

IN THE MATTER OF AN IFA APPEALS COMMITTEE

Between

WOODVALE FOOTBALL CLUB

Appellant

-v-

NAFL

Respondent

APPEALS COMMITTEE

Rachel Best KC (Chair)

David Lennox

Peter Clarke

On behalf of the Appellant, David McKeown (Club Secretary) and Jonny Kelly

On behalf of the Respondent, T Pateman (Chair) and P Causby (Vice Chair) League Management Committee

FACTS AND BACKGROUND

1. On the 28th September 2024 the Appellant played Suffolk FC at Suffolk Park in a match in division 1C of the NAFL League. The match finished 1-1. At the time of the match all the players appeared in Comet to be properly registered to their respective Club and not under any form of suspension.
2. At a League Management Committee (LMC) of NAFL held on the 25th February 2025 it was announced that the LMC had been informed by the IFA Player Registration Committee that a Suffolk FC player registration was invalid as a “player registered with two clubs having agreed to be re-registered with his former club”. The LMC further decided that Suffolk FC were in breach of the byelaws B1.2.4 and B2.1.
3. The Respondent’s description of the issue and sanction was set out as follows:

LMC notified by IFA Player Registration Committee that a Suffolk FC player registration was invalid as player registered with two clubs having agreed to be re-registered with his former club. LMC decision Suffolk FC in breach of Bye-Laws B,1.2.4 as priority of registration with former club and Bye-Laws B 2.1 player ineligible due to invalid registration. Points forfeited for games which player played in, total 11, and Suffolk FC fined £50.00 as per Bye-Laws B, 2.1.

4. As a consequence, the LMC decided that points would be forfeited for the games which the player played in and a fine would be imposed. This information was not passed directly to the Clubs involved and the player in question was not identified. The Clubs only became aware of the issue following the publication of the LMC Ruling on the NAFL website at some later date. No protest was lodged by any Club as a result.
5. Upon being made aware of this publication the Appellant began what they have called an “investigation” and was able to deduce that the player in question was most likely to be Player A who had played in the aforementioned match on the 28th September 2024.
6. As a consequence, the Appellant contacted the League on the 1st April 2025 enquiring if Player A was in fact the ineligible player. The communication further went on to enquire if, as has been custom, whether or not the teams against whom the ineligible player had played would be awarded 3-0 wins as was the consistent approach of the League over many seasons. The Appellant also referred to the similar case of **Queen’s Grads v NAFL 2023**.
7. On the 1st April 2025 the League replied informing the Appellant that the LMC were still considering the matter. At this stage it was still not confirmed if in fact Player A was the ineligible player.
8. On the 11th April 2025 the League informed the Appellant that Player A was in fact the ineligible player in question, but no teams would be awarded the points in question. The basis for this was that no Club had raised an issue at the time of the match. The Appellant asserts this was a departure from the standard practice as adopted by the League and approved by the IFA Appeals Panel in **Queen’s Grads v NAFL 2023**. On the 14th April 2025 Woodvale submitted an appeal to the IFA pursuant to Article 14 of the Articles of Association.

DECISION

9. The Appeals Committee were grateful to the Appellant who submitted their appeal letter and an extremely helpful skeleton argument in advance of the Hearing. The Respondent declined to submit any documents. At this point it is important to note that the Committee found the Appellant’s approach helpful and consistent with what is expected of parties appearing before the Appeal Committee.

10. The Appeals Committee finds that the Respondent was unhelpful to the Appellant when they were seeking to ascertain the name of the Club or player in question. It is illogical to suggest that teams would not receive the points in question because no Club had raised a protest. How can a club be expected to raise a protest if they did not know who the player was and what was the match in question? Such an approach is obviously unfair.
11. In the case of ***Queen's Grads v NAFL*** this issue was considered by the Appeal Committee, It is recognised that this does not set a precedent, and this Committee is entitled to make a decision such as appears before on the facts. However, this decision is considered to be persuasive in relation to the present matters.
12. In the aforementioned decision the Appeals Committee found that the Respondent's interpretation of the relevant byelaws (the same as in this case) was correct. It was held that the fielding of an illegible player in the games in question led to the inescapable conclusion that the match points gained should be reversed and awarded to the other side. In the Queen's Grads case no protest was required before the points were awarded to the other side.
13. No satisfactory explanation was advanced in relation to why in this particular instance this was not the adopted practice.
14. In the circumstances the Appeals Committee concludes that the Appellant were correct in their argument that
 - (a) the Respondent has erred in law by failing to follow its own decisions in respect of the consequences of breaches of byelaw B2.1.
 - (b) the Respondent has erred in law by failing to notify interested Clubs once it became aware of the ineligibility issue raised by the IFA Registration Committee.
 - (c) the Respondent has failed to properly consider its own Rules as well as the IFA Appeal Rulings on the correct determination to be made once a player is to be considered ineligible in accordance with those Rules and Regulations.
 - (d) the Respondent has arrived at a decision that undermines the overriding objective of the aforementioned Regulations which requires disciplinary panels to deal with matters in a fair manner and applying a common-sense approach.
15. Accordingly, the Committee finds in favour of the Appellant. The match in question, in which Player A played, on the 28th September 2024 should be awarded to Woodvale with the score of 3-0.
16. The Committee would wish to take this opportunity to urge the Leagues to deal with these matters on a consistent approach to ensure that Clubs have certainty in relation to the Rules and the approach adopted. It is undesirable that there is an inconsistent approach.

17. Accordingly, the Appeal is upheld.

R BEST KC (Chair)

D LENNOX

P CLARKE