

Portadown FC v Northern Ireland Football League

Before the IFA Appeal Board on 2 December 2021

John Greer (Chair), Carley Shields, Ian Beggs

The Appeals Board would firstly wish to place on record its thanks to all parties to the appeal for their cooperation and the clarity of their submissions. In line with the procedures adopted since the commencement of the Covid pandemic this matter was considered by the Appeals Board on the written submissions provided by the parties.

This is an appeal brought by Portadown FC ('Portadown') against the decision of the Northern Ireland Football League ('NIFL') not to uphold their protest against Cliftonville for allegedly playing an ineligible player in the NIFL League Cup Quarter final.

The basis of the appeal is that Cliftonville played a player, Colin Coates, who was signed by them after the closure of the designated registration period, namely 31 August, and therefore in contravention of the NIFL League Cup rule 7c which states –

'For the avoidance of any doubt to be eligible to play in this competition a player must also be eligible to participate for his club in the relevant league competition and must have been registered during one of the two professional game registration periods.

These registration periods are:-

First Registration Period – 9 June 2021 – 31 August 2021

Second Registration period – 1 January 2022 – 31 January 2022'

In response NIFL contended that the cup competition rules must be read in the context of both over-riding conditions of the IFA Player Registrations Regulations and particularly the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players.

The Appeals Board considered in detail the submissions and the appropriate regulations.

It was clear that a simple interpretation of NIFL rule 7c would appear to provide support to the Portadown position, however the Board accepted that the regulatory framework and in particular the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players provides binding conditions under which all FIFA national associations must operate.

These Regulations provide at article 6(1) –

'Players may only be registered during one of the two annual registration periods fixed by the relevant association. Associations may fix different registration periods for their male and female competitions. As an exception to this rule, a professional whose contract has expired prior to the end of a registration period may be registered outside that period. Associations

are authorised to register such professionals provided that due consideration is given to the sporting integrity of the relevant competition.'

The Appeals Board are satisfied that the NIFL League Cup rules operate within a hierarchy of regulations and that FIFA regulations sit at the top of the framework, and as they provide for an exception for 'out of contract professionals', in the absence of any specific regulation to prevent such players from playing in this competition, NIFL have applied the rules correctly.

The Appeals Board therefore unanimously reject the appeal and confirm the decision of NIFL.