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LEGAL ALERT

CAF Appeal Board Overturns AFCON 2025 Final Result

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March 2026

The 17 March 2026 decision of the Confederation of African Football (CAF) Appeal Board to overturn the African Cup of Nations (AFCON) 2025 final result between Morocco and Senegal may rank among the most extraordinary decisions in African football history and could represent a global first, where the result of a completed major continental final was reversed after the trophy had already been awarded. While disciplinary sanctions are not uncommon in football, the nullification of a final result raises significant legal and sporting implications. It should be noted, however, that the detailed decisions of the CAF Disciplinary Board and Appeal Board are not yet public, and this analysis is based on available press statements.

Background – The AFCON Final Incident

The AFCON final, played on 18 January 2026 between Morocco and Senegal, was thrown into controversy when Senegal players temporarily walked off the field in the dying minutes of the game for approximately 15 minutes in protest of the referee's decision to award Morocco a penalty shortly after Senegal had been denied what they believed to be a legitimate goal.

However, the Senegalese team eventually returned to the field to complete the match. In a dramatic twist, Brahim Diaz missed the resulting penalty for Morocco, and the match proceeded to extra time. Senegal ultimately secured a 1-0 victory through a well-executed finish by midfielder Pape Gueye and were initially crowned AFCON 2025 champions.

Proceedings before the CAF Disciplinary Board

Following the match, a complaint was lodged before the CAF Disciplinary Board by the Moroccan Football Federation (*Fédération Royale Marocaine de Football*), seeking, among other reliefs, the reversal in its favour of the match result on account of alleged breaches of Articles 82 and 84 of the Regulations of the CAF Africa Cup of Nations (CAF Regulations).

In summary, Articles 82 and 84 of the CAF Regulations provide that where a team withdraws from a match, refuses to continue play, or leaves the field without the referee's authorisation, it will be deemed to have forfeited the match, face elimination from the competition, and lose the match by a scoreline of 3-0, unless the opposing team had already secured a more favourable result at the time the match was interrupted.

On 28 January 2026, the CAF Disciplinary Board found that Senegal's temporary walk-off amounted to unsporting conduct warranting sanction and consequently imposed significant financial penalties of up to USD 715,000 collectively against individual players, officials, and the Senegalese Football Federation (*Fédération Sénégalaise de Football*). The Board also imposed financial sanctions of approximately USD 415,000 against Morocco arising from separate incidents of unsporting conduct involving players, officials, and ball boys.

However, given that the match was ultimately completed on the field of play, the Board held that there was no breach of Articles 82 and 84 of the CAF Regulations, and on that basis declined to overturn the sporting result.

In the absence of a detailed, reasoned decision by the Disciplinary Board, it is believed that this approach was influenced by the long-standing principle in sports governance that results achieved on the field of play should only be overturned in the clearest and most compelling circumstances.

CAF Appeal Board Decision

The matter did not end there. Morocco appealed the decision to the CAF Appeal Board, contending that the CAF Regulations mandated forfeiture once a team refused to continue play, even if only temporarily.

The CAF Appeal Board appears to have adopted a stricter interpretation of Articles 82 and 84 of the CAF Regulations, which govern match integrity and the consequences of misconduct affecting the continuation of play. The Board concluded that Senegal's temporary departure from the field amounted to a refusal to continue the match, albeit briefly, and therefore constituted a regulatory breach attracting the mandatory sanction of a 3-0 loss by forfeiture.

On that basis, the Appeal Board overturned the match result, stripped Senegal of the AFCON 2025 crown and awarded it to Morocco.

Key Legal Question – Was the Match Truly Abandoned?

The divergence between the two decisions may be explained by differing legal interpretations.

The Disciplinary Board appears to have adopted what may be described as a sporting reality approach, namely that while there may have been an intention to abandon the match, no actual abandonment occurred since the game was ultimately resumed and completed. Furthermore, the decisions by both the referee and Morocco to proceed with the match with the clear intention of concluding it on the field of play directly contradict any suggestion that the match had been abandoned.

One may also question whether Morocco would have pursued the breach complaint had Brahim Diaz converted his penalty and secured victory. The timing of the complaint may therefore be subject to scrutiny, particularly in assessing whether the alleged breach was treated as determinative in real time or only pursued following an unfavourable sporting outcome.

By contrast, the CAF Appeal Board appears to have adopted a strict compliance approach, holding that even a temporary refusal to continue play constituted a breach sufficient to trigger forfeiture, regardless of the match's eventual completion. The sanction may also have been intended to deter that kind of match disruption and unsporting conduct.

These represent two legitimate but competing approaches in sports jurisprudence: the protection of sporting results determined on the field versus strict enforcement of regulatory compliance. Arguments can be made either way.

Public Reaction and the Sporting Fairness Debate

Public reaction has largely favoured Senegal, particularly among observers who believe the team earned victory through its on-field performance.

A comparable precedent may be found in the 2019 CAF Champions League final between Espérance Sportive de Tunis of Tunisia and Wydad Athletic Club of Morocco, where Wydad players walked off the pitch in protest following a disputed refereeing decision relating to a disallowed goal. The victory was initially awarded to Espérance on the field of play after Wydad refused to continue. The CAF Executive Committee subsequently ordered a replay of the final, a decision which was later overturned by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). CAS ultimately upheld the on-field result, reinforcing the principle that sporting results determined on the field of play should only be disturbed in exceptional circumstances.

At the same time, CAF's sanctions against Morocco for separate misconduct suggest the disciplinary bodies recognised breaches on both sides. The debate, therefore, centres less on innocence and more on whether Senegal's conduct justified the ultimate sporting sanction imposed.

Ultimately, the Appeal Board appears to have treated the matter primarily as a question of regulatory compliance rather than sporting equity.

What Happens Next – Possible CAS Appeal

Senegal has indicated its intention to appeal the decision to CAS. Under the CAF Statutes, such an appeal must be filed within ten (10) days of notification of the Appeal Board's decision, unless otherwise provided. As the final appellate tribunal in international sports disputes, CAS will have the last word on the matter.

In determining the appeal, CAS will likely focus on whether Senegal's temporary walk-off constituted a withdrawal or refusal to continue play within the meaning of Articles 82 and 84, whether the subsequent completion of the match affected the legal consequences of that conduct, and whether the forfeiture of the title was a proportionate and mandatory sanction in the circumstances.

Conclusion

For now, Morocco stands as AFCON 2025 champion by virtue of the CAF Appeal Board decision. However, the final determination of the dispute will ultimately lie with CAS if Senegal proceeds with an appeal.

Regardless of the eventual outcome, this case may become an important reference point in African and international football jurisprudence. This dispute may result in clarity on whether temporary refusals to continue play automatically trigger forfeiture under the CAF Regulations, or whether completion of a match preserves the sporting result.

Contact Us

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