

IN THE MATTER OF A FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY COMMISSION

PROCEEDINGS BETWEEN: -

THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

-and-

(1) SHEFFIELD UNITED; AND

(2) WATFORD FC

**DECISION AND WRITTEN REASONS OF
THE INDEPENDENT REGULATORY COMMISSION**

Regulatory Commission: Bradley Pritchard - Chair
Mick Kearns
Tony Carr

Secretary to

Regulatory Commission: Michael O'Connor
(Judicial Services Assistant Manager)

Date: 13 September 2024

Hearing Format: Paper Hearing

Introduction

1. These are the Written Reasons for a decision made by an Independent Regulatory Commission (“**the Commission**”) following consolidated charges brought by The Football Association (“**The FA**”) against Sheffield United (“**SUFC**”) and Watford FC (“**WFC**”).

2. By respective letters dated 04 September 2024, The FA charged both SUFC and WFC with Misconduct for 2 breaches of The FA Rule E20.1 (“**the Charge**”) in respect of an EFL Championship fixture between the clubs on 01 September 2024 (“**the Match**”).

3. Both clubs were charged with the following:

- i. It is alleged that in or around the 94th minute of the fixture, SUFC and WFC failed to ensure that its players did not behave in a way which is improper and/or provocative.
- ii. It is alleged that upon conclusion of the fixture, SUFC and WFC failed to ensure that its players did not behave in a way which is improper and/or provocative.

4. With regard to SUFC, The FA designated their matter as a *Non-Standard Case* due to a previous proven breach of FA Rule E20 in a fixture against Wrexham AFC on 13 August 2024 and/or the multiple reported breaches.

5. In the matter of WFC, The FA designated this as a *Non-Standard Case* due to the multiple reported breaches.

6. Pursuant to The FA Regulations, The FA consolidated the charges against SUFC and WFC. As such, the hearings for each club were conducted together and determined at a joint hearing.

Relevant Rules and Regulations

Procedure

7. Regulation 13 states that –

Where the subject matter of or facts relating to a Charge or Charges against one or more Participant(s) is sufficiently linked (including, but not limited to, where offences are alleged to have been committed in the same Match or where there is common evidence of The Association or the defence) and where appropriate for the timely and efficient disposal of the proceedings, The Association and/or the relevant panel shall have the power to consolidate proceedings so that they are conducted together and the Charges may be determined at a joint hearing

Charge

8. FA Rule E20 states that –

Each Affiliated Association, Competition and Club shall be responsible for ensuring that its Directors, players, officials, employees, servants and representatives, attending any Match do not:

E20.1 behave in a way which is improper, offensive, violent, threatening, abusive, indecent, insulting or provocative.

Reply to the Charge

9. Both SUFC and WFC admitted their respective charges and sought a Commission to deal with matters at a paper hearing (“**the Hearing**”).

10. The Commission were presented with the following documentation as part of the hearing bundle:

- i. Copy of Charge letter for SUFC, dated 04 September 2024,
- ii. Copy of Charge letter for WFC, dated 04 September 2024,
- iii. Reply Form from SUFC, dated 05 September 2024,
- iv. Reply Form from WFC, dated 09 September 2024,
- v. Submissions from Donna Fletcher, SUFC Football Secretary, dated 05 September 2024,
- vi. Submissions from Ian Taker, WFC Head of Legal, dated 18 April 2024,
- vii. Match reports of each respective incident, from Match Referee, Andrew Kitchen, dated 01 September 2024, and
- viii. Several videos and photographs of the Incident.

11. The following is a summary of the principal submissions provided to the Commission. It does not purport to contain reference to all the points made, however the absence of a point, or submission, in these reasons should not imply that the Commission did not take such point, or submission, into consideration when the members determined the matter. For the avoidance of doubt, the Commission has carefully considered all written and video evidence in respect of this case.

Breach 1

12. With regard to the first breach, Match Referee, Andrew Kitchen states in his report:

“In the 94th minute of the match, numerous players from both sides were involved in a mass confrontation around the centre circle. Following the confrontation Sheffield United 6 (Harry Souttar) and Watford 18 (Daniel Jebbison) were both cautioned for unsporting behaviour. This has been submitted to The FA to check for any further misconduct.”

Breach 2

13. Match Referee, Andrew Kitchen states in his report:

“Following the full time whistle, numerous players from both sides were involved in a mass confrontation on the field of play. No disciplinary action was taken, and this has been submitted to The FA so check for any unseen misconduct.”

Sanction

14. Having already admitted the Charges, the Commission considered aggravating and mitigating factors for both SUFC and WFC. These included, inter alia, the nature of the incident, the written submissions offered by each club, and the respective relevant disciplinary histories in relation to breaches of FA Rule E20 within first team fixtures.

SUFC

15. SUFC have four previous breaches of FA Rule E20 in the preceding 5 [five] season period. The teams and details of sanctions are as follows:

- i. EFL Cup against *Wrexham AFC* on 13 August 2024, receiving a fine of £8,500;
- ii. EFL Championship against *Bristol City FC* on 01 November 2022, receiving a fine of £15,000;
- iii. EFL Championship against *Norwich City FC* on 22 October 2022, receiving a fine of £7,500; and
- iv. EFL Championship against *Blackpool FC* on 15 October 2022, receiving a fine of £12,500.

16. The Commission discussed SUFC's record. What was pertinent, was how close in time the individual breaches were to each other. For example, the three charges brought in the 2022/23 season all occurred within less than a month; 15 October, 22 October and 01 November respectively. In the current 2024/25 season, SUFC have a previous proven charge, against *Wrexham AFC*, less than a week prior to this Charge. This pattern of behaviour displays a consistent failing by the club to control its players, despite its claims that they are addressing the issue,

“Following these incidents, we have held internal meetings and reminded the players of their collective responsibility not to participate in mass confrontations even when provoked.”

17. Further, the Commission noted that SUFC were only 6 [six] games into the season yet had already received 2 [two] separate charges for a failure to ensure that its players did not behave in a way which is improper and/or provocative. This, in the eyes of the Commission was another significantly aggravating factor.

18. Assessing the incidents themselves, SUFC submit that

“the confrontation started after [REDACTED] tried to punch [REDACTED] twice an action which was not seen by any of that match officials, we believe this is the catalyst behind the mass confrontation.”

After reviewing the footage, the Commission do not accept SUFC’s submission that this was the origin of the first mass confrontation. Rather, it appeared to be the actions of SUFC [REDACTED] who, in an effort to stop his opponent gaining an advantage, grabs the WFC [REDACTED] for a sustained period of time. In the footage, WFC [REDACTED] is seen trying to free himself from the holding, resulting in both players falling to the ground. They are then surrounded by players from both clubs.

19. Yet, as players are attempting to calm down, the footage shows SUFC [REDACTED] [REDACTED] waving his arms, encouraging the crowd to get louder and be more passionate. To be clear, this, in the eyes of the Commission, does not have a causative effect on the breaches. However, it does demonstrate a lack of understanding of the responsibility that players have not to exacerbate such incidents.

WFC

20. WFC have a clean record, with no previous breaches of FA Rule E20 in the preceding 5 [five] season period.

21. Notwithstanding the fact that WFC players may have felt provoked, their involvement resulted in their club being charged.

To decide on an appropriate sanction for both clubs, the Commission took into account the FA Guidance provided to all League clubs in relation to multiple breaches of FA Rule E20.

“For each successive non-standard breach of FA Rule E20, including E20.1 and E20.2, within a 12-month period the maximum fine shall double and then treble (and so on) the amount set out above.”

22. As such, the Commission have imposed the following sanctions:

- i. SUFC is fined £17,000.
- ii. WFC is fined £5,000.

23. These decisions are subject to the relevant Appeal Regulations.

Bradley Pritchard (Chair)

Mick Kearns

Tony Carr

15 September 2024