

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION APPEALS COMMITTEE

In the matter of an appeal filed on behalf of Valley Rangers F.C (hereinafter referred to as the Appellant) against a decision of the Mid-Ulster Football League (hereinafter referred to as the MUFL or the Respondent) who determined that a match between the Appellant and Moneyslane FC which was previously abandoned on 21st March 2023 due to floodlight failure, should be replayed.

Appeals Board

Mr Barry Finnegan (Vice-Chair)

Mr David Lennox

Mr Stephen Shaw

Decision:

This is a decision of the IFA Appeals Board following a Hearing which took place at IFA Headquarters on Wednesday 19th April 2023. It concerns an appeal brought on behalf of the Appellant against a decision reached following a meeting on 27th March 2023 held by the Respondent's management committee who unanimously agreed that the match between the Appellant and Moneyslane FC should be replayed following the abandonment of the previous fixture on 21st March 2023 because of floodlight failure.

It is accepted by both parties that the aforesaid game took place at the Appellant's home pitch, Bignian Park, and was abandoned because of floodlight failure in and around the 67th minute of the match whilst the Appellant was leading 1-0.

The Appellant consider that the decision reached by the Respondent in ordering the game to be replayed is inconsistent and incorrect. They are of the view that the Respondent had initially determined that neither team was responsible for the abandonment of the match and the result at the termination of play, namely the 1-0 scoreline in the Appellant's favour, should stand as over 60 minutes had been played in the match before the same was abandoned.

This course of action would, they say, be consistent with a decision taken by the Respondent previously in connection with the abandonment of a match between the Appellant and Banbridge Rangers FC, played on 22nd November 2022, which was also abandoned due to floodlight failure at the Appellant's home ground. In that game the score at the time of the abandonment (0-1 in favour of the opposing team) was held to have stood as over 60 minutes had been played and hence the match was awarded in favour of Banbridge FC.

Having regard to the reasons set out below, the unanimous decision of the Appeals Board is that the appeal shall be dismissed so that the original decision of the Respondent is upheld. Accordingly, the match between the Appellant and Moneyslane FC will be replayed on a date suitable to the Respondent's fixture's secretary given the decision reached by the Respondent was correct on both a technical and sporting level. The Appellant is however entitled to a £100.00 refund in relation to the appeal fee given the miscommunication contained in correspondence sent to the Appellant by the Respondent dated 29th March 2023.

Attendees:

The Appellant was represented at the Hearing of this appeal by Daryl Parke, First Team Manager and David Mckee, Assistant Coach. They each gave evidence to the Appeals Committee. The Respondent was represented by Maurice Johnston, Vice Chairman, and Stephen Magill, League Secretary, both of

whom also provided evidence to the Appeals Committee. The Appeals Committee would like to express their gratitude for the helpful and informative way in which all of the attendees conducted themselves during Hearing.

The Rules at Issue:

This appeal does, in part, concern the interpretation and application of The Respondent's League Rules as most recently updated in the "Season 2022/23" edition and specifically Rule 11 b) which reads as follows:-

(i) If for any reason a match has been terminated by a Referee, due to circumstances over which neither competing team has control, the result at the termination of play shall stand provided that the duration of the match has not been less than an hour.

ii) In cases where either or both teams are deemed to have been responsible for the abandonment of any match, the outcome of the match shall be referred to the Management Committee for a decision .Under the circumstances of an abandoned match under section (ii) above, the Committee shall have the powers to : -

a) Order that the match should be replayed

b) Order that the match be declared void and not be replayed

c) Order that the score at the time of the abandonment should stand as the Official result.

d) Order that a 3-0 score -line be awarded to any team where their opponents are deemed to be guilty of causing said match to be abandoned.

e) (i) Clubs drawn first in any tie shall be deemed to be the home team and shall have choice of ground subject to item (iii) below. Clubs drawn second in any tie shall be deemed to be the away team.

Facts:

In addition to an examination of the relevant rules and the oral evidence submitted on behalf of the Appellant and Respondent, the Appeals Committee noted the written submissions filed on behalf of both parties.

The Committee has made the following findings following a detailed analysis of the facts available:-

1. Both parties accept that the match between the Appellant and Moneyslane FC was abandoned at the Appellant's home ground on 21st March 2023 due to floodlight failure;
2. Evidence was provided by both Mr Parke and Mr McKee on behalf of the Appellant that significant efforts were undertaken on the evening in question, with members of both teams

involved, to restore the floodlights without success. Furthermore a local electrical engineer was contacted with a view to examining the floodlights to determine the cause of the failure the following day. He was unable to do so and eventually the Appellant was required to contact the manufacturers who determined an “electrical fault” and installed a suitable replacement part which has seemingly remedied the issue.

3. Both the Appellant and Respondent made reference to a previous fixture played at the Appellant’s home-ground against Banbridge Rangers FC on 22nd November 2022 in which the game was also abandoned due to a floodlight failure. A clear distinction was made by Mr Parke for the Appellant that the issue on that particular occasion was that the generator had ran out of fuel and that the Appellant had accepted full responsibility for this oversight. In the match against Moneyislane FC however the issue had arisen due to a more complex electrical fault which was, in their own words, “in no way down to human error.”
4. The committee was not provided with any expert engineering evidence or generator inspection report which may have offered greater insight into the cause of the issue which led to the match abandonment on 21st March 2023. No pre-match inspection or general servicing records have been supplied to demonstrate a regular system of inspection and maintenance of the generator.
5. The committee does however accept that an electrical fault had occurred which led to the floodlights failing on 21st March 2023 in the absence of a suitable alternative explanation.
6. During the course of their evidence the Appellant asserted that the Respondent had sent formal written communication to the Appellant on 29th March 2023, following the management committee meeting two days prior, to confirm that the match was to be replayed on the basis that “neither the home team nor the away team was deemed to have been responsible for the abandonment of the match.” This email was contained in the appeal bundle.
7. The Appellant’s contention, underpinning their appeal, was that if this were indeed the case then the result at the termination of play shall stand as over 60 minutes had been played in the game prior to the abandonment as per the Respondent’s Rule 11 b i. By effect, the Appellants argue that a 1-0 scoreline ought to be awarded in their favour and the Respondent have no basis on which to suggest the match should be replayed.
8. The Respondent did subsequently clarify the rationale for their decision in a follow up email to the Appellant dated 31st March 2023 (not contained in the email bundle) and referenced the Respondent’s league rule 11b ii to stipulate that as either or both teams were deemed to have been responsible for the abandonment of the match, the management committee exercised their inherent discretion and decided to replay the fixture.
9. The evidence provided by Mr Johnston suggested that there had been some concern raised on his part surrounding the ambiguity of the language used in the initial correspondence of 29th March 2023. The committee was provided with a copy of an internal email sent by Mr Johnston in which he described this as being “a simple admin error” and references the management committee who had unanimously agreed that “the home team has responsibility for the abandonment, albeit not deliberate.”

10. The Respondent's contention was therefore as the Appellant were the home team and were in charge of facilitating the match in question, they were deemed to have been responsible for the abandonment of the match and so League Rule 11 b ii was applied to the extent the Management Committee decided to replay the fixture.
11. The Appeals Committee is satisfied that a genuine error had occurred in terms of the initial explanation relayed by the Respondent to the Appellant on 29th March 2023 in ordering that the match be replayed. There is clear consistency in determination, via the contemporaneous correspondence and minutes of the Management Committee Meeting, that the match was to be replayed and the evidence provided by Mr Johnston for the Respondent, both in oral and written form, was that this was due to the fact they felt the home side were responsible for ensuring adequate facilities were in place to complete the match without abandonment, including the correct operation of the floodlights to ensure adequate visibility was in place for the players, match officials and other attendees.
12. Furthermore the Appeals Committee is of the view that the evidence from the Appellant's "representative on the MUFL committee" which convened on 27th March 2023, may have been of some assistance in clarifying this issue. This particular representative was however not in attendance to give evidence at the Appeal Hearing.
13. Following on from the above no evidence was provided to the Appeals Committee that there had been any form of communication with the "representative on the MUFL committee" from the Appellant's perspective and Mr Parke indicated that the Appellant had merely relied upon the Respondent's written confirmation dated 29th March 2023 which contained reference to neither team having been held responsible for the match abandonment, when considering whether to appeal the Respondent's decision to replay the match.
14. On a theoretical level Mr Parke quite correctly referred to the fact that had this reference (neither team having been held responsible) not been included in the Respondent's written notification of 29th March 2023, the Appellant could not confirm whether an appeal would have been lodged or otherwise as their members would have been required to discuss the position before a final determination had been reached.
15. In the present case the Appeals Committee is satisfied that the Appellant, as the home team, were responsible for ensuring adequate facilities were in place to ensure the match against Moneyslane FC could be completed on 21st March 2023. Consequently, it must be held that the Appellant were responsible for the abandonment of the match on this occasion given they control, inspect, maintain and operate the floodlights at Bignian Park.
16. A significant issue which arises in this case is one of proportionality. The Appeals Committee is of the view that it would be entirely disproportionate to the away side, namely Moneyslane FC, had the Respondent elected to award the result at the time of the abandonment, in the home side's favour.
17. If such a course of action had transpired the away side, having had no input into the organisation of the match facilities, would have been prevented from replaying a match

which had been abandoned in which they had a remaining playing time of approximately 23 minutes (plus injury time) to salvage a draw at least and potentially gain match point(s).

18. It therefore appears unjust, from both a sporting and natural justice standpoint, that the away side are prohibited from replaying the match when they were not responsible, in any way, for the abandonment. It is the latter fact which most significantly renders the decision to replay the match entirely appropriate.
19. The Appeals Committee is not satisfied by the representations made by the Appellant regarding the ambiguous nature of the Respondent's correspondence dated 29th March 2023 as being sufficient to override the Respondent's overarching decision to replay the match.
20. Therefore, on the issue of interpretation of the rules the Appeals Committee finds that the only correct and proper interpretation was the one contended for by the Respondent at the Appeal Hearing. That being that the Appellant was deemed to have been responsible for the abandonment of the match on 21st March 2023 and thus had sufficient power to order that the match should be replayed in the circumstances.
21. Having regard to all of the evidence therefore the Appeals Committee finds that no grounds exist to uphold the Appellant's appeal and the same is dismissed accordingly.
22. In addition the Appeals Committee finds that the Appellant is to be refunded the £100.00 appeal fee given the committee consider there was a distinct possibility an appeal may not have been lodged had the Respondent not indicated that neither team had been held responsible for the initial match abandonment (see email from Respondent to Appellant dated 29th March 2023).
23. Accordingly, the match between the Appellant and Moneyslane FC will be replayed on a date suitable to the Respondent's Fixture's Secretary and the Appellant is to receive a refund for the Appeal fee in the sum of £100.00.

Dated: 24th day of April 2023, Barry Finnegan, Vice-Chair. On Behalf of the IFA Appeal's Committee