

**IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
APPEALS COMMITTEE**

In the matter of an appeal by ST MARY'S YCFC against a decision taken by MID ULSTER FOOTBALL LEAGUE COMMITTEE

Appeals Committee:

Emma McIlveen BL

David Lennox

Rodney McVitty

THE APPELLANT was represented by **Danny Robinson (Chair), Paul McKeown (Treasurer) & Tom Mallon (Secretary)**

MID ULSTER FOOTBALL LEAGUE COMMITTEE was represented by **Maurice Johnston (Vice Chair), Matthew Holmes (Minute Secretary) & Paul Suckling (Administrator)**

DECISION

This decision of the IFA Appeals Committee was reached following a hearing held on 20th November 2024.

Background

1. This appeal involved an appeal against a decision of the Mid Ulster Football League Committee taken at their meeting on Monday 7th October 2024 to overturn the result of a Mid Ulster Football Intermediate League A match on Tuesday 13th August 2024, a match won 0-2 by St Mary's YCFC and award a 3-0 victory to Seapatrick FC.
2. At the outset, the Panel would like to thank both parties for their thoughtful submissions and for the passion they demonstrated regarding the issues at hand. We particularly appreciate how strongly St. Mary's felt about the matter. The Panel values the time and effort both sides invested in presenting their perspectives.

Points advanced

3. St Mary's made the following points:
 - a. St Mary's acknowledge that Caolan Campbell was not listed in the initial line-up submitted to the referee, either as a starting player or as a substitute.
 - b. St Mary's informed the referee that Caolan was running late and were advised that they could amend the line-up upon his arrival.
 - c. Upon Caolan's arrival, St Mary's notified the referee, who then amended the line-up on the COMET system.
 - d. The opposing team was not informed of this change.
 - e. It was unclear as to how the opposing team discovered the change
 - f. St Mary's won the match but were subsequently found in breach of **Rule 21.2** during the League's review.
 - g. They focused on the wording of 21.1 in that it provided confirmation of the line up must be given to the referee
 - h. They made reference to inconsistent application of the rules by the League
 - i. There was no dishonesty on their part and that they relied on the referee's advice.

4. Mid Ulster Football League Committee responded as follows:
 - a. The League maintains that it has a responsibility to apply the rules as written, and this includes **Rule 21.2**, which governs the confirmation of players in line-ups.
 - b. The League sought legal advice regarding the interpretation of the rules and acted accordingly.
 - c. The rules in question were also approved by the Irish Football Association (IFA).
 - d. Based on their findings, the League concluded that St Mary's had breached Rule 21.2.
 - e. Consequently, and in compliance with the rules, they determined that the match result should be forfeited.
 - f. There was no discretion in the rules regarding sanction

Relevant rules

5. The relevant rules were as follows:

21) Amendments to confirmed lineups

21.1) Should any player or substitute sustain an injury or become otherwise incapacitated after the confirmation of the lineup to the referee and prior to the kick-off, he may be replaced provided that the referee and the opposing club are notified in writing as soon as possible prior to the commencement of the match, subject to the following.

21.2) If any of the starting lineup named on the team sheet are unable to start the match for any reason, they can be replaced only by one of the five substitutes named on the initial team sheet. The substitute(s) can then be replaced by a player, or players not originally named on the initial team sheet so that the quota of substitutes is not reduced. During the match, 3 substitutes (or 4 if rules allow) can still be used.

21.3) Teams found to have amended their lineup, after confirmation, and without such permission will be defaulted.

21.4) Any team or club official found guilty of amending lineups after the match has commenced will be deemed to have brought the MUFL into disrepute and the club will be fined a sum of not less than £250.

Committee's decision

6. The Panel has great sympathy for St Mary's in this matter. It is clear that the club acted in good faith, relying on the advice of the referee, and there was no intent to breach the rules.
7. The Panel further understands why the appeal was pursued, particularly given the potential confusion arising from the rules and the use of the phrase "subject to the following." Upon review, it appears this wording may have been the result of a typographical error, which may have contributed to a misunderstanding of the rules.
8. However, we are bound to assess the situation within the framework of the League's rules, which were properly approved and must be applied.
9. While we acknowledge the circumstances described by St Mary's, it remains the responsibility of clubs to ensure they fully understand and comply with the rules. In this case, the club's reliance on advice from the referee, while understandable, does not override the requirements set out in **Section 21**.

10. In applying the relevant rules, the Panel held as follows:
 - a. **Rule 21.1** applies specifically to situations where a player sustains an injury/becomes incapacitated after confirmation of the line up. This is not applicable in the present case, as Caolan Campbell's late arrival does not fall under this category.
 - o **Rule 21.2** clearly governs situations where players are added or amended in the line-up after submission. St Mary's did not comply with the requirements of Rule 21.2, particularly in failing to notify the opposing team of the change and failing to add Caolan to the initial team sheet.
11. When submitting team lineups via the Comet system, it is essential to ensure all players, including substitutes, are correctly listed before final submission. In this instance, the proper course of action would have been to add Caolan to the team sheet as a substitute prior to submitting the lineup. This step is critical as the system typically locks the lineup after submission, preventing further amendments except under exceptional circumstances. By conducting a thorough review of the team sheet and verifying player inclusion beforehand, such oversights can be avoided, ensuring compliance with procedural requirements and maintaining the integrity of the submission process.
12. The Committee must base its decision solely on the appeal before us, considering the facts and circumstances directly related to this case. While we understand the desire to draw comparisons, it is not helpful to reference situations, such as that of the Hillsborough case, that are not directly analogous to the matter at hand. Each case must be considered on its own merits, and the unique details of this appeal were the focus of our deliberations.
13. The League acted appropriately in applying the rules as they stand. While St Mary's may have relied on incorrect advice from the referee, this does not alter the fact that the rules were breached. The League's decision to forfeit the match was consistent with the rules and therefore cannot be overturned.

Recommendations for Consideration

14. The Panel recognises the challenges posed by this situation and suggests the following recommendations to the League for future clarity and flexibility:
 - a. **Amend Rule 21.1**
Consider removing the phrase "*subject to the following*" from Rule 21.1 to avoid potential confusion about its application to scenarios outside of incapacitation during warm-ups.
 - b. **Consider introducing Discretion for Sanctions**
The League may wish to explore introducing an element of discretion when applying sanctions for breaches of rules, particularly in cases where a club has acted in good faith and there is no evidence of dishonesty or deliberate non-compliance.

Conclusion

15. While we empathise with St Mary's, the Panel concludes that the League's decision to forfeit the match was correct and consistent with the application of Rule 21.2. We trust that the recommendations provided will help prevent similar disputes in the future.
16. For the reasons stated herein, the unanimous decision of the Committee is that:
 1. The Appeal is dismissed

2. Given the circumstances of this case, St Mary's are to be refunded their fee for the appeal

Dated: 22nd November 2024



Emma McIlveen BL
Chair of the Appeals Committee