

## **IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION APPEALS COMMITTEE**

In the matter of an appeal filed on behalf of Midway United F.C (hereinafter referred to as the Appellant) who seek to challenge a decision reached by the management committee of the Mid Ulster Juvenile League ('the Respondent' or 'MUJL') to overturn the result of the semi-final of the Décor Cup competition played between the Appellant and St Mary's YC FC on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2024 as a consequence of the Appellant not having uploaded their team line up to COMET in advance of the match as required by the competition rules.

### Appeals Board

Mr Barry Finnegan (Vice-Chair)

Ms Rachel Best KC

Mr Stephen Shaw

### **Decision:**

This is a decision of the IFA Appeals Committee following a Hearing which took place at IFA Headquarters on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2024. It concerns an appeal brought on behalf of the Appellant against a decision reached by the Respondent's management committee to rescind the Appellant's victory in the Décor Cup competition and award the same to St Mary's YC FC.

The Appellant consider that the Respondent's decision ought to be overturned on the basis that multiple attempts were made to access the Comet registration system on the day of the match but were prevented from uploading their team sheet due to technical reasons outside their control. They also aver that a physical team sheet was completed and handed to the referee in advance of the game commencing.

Having regard to the reasons set out below, the unanimous decision of the Appeals Committee is that the appeal shall be **dismissed** so that the original decision of the Respondent is upheld. Accordingly, the Respondent had nor erred in overturning the Appellant's victory in the Décor Cup competition and awarding the same to St Mary's YC FC.

The final of the 2023/24 Décor Cup will therefore be played between St Mary's YC FC and Craigavon City FC.

### **Attendees:**

The Appellant was represented at the Hearing of this appeal by Chris McGivern, Assistant Coach who gave evidence to the Appeals Committee. The Respondent was represented by Jim Canning, League Secretary who also provided evidence to the Appeals Committee. The Appeals Committee would like to express their gratitude for the helpful and informative manner in which all of the attendees conducted themselves during Hearing.

### **The Rules at Issue:**

This appeal does, in part, concern the application of the Respondent's 2023-2024 League Rules and their applicability to the Appellant's participation in the Décor Cup competition which the committee understands is administered and regulated by the MUJL.

In the absence of an alternative set of rules having been presented, the Committee consider the aforesaid rules to represent the regulatory platform which players, officials and coaches must adhere to when participating in this competition. The committee also notes that the same rules

make reference to cup competitions with rule 13 in particular stipulating that *“Cup finals will be determined by the League at the start of each season.”*

These rules are not publicly accessible and a copy of the same were presented to the committee by Mr Canning for the Respondent upon request during the appeal hearing. They are provided to each participating club at the outset of each league season.

The committee consider Rule 12 to be of relevance. This is stipulated as follows:-

*“Club managers must submit their line-up on COMET this can be done either the day prior to or on match day. This is the starting eleven players along with a maximum of five substitutes. The Head Coach must have their selection made so the referee can identify players accordingly with regards to cautions and dismissals that may occur during a game. Player shirt numbers must match the COMET team selection. Team selection must be completed 20 minutes prior to kick-off.”*

The committee also consider rule 3.1 of the Disciplinary Code to be of relevance. The same stipulates the following:-

*“Any breach of these rules may render the player, official or club liable to censure, fine or suspension, or a combination of such penalties as it is deemed fit to impose.”*

**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. It was conceded by Mr McGivern at the outset of the Appeal Hearing that he did not have access to the COMET registration system. The same is always completed by the Appellant’s coach, Alan Campbell, prior to matches commencing. Mr McGivern is not registered to access the same. He readily agreed that he specialises in coaching, rather than the administrative side of underage football management.
2. Mr McGivern provided evidence which closely reflected the Appellant’s written submissions to include the attempts made by Mr Campbell to log in and upload the team line up whilst in the changing rooms. Reference was made to how he was “able to select 5 or 6 players before being logged out.”
3. According to Mr McGivern this issue was brought to the attention of the match referee who entered the changing room prior to the match to seek assistance in moving the goalposts and get the pitch appropriately set up. The referee purportedly also advised that he was having issues accessing COMET at this time.
4. When asked whether the issue was brought to the attention of the opposing team prior to the match Mr McGivern advised this was not done. When asked why he indicated that there had been a degree of acrimony (“a bit of niggles”) between the two sides during an earlier game that season which ended in a draw and neither management team was necessarily on the best of terms with the other.

5. It was accepted by both Mr McGivern and Mr Canning for the Respondent that St Mary's YC FC had successfully uploaded their team line-up to COMET prior to the match in question.
6. When asked for potential reasons why the Appellant's team could not be uploaded to COMET despite the fact the opposing team had managed to do so Mr McGivern speculated that this may have been due to "connectivity issues" involving mobile data or wi-fi.
7. When asked about the purported handwritten team sheet and who had completed the same Mr McGivern advised that he had not filled this in nor handed it to the referee and surmised that Mr Campbell had done so. When asked whether he had physically seen this team sheet Mr McGivern conceded he had not.
8. Both parties were made aware of the fact that no evidence of this team sheet had been presented to the committee by either party and the referee had neither mentioned the same, nor the difficulties accessing COMET generally, in his match report.
9. Mr Canning advised the Committee that he had attended the game in question. He was unaware of any technical difficulties with COMET upon arrival and described an encounter with the coach of St Mary's YC FC who was apparently rather aggrieved at the situation involving water bottles for the players but made no mention of any difficulties with COMET.
10. Mr Canning advised that Committee that he also had not seen nor was made aware of a hand-written team sheet completed by the Appellant and provided to the referee on the day.
11. Upon further questioning the committee ascertained that Mr Canning was not made aware of the COMET registration difficulties until he was approached by Mr Campbell for the Appellant during the water break in the second half of the match in question.
12. When asked to elaborate as to the nature of the conversation Mr Canning advised initially that "I told him I was having the same problem." When asked if this meant he also couldn't access COMET Mr Canning clarified that he could access the system on his phone but when he went to check the match he was attending the only team sheet appearing on the system was that belonging to St Mary's YC FC.
13. Mr Canning advised that at this time he recalled the management team for St Mary's YC FC shouting, apparently to no one in particular, "we don't know who we're playing." This was an apparent reference to the fact they had now become aware of the fact the Appellant's team sheet had not been uploaded to COMET.
14. When asked what instructions he provided to Mr Campbell at the time Mr Canning advised that he stated "I don't know what to do, we'll see what happens" or words to that effect. Mr Canning advised upon enquiry that no reference was made to a physical team sheet having been completed at that time however.
15. Mr Canning also advised the Committee that he contacted the MUJL referee's coordinator (Eddie Madigan) to enquire as to whether he was having difficulties accessing COMET. Mr Madigan apparently was able to access the system from the other semi-final which was being played at an unknown location. According to Mr Canning he was advised by Mr

Madigan that he also could not see any team sheet belonging to the Appellant on the system.

16. The Committee then considered the various screenshots, purportedly captured from the COMET system which suggest that Mr Campbell had attempted to upload the team line-up as required at 11.16am and thereafter at 11.18am on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2024. It was suggested that this could potentially have coincided with either the half time break or second half water break and neither party disagreed that this was a possibility. Mr McGivern advised that he had no knowledge of this as once the match had commenced, he felt the team-sheet submission, or lack thereof, was a “non-issue.”
17. Mr McGivern also indicated that his son is a member of the Appellant’s team and noted that he was not listed on the screenshots provided during the appeal hearing. Upon review of the information uploaded to COMET he was able to determine that 2 of the starting 11 members of the Appellant’s side were in fact not starting that particular day.
18. Upon enquiry Mr Canning advised the Committee that the complaint regarding these issues was properly received from St Mary’s YC FC.
19. Upon receipt the Respondent’s Management Committee convened a meeting on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> May 2024 involving 5 members. One of the members from Craigavon City FC was stood down due to a potential conflict of interest given his side would meet either the Appellant or St Mary’s YC FC in the final.
20. The Respondent’s committee unanimously decided to overturn the result of the match in question, which the Appellant had won 6-2, and awarded the result to St Mary’s YC FC meaning they would meet Craigavon City FC in the final.
21. Mr McGivern disagreed with this decision and advised the committee that he though the non-submission of the Appellant’s team line-up to COMET was a “non-issue” and that “football should be won of the pitch.” He felt the original result should stand and the Appellant should progress through to the final to meet Craigavon City FC.

### **Conclusions:**

1. In the present case the Appeals Committee deems the non-attendance of Alan Campbell, the Appellant’s coach, to be of significant hindrance to the Appellant’s case. Mr Campbell apparently had sole means of access to COMET and responsibility to upload the team line up for the Appellant. He was best placed to provide evidence concerning what attempts were made to do so, what specific issues he encountered and how he came about completing a physical line-up sheet prior to the match in question.
2. The Committee has some difficulty in comprehending why the match referee did not mention the purported technical issues with COMET in his match report, nor make reference to the apparent submission of a physical team sheet. Furthermore the committee is particularly cognisant of the Respondent’s written submissions, contained in an email from Michael O’Kane dated 28<sup>th</sup> May 2024 which stipulates the following:-

*“It was only during a water break in the second half (11:16) that St Marys noticed Midway hadn’t uploaded their team sheet. This was brought to the attention of the referee who approached Midway and they gave him a written out team sheet, Midway then uploaded some of their players to Comet (11.18). “*

3. It is apparent that there is some consistency between the timeframes stipulated within the aforesaid email, and the independent evidence submitted by the Respondent to include the screenshots from the Comet registration system.
4. The committee is therefore satisfied that the Appellant failed to upload their team line-up to COMET in advance of the match in question. The committee is also satisfied, on the basis of the evidence presented by both parties, that the team line up which was ultimately uploaded did not correctly reflect the players who took the field of play for the Appellant on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2024.
5. Furthermore, the committee accepts the applicability and extent of Rule 12 of the Respondent’s league rules. The committee is satisfied the Appellant breached rule 12 and, bearing in mind no evidence was adduced which demonstrated that any other party experienced technical issues in accessing COMET on the day, no justifiable reason arises to account for this infringement.
6. With the infringement having been identified and no adequate mitigation having been presented the committee must determine whether the sanction applied by the Respondent was appropriate. Mr Canning indicated in his evidence that no explicit rule exists stipulating that the result must be overturned if the team line up was not submitted in advance. This is in spite of the fact the Respondent’s management committee unanimously agreed to overturn the result.
7. The question which the appeals committee must address however is whether it was reasonable for the Respondent to adopt this sanction in accordance with the league rules. In this regard the committee is satisfied that a reasonable interpretation of rule 3.1 (Breach of League Rules) would include overturning a prior result as this would fall within the definition of “a combination of such penalties as it is deemed fit to impose.”
8. On the basis of the foregoing, it seems entirely appropriate to determine that the Respondent had reached a reasonable and logical decision on the basis of the facts available.
9. 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. The original decision of the Respondent is therefore upheld. The Respondent had nor erred in overturning the Appellant’s victory in the Décor Cup competition and awarding the same to St Mary’s YC FC.
10. The final of the 2023/24 Décor Cup will therefore be played between St Mary’s YC FC and Craigavon City FC on a date to be scheduled by the Respondent’s fixtures officer.

Dated: This 10<sup>th</sup> day of June 2024,

*Barry Finnegan*

Barry Finnegan, Vice-Chair. On Behalf of the Appeals Committee