit the participation of professional soccer players based on their age, aiming to promote the development of young talent. These measures have sparked a legal debate about their compatibility with the right to work, equality, and the prohibition of discrimination.

In Costa Rica, the Association of Professional Football Players (ASOJUPRO) reacted strongly to the directive from the Costa Rican Football Federation that restricted the signing of players over 28 years old in the Second Division. In letters sent to the Federation, clubs, and public institutions, ASOJUPRO reported that the measure violated the constitutional right to work, the principle of equality, and the prohibition of age discrimination, pointing out that *“limiting the number of players over 28 years old directly affects the professional development of dozens of players and restricts their chances of obtaining decent work.”* These communications reflect the union’s concern about what they consider a setback in the labor protection achieved by footballers.

The debate isn’t limited to Costa Rica. In Guatemala, the National Football Federation also approved in 2022 a regulation that imposed strict limits of age in the promotion divisions, which caused opposition from the Professional Footballers' Union (SIFUPGUA) and threats of labor lawsuits.

Thus, this article seeks to analyze the legal–labor impact of age restrictions in professional soccer, taking as a reference the complaints filed in Costa Rica and comparing them with similar experiences in Latin America. The aim is to reflect on the need to link sports policies with the protection of the labor rights of professional soccer players and to ensure that promoting young players does not turn into discriminatory practices against those who have already built a professional career in the sport.

The Case of Costa Rica

In July 2025, the Costa Rican Football Federation issued a guideline that restricted the hiring of players over 28 in the Second Division, with the intention of lowering the limit to 26 in later seasons. The Association of Professional Soccer Players (ASOJUPRO) reported the measure to the Federation, the Ombudsman, and the Ministry of Labor, arguing that it violated the right to work (Art. 56 of the Constitution), the principle of equality (Art. 33), and the prohibition of age discrimination (Labor Code) and still waiting for the response from the proper administrative process for next steps. For ASOJUPRO, these restrictions represented a setback in the labor protections that footballers had gained.

The Case of Guatemala

In Guatemala, the National Football Federation (FEDEFUT) set age limits in different divisions:

- **First Division:** maximum 35 years old, with three exceptions.
- **Second Division:** limit of 27 years old, with three reinforcements under 32.
- **Third Division:** limit of 22 years old.
- **National League:** no age limit, but with a requirement to accumulate minutes for players under 22.

The official justification was to promote generational turnover and prepare youth teams. However, players and unions criticized the measure for reducing job opportunities and creating discrimination, sparking a debate similar to the one in Costa Rica.

International perspective.

The Case of Chile

In Chile, the situation was different. The National Association of Professional Football (ANFP) established the requirement to accumulate minutes for U21 and U20 players, which indirectly affects the participation of experienced players. These situations show the tension between the regulatory autonomy of sports organizations and federations in countries against players' labor rights, which is an international phenomenon.

The reaction of the Professional Footballers' Union of Chile (SIFUP), was that imposing an age limit meant excluding many players who were older than the set age from the labor market, directly affecting their right to work.

In defense of the soccer players, the union filed the corresponding complaints with the government authorities and the Ministry of Labor. Likewise, the professional soccer players carried out a total work stoppage as a form of protest against the implementation of that restriction.

As a result of these actions and the firm stance taken by SIFUP, the parties reached a final agreement that eliminated the rule setting an age limit. Consequently, official tournaments are now held without age restrictions, ensuring that soccer players can continue their careers and compete on an equal footing, without age-based discrimination.

These situations aren't exclusive to the countries above (Costa Rica, Guatemala, Chile). In other countries of Latin America like Mexico and Argentina, such restrictions have also been discussed restrictions that limit professional soccer players based on age or require a minimum number of young players in matches. These measures were heavily criticized for their impact on freedom hiring and the right to work of experienced footballers.

That said, scientific studies like the Berkeley Study (2022), which published a report through Sport Analytics analyzing the best seasons of football players' careers in the five major European leagues, determined that professional footballers peak in performance around 28 years old. Age by itself is not a valid reason to prevent a player from competing, finishing contracts, or continuing their career. The analyzed restrictions do not pass the proportionality test, they

generate discrimination, reduce job opportunities, and ignore scientific evidence showing that many soccer players reach their peak performance around 28 years old.

Based on the above, we can say that it is not legally valid to set age limits that prevent football players from competing in professional tournaments. If such restrictions were strictly applied, internationally renowned players like Cristiano Ronaldo, Luka Modrić, or Keylor Navas would not have been able to participate in teams with such guidelines and, consequently, would miss out on the 2026 World Cup, despite their full physical and technical ability. This example shows that limitations based solely on age are an arbitrary measure that violates labor rights, such as the right to work, equal opportunities, and the prohibition of discrimination. Consequently, any professional sports regulation that conditions player participation solely on age contradicts the constitutional and labor principles that govern work relationships in professional soccer.

Legal Debate

The conflict centers on the tension between:

- **Regulatory autonomy of sports organizations**, which aim to provide spaces for young talent.
- **Fundamental labor rights of soccer players**, recognized in constitutions, labor codes, and international agreements.
- **Club hiring rights**, which aim to sign the best current talent to achieve their objectives.

The key question is *whether sports and commercial goals can justify differential treatment based solely on age*.

The challenge for sports organizations is to balance promoting youth talent with protecting labor rights, avoiding exclusionary measures, and adopting policies that encourage training without sacrificing equal opportunities. Incentives, development programs, youth

leagues, and transitional mechanisms in lower leagues are more balanced alternatives that do not violate fundamental rights.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of promoting young talent, balancing competitions, or generating commercial value are legitimate goals. But they do not automatically justify excluding, limiting, or harming the jobs prospects of soccer players over a certain age, as they show that age restrictions in professional football have significant labor and legal effects. While it is legitimate to encourage youth development, policies must be designed in a way that is compatible with the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and freedom to work. The challenge is to harmonize sporting objectives with the effective protection of human and labor rights, avoiding practices that are legally problematic and questionable from a sports perspective.

Age restrictions in professional soccer, when applied rigidly and without objective justification, constitute a form of discrimination inconsistent with the legal framework and the labor nature of the sport. Protecting professional soccer players requires that sports policies fully respect fundamental rights, ensuring that the search for new talent doesn't result in the unfair exclusion of those who have already built a career in Soccer.

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