

Larne FC v Northern Ireland Football League

Before the IFA Appeal Board on 14 October 2021

Carley Shields (Chair), John Greer, Ciara McReynolds

This is an appeal by Larne FC ('Larne') against the decision of the Northern Ireland Football League ('NIFL') to disqualify Larne from the BetMcCleen League Cup and fine the club £250.

The salient facts are as follows:

- On 10 October 2020 Caolan Donnelly ('Mr Donnelly') was a player for Cliftonville FC ('Cliftonville') and played for them for the final time on 10 October 2020.
- On 25 March 2021 Mr Donnelly was accepted onto the Steven Gerrard Academy Scholarship at Larne. His pre-contract acceptance form was signed by his father.
- On 17 June 2021 Cliftonville re-register Mr Donnelly as their player on the Comet system. Mr Donnelly's father received an email notifying him of the re-registration.
- On 23 June 2021 Mr Donnelly's father replies to said email to advise that his son has left Cliftonville.
- On 1 July 2021 Larne search for Mr Donnelly on the Comet system using an incorrect date of birth, and as such, no entry is returned. Larne proceed to register him as a first registration.
- On 23 September 2021 Larne is notified by Cliftonville that Mr Donnelly is registered as their player on Comet.
- On the same date, 23 September 2021, Larne realise that Mr Donnelly has been entered onto Comet twice, once as a Cliftonville player with his correct date of birth and then as a Larne player but with the incorrect date of birth.
- The NIFL League Cup Committee found, after representations were made by Larne, that Mr Donnelly was not registered correctly pursuant to Rule 23 of the NI League Cup Rules – Season 2021/22 and since Mr Donnelly played for Larne against Limavady United in the 2nd round of the Cup competition as an incorrectly registered player, the Committee, pursuant to Rule 24 of the League Cup Rules, disqualified Larne from the Cup and imposed a fine of £250.

Appeal hearing

The Appeal Board examined all written submissions provided on behalf of both parties to the appeal.

The Appeal Board also had regard to the relevant provisions of both the Professional Game Player Registration Regulations (June 2021) and the NI League Cup Rules – Season 2021/22.

Of particular relevance is Regulation 6.0b which states that 'All mandatory fields of Comet FMS must be accurately completed in full before a registration is confirmed. The player shall

be considered registered upon completion of the online procedure. Any player who is under the age of 18 on the date of registration must have written consent from a parent or guardian agreeing to the registration.”

There are two key aspects to this appeal, firstly the registration of Mr Donnelly by Cliftonville and secondly, the error concerning his date of birth.

Looking at the first issue, regarding the registration by Cliftonville. Regulation 6 makes it clear that to be properly registered there must be written consent obtained from the player’s parent or guardian. Such consent was not given in this case and therefore Mr Donnelly could not have been validly registered with Cliftonville.

Turning to the second issue, being the use of the incorrect date of birth. The Appeal Board is aware that to access a player’s record on Comet all that is required is their name and date of birth. If, when inputting these details, a player’s record is not returned it is presumed that they have no playing history. In this case, it must have been known to Larne that Mr Donnelly had previously played for Cliftonville, or presumably some other club, given he was signing for a Premiership club, and therefore the Appeal Board is of the opinion that Larne ought to have acted in a more prudent manner and carried out enquiries as to why his player profile was not showing up. Having made such enquiries with Mr Donnelly or otherwise, this would have resulted in his player profile being located and the incorrect date of birth would presumably have been noticed.

Regulation 6b clearly states that all mandatory fields of Comet must be *accurately completed in full* before a registration is confirmed, therefore since the date of birth was noted inaccurately Mr Donnelly cannot have been properly registered and as such the Appeal Board accepts the submissions of NIFL in this regard.

In relation to the penalty awarded for playing unregistered or illegible players as set out in Rule 24 of the NI Cup Rules, it is stated that the club ‘will be dismissed from the competition’ and that it ‘*may* be fined up to a maximum sum of £250.’ NIFL have correctly dismissed Larne from the Cup, however, the Appeal Board has considerable sympathy for Larne in that it was clearly only a typographical error that has led to this Appeal being before the Board today, and therefore we are minded to vacate the monetary penalty on this occasion.

However, the Appeal Board must uphold the dismissal of Larne from the Cup on the basis that it is incumbent on all clubs to ensure that extreme care and due diligence is taken when registering players onto the Comet system, and if in any doubt appropriate enquiries ought to be made before proceeding with a registration.

End.