

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
APPEALS COMMITTEE

In the matter of an appeal by BELFAST CELTIC against a decision taken by BALLYMENA AND PROVINCIAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Appeals Committee:

Emma McIlveen BL

David Lennox

Stephen Magill

DECISION

This is a decision of the IFA Appeals Committee ('the Committee') which was reached following a hearing which took place at IFA Headquarters on 12 October 2023. It concerns an appeal brought by ***Belfast Celtic*** ('the Appellant') against a decision reached by the ***Ballymena and Provincial Football League*** ('the Respondent').

Having regard to the reasons set out below, the unanimous decision of the Committee is that:

1. The appeal shall be dismissed
2. The decision of ***Ballymena and Provincial Football League*** dated 11th September 2023 is upheld

Attendees

1. The Appellant was represented at the hearing by John Morgan (Secretary), Stephen McAllorum (Manager) & Hugh Greene (Committee member). The Respondent was represented at the hearing by Robert Fenton (Vice Chair).
2. The Committee wishes to express its gratitude to the parties for their attendance at the hearing and for their helpful written and oral submissions.

Background

3. The dispute arises out of a match between Belfast Celtic and Strabane Athletic which occurred on the 26th August 2023.
4. There were two incidents reported to the Respondent in respect of the game:
 - A. Firstly, Strabane Athletic claimed that Belfast Celtic had used the substitution process four times when only three occasions were allowed. In respect of this incident, the Respondent decided that Belfast Celtic should forfeit the game and be fined £25.
 - B. Secondly, Belfast Celtic claimed that Strabane Athletic had players who did not have photographs on the match start sheet. The League found that player no 16 had no photograph published. In respect of this incident, the Respondent decided that Strabane should also forfeit the game and should be fined £25
5. As both clubs were deemed to forfeit the game, the Respondent ultimately decided that the game should be declared void.
6. Belfast Celtic subsequently submitted an appeal against this decision on 12th September 2023.

Points Raised on Appeal

7. The Committee had the following documentation before it:
 - a) Appeal letter from John Morgan dated 12/9/23
 - b) Letter from Ballymena and Provincial Football League dated 11th September 2023
 - c) Response to appeal from William C McIlroy BEM dated 19th September 2023
 - d) Email exchange between Stephen McAlorum and Joseph McCall, Secretary of St James Swifts FC
 - e) Email account from the referee from the game in question regarding the extra substitution
 - f) Ballymena and Provincial Football League Rules for Season 2023- 24
 - g) Laws of the Game 2023/2024

h) IFA Group Handbook 2023-2024

8. **Belfast Celtic** made the following points on appeal:

- a) The referee allowed the fourth substitution to take place and as such must take the blame for the error
- b) The referee should have been aware of the Ballymena League Rule regarding substitution and should have refused permission for the request to use a fourth substitute in the 90th minute
- c) Referees have been told that they must be fully aware of the rules of the competition
- d) The Referee is the ultimate controller of the game and it is their decision that enables/stops a substitution to be allowed
- e) The Club made an honest error in trying to make a substitution in the 90th minute
- f) If the referee had applied the rule correctly, he should have refused the clubs request to make the substitution
- g) Reference was made to a similar situation involving St James Swifts on 9/9/23 where a referee refused a request by St James to use another substitute
- h) If the referee had applied the rules correctly, the Club would not have made the error and would not have been subject to the sanction of the Ballymena League Committee.
- i) Reference was made to the recent decision in an appeal concerning Donegall Celtic and Coagh United and the ability of the Appeals Committee to find in favour of Clubs where there has been some third party interference
- j) More and more, football is “getting played on screens” rather than on the pitch as clubs/players are now searching COMET/internet after games in order to find errors that their opponents have made.
- k) The Club sought guidance from the referee “in the heat of battle” regarding the substitution and the referee allowed the club to proceed with the substitution.
- l) There is a lack of consistency regarding rules about substitution. This is unhelpful.
- m) Common sense should prevail in this scenario

9. In response, the **Ballymena and Provincial Football League** made the following points:

- a) Teams that participate in the Ballymena League must understand the importance of following the rules

- b) The League were correct to sanction the club for breaching the rules as using a fourth substitution period was not permitted within the rules and therefore resulted in Belfast Celtic playing an ineligible player.
- c) The referee had confirmed in an email to the League dated 28/8/23 that he had made a mistake in respect of the extra substitution and that the reason for this was due to the technology on his smart watch (namely the RefSix app) which he used during the game to record the substitutions. The Referee had explained that the app records how many substitutions but not on how many separate occasions. The referee apologised for his error and expressed regret to the League and clubs involved. The referee confirmed that he would be reverting to the traditional notebook and pen approach until the issues with the technology can be rectified.

Findings

- 10. The Committee has made the following findings following a detailed analysis of the information available.
- 11. At the outset of the hearing, both parties to the appeal agreed that the key issues which the Committee had to consider were as follows:
 - 1. What is the impact of the fourth substitution being played?**
 - 2. What is the role of a referee in respect of the rules?**
 - 3. Is the League's decision dated 11/9/23 correct?**
- 12. During the hearing, the Appellant accepted that they had made four substitutions in four separate occasions during the game against Strabane Athletic on 26/8/23. They further accepted that this was a breach of the Ballymena and Provincial Football League Rules for the Season 2023- 24 and that the playing of the fourth substitute meant that they had played an ineligible player. That being said, the Appellant was of the view that the referee should be to blame for this error because of the advice which he had given to the Club.
- 13. The Committee examined the relevant rules carefully and spent time considering how the rules apply to this particular set of circumstances.

14. The Committee considered that the relevant extracts of the Ballymena and Provincial Football League rules for the 2023- 2024 season are as follows:

- Rule 11(c): “Each team can name a panel of seven substitutes (subs) on the Comet system and use five in games played under the League jurisdiction. Subs to be used on three different occasions during normal time of a match with an additional opportunity at half-time, in other words a maximum of three subs in any one occasion”.
- Rule 8(c): “In cases where both teams have been judged to have played an ineligible player in any match, the match shall be declared null and void and both teams shall have a minus three (-3) goal difference recorded against them...
 - For the purposes of clarification an ineligible player is
 - (iii) A player who has played in contravention of the Rules of the Competition in which he has taken part
 - “The Committee may impose a fine of £100 for a first offence”

15. The Committee also considered the Laws of the Game 2023/24. Committee noted the following laws:

- **Law 3: 3: Substitution procedure**

The names of the substitutes must be given to the referee before the start of the match. Any substitute not named by this time may not take part in the match.

To replace a player with a substitute, the following must be observed:

- the referee must be informed before any substitution is made
- the player being substituted:
 - receives the referee’s permission to leave the field of play, unless already off the field, and must leave by the nearest point on the boundary line unless the referee indicates that the player may leave directly and immediately at the halfway line or another point (e.g. for safety/security or injury)
 - must go immediately to the technical area or dressing room and takes no further part in the match, except where return substitutions are permitted
- if a player who is to be substituted refuses to leave, play continues

The substitute only enters:

- during a stoppage in play
- at the halfway line
- after the player being replaced has left
- after receiving a signal from the referee

The substitution is completed when a substitute enters the field of play; from that moment, the replaced player becomes a substituted player and the substitute becomes a player and can take any restart.

All substituted players and substitutes are subject to the referee's authority, whether they play or not.

○ **Law 5: The Referee**

- **1. The authority of the referee:** Each match is controlled by a referee who has full authority to enforce the Laws of the Game in connection with the match.

- **3. Powers and duties:** The referee
 - enforces the Laws of the Game
 - controls the match in cooperation with the other match officials
 - acts as timekeeper, keeps a record of the match and provides the appropriate authorities with a match report, including information on disciplinary action and any other incidents that occurred before, during or after the match
 - supervises and/or indicates the restart of play

16. The Committee also reviewed the Irish FA Group Handbook 2023- 2024. The Committee noted Rule 1(h) of the Amateur Game Player Registration Regulations Season 2023/24 which provides: "It shall be the responsibility of clubs playing in any match to be played under the jurisdiction of the Association to ensure that its players are eligible to play in such a match"

17. The Committee would like to record that they had a degree of sympathy for the Appellant. On the basis of the information before the Committee, it was accepted that the referee did provide Stephen McAlorum (the Manager of Belfast Celtic) incorrect guidance regarding the

fourth substitution during the game on 26/8/23. However, the Committee further recognised the importance of Clubs being aware of AND following League rules. It should not be the case that Clubs are unaware of the rules and solely rely on the referee for guidance in respect of the rules.

18. Ultimately, the Committee held as follows:

1. Under the Ballymena and Provincial Football League Rules¹ for 2023-24, when Belfast Celtic used a fourth substitution period to bring on their fourth substitute during the game on 26/8/23, they played an ineligible player.
2. The decision reached by the Respondent was accordingly fair, just and reasonable in all of the circumstances
3. The Respondent had the power to impose a fine of up to £100 but decided to fine both clubs £25. This was also fair and just.

19. The Committee acknowledges that the Appellant attempted to rely upon a recent decision of the Appeals Committee in respect to Donegal Celtic and Coagh United. This Committee are aware of that decision and wish to point out that the decision in that case was recorded as “exceptional”. The Committee further considers that the circumstances of this scenario are different and unanimously agreed that this case did not fall into the exceptional category.

20. The Committee noted that the Ballymena and Provincial Football League had made a number of changes to their rules for the 2023-24 season. The Respondent may wish to consider a further amendment to make it clear that clubs have a responsibility to be aware of the Ballymena and Provincial Football League rules and how they apply during football games. It may also be helpful to consider a training session for clubs on the rules and how they apply. Clubs however have a responsibility to understand the relevant rules of each competition in which they are playing.

21. The Committee would also like to give credit to the referee for the stance which he adopted. It is admirable that he adopted a “hands up” approach to his mistake. The Committee

¹ See the definition of ineligible player at Rule 8(c)(iii)- a player is ineligible if they breach the rules of the competition. The Appellant accepted that they had breached Rule 11(c) in respect of the fourth substitution.

acknowledges the challenging role which referees have and acknowledge that referees are human and can make mistakes. That being said, it is important that referees across the game are aware of the relevant applicable rules and their role in enforcing the laws of the game.

Conclusion

22. For the reasons stated herein, this appeal is dismissed and the decision reached by the Respondent is accordingly upheld.

Dated: 17 October 2023

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in blue ink. The signature is cursive and appears to be 'Emma McIlveen'.

Emma McIlveen BL

On Behalf of the Appeals Committee