

IN THE MATTER OF A FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
INDEPENDENT REGULATORY COMMISSION

BETWEEN:

THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

and

MR PAUL HECKINGBOTTOM;
PRESTON NORTH END FOOTBALL CLUB.

WRITTEN REASONS AND DECISION OF
THE INDEPENDENT REGULATORY COMMISSION FOLLOWING THE
HEARING
ON 11 DECEMBER 2025

Background

1. These are the written reasons for a decision made by an Independent Regulatory Commission which sat by video conference on 11 December 2025.
2. The Regulatory Commission members were Mr Gareth Farrelly, Chairman and Independent Football Panel Member, Mr Ian Atkins, Independent Football Panel Member and Mr Francis Benali, Independent Football Panel Member.
3. Mr Conrad Gibbons, Judicial Services Assistant Manager acted as Secretary to the Regulatory Commission.

Charges, Evidence and Replies

4. By letter dated 28 November 2025, The Football Association (“The FA”) charged Mr Paul Heckingbottom of Preston North End FC (“PNE”) with misconduct in respect of a breach of FA Rule E3.1 in respect of the EFL Championship fixture between Watford FC and Preston North End FC on 25 November 2025.
5. The Football Association designated this as a Non-Standard Case as the particular facts of the Misconduct were of an unusual nature and/or Mr Heckingbottom had been issued with a charge for a similar matter, as determined by The Association, which took place in the preceding 12 months, and that charge was found proven, namely two previous breaches of FA Rule E3.1:
 - Watford FC v PNE FC, 21 January 2025; and
 - Hull City AFC v PNE FC, 21 April 2025.
6. It was alleged that during the pre-match briefing, Mr Heckingbottom acted in an improper manner and/or used abusive and/or insulting words towards a match official.
7. Rule E3.1 states that –

A Participant shall at all times act in the best interests of the game and shall not act in any manner which is improper or brings the game into disrepute or use any one, or a combination of, violent conduct, serious foul play, threatening, abusive, indecent or insulting words or behaviour.
8. The FA included the following evidence with the respective charge: -
 - Email correspondence from Mr. J. Bell, Match Referee, to Mr. R. Marsh of The FA, on 26 November 2025
 - Statement of Mr. I. Louza, Watford FC Captain
 - Statement of Mr. J. Gracia, Watford FC Head Coach
 - Statement of Mr. K. Affleck, Watford FC Head of Communications.
9. With regard to the incident the Match Referee, reported: -

“I'd like to bring to your attention an incident that occurred prior to the game I refereed last night (Tuesday 25th November) in the EFL Championship between Watford v Preston North End.

At 18:29 I made my way down from the referees dressing room to the area at the bottom of the stairs, at the foot of the tunnel at Watford, ready for the manager/captain briefing. I had a short conversation with Peter Ridsdale (Preston) and said a brief hello to Ben Rhodes (Preston) before noticing that the Watford Manager (Javi Gracia) and Watford Captain (Imran Louza) had made their way out of their dressing room alongside their Head of Comms (Kevin Affleck). Seconds later, Paul Heckingbottom (Preston Manager) and Liam Lindsay (Preston Captain) joined them and they were exchanging handshakes. I made my way over to the group and shook the hands of Javi and Imran before attempting to shake the hand of Paul. Paul refused and stood with his arms folded telling me to 'get on with it'. I found this highly irregular as I have never experienced a reaction like this when offering to shake the hand of a manager pre-match in 20 years of officiating. It felt like he was trying to be disrespectful and undermine my authority in a public way before a ball had even been kicked. I again offered to shake Paul's hand 'asking if he really wasn't going to shake my hand before the game' (as I was so surprised by his reaction). Paul then went into an aggressive rant, raising his voice, questioning my integrity and insulting me. He said 'no I don't want to shake your hand cos you're a liar, you shouldn't be on the fucking game and you shouldn't be at this fucking level! You're a disgrace!'

At this point, Peter Ridsdale who was stood only a few yards behind us moved across and took hold of the left forearm of Paul saying 'that's enough, leave it.'

Paul repeated that I was a 'fucking liar' and to 'get on with it' before I stepped in and said firmly 'that's enough'.

I was taken back at what I had just been subjected to in what is meant to be a professional environment. The shock was also reflected in the faces of Javi, Imran and Liam who all stood in a stunned silence looking incredibly uncomfortable. I shook the hand of Liam before continuing my pre-match briefing which from this point was witnessed in silence.

For clarity, the incident above was witnessed by Javi Gracia, Imran Louza, Liam Lindsay, Peter Ridsdale and Kevin Affleck.

Immediately after the briefing I turned round and Stuart McCall (Preston North End Assistant Manager) was a few steps behind me. Thinking he had therefore witnessed what had gone off and believing we have a good working relationship, I asked him 'what was that about?' Stuart responded that Paul 'obviously has it in his head that that he didn't punch the wall last year and that you'd lied'. I reaffirmed categorically that this was not the case. Ben Rhodes was close by at this point and I mentioned to him that I considered Paul's behaviour to be unacceptable. He asked me what had happened as he had not heard or seen anything as he was just around the corner and I gave him a brief overview of what had happened before heading back to my dressing room.

During the warm-up I was further approached by Stuart McCall whilst I was around the centre circle. He came over and commented that 'this is your opportunity to show what your character is about now. It would be easy to give them everything after what's happened'. This felt like an underhanded approach to further influence my judgement and management of the game whilst also showing that he'd witnessed Paul's behaviour pre-match”.

10. Mr Heckingbottom admitted the charge by reply on 4 December 2025. He did not request a personal hearing, and the case was dealt with on the papers only. The Club submitted a detailed letter, Mr Heckingbottom's statement in response to the charge, the observations provided by Mr Heckingbottom in response to The FA earlier request on 29 November

2025, further observations from Club Officials; Mr Ben Rhodes, Mr Stuart Mc Call, Mr Peter Ridsdale and Mr Liam Lindsay, the contents of which were read and noted by the Commission.

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.
12. In summary, it was Mr Heckingbottom's position that this was the first game played at Vicarage Road since January 2025, a game which led to a charge for misconduct being brought against him. An element of the charge brought was that Mr Heckingbottom had allegedly punched a wall during an incident with the Match Officials. Mr Bell had been the Fourth Official that day and had given live evidence in the hearing that followed. For completeness, Mr Heckingbottom had denied that charge and requested a personal hearing. Despite the charge being found (part) proven, Mr Heckingbottom remained aggrieved with the outcome of this case. He accepted that the charge was found proven to the requisite standard but took issue with the evidence given at the hearing by Mr Bell.
13. Mr Heckingbottom went into this game concerned, aware that Mr Bell had given evidence against him previously in a contentious case. This, coincidentally, had been the first time he had been appointed to referee one of their fixtures since the incident and subsequent decision. He believed that PGMO were aware of this and avoided any appointment.
14. As to the incident itself, Mr Heckingbottom acknowledged that he refused to shake hands with the Referee. He submitted that the reason for doing so was initially communicated privately, he acknowledged saying to Mr Bell that he should not be allowed in a football stadium, let alone in the Referee's kit. Then, Mr Bell had tried to shake his hand again, and he maintained his position, passing further comment to Mr Bell, this time saying, *inter alia*, that there was no way he was shaking his hand. He accepted that passage of his behaviour was improper, his justification for which was that, if the Referee had left it alone, and not persisted in trying to get him to shake his hand, the incident would not have escalated. He had spoken to Kevin Friend from PGMO about this after the game, setting out his position. His grievance with the previous decision of the Regulatory Commission and the evidence given by Mr Bell precipitated his feelings, and he considered that he was within his rights to decide who he wished to shake hands with or not. In fact, Mr Friend had proscriptively addressed when briefing Mr Bell before the game that there may be an issue. It was Mr Heckingbottom's position that they were forewarned yet followed the course of appointing Mr Bell to the game.
15. For completeness, the statements from the Club Officials did not offer anything further beyond that which had been set out by The FA and Mr Heckingbottom himself.
16. The FA provided their response to the Club's submissions. It was submitted that much of the evidence submitted related to the previous misconduct case and the evidence given by Mr Bell in those proceedings. However, this should not in any way justify, excuse or mitigate Mr Heckingbottom's actions in respect of this fixture. It was submitted, respectfully, that such discussion sought to distract from the present misconduct that Mr

Heckingbottom refused to shake the hand of a Match Official, followed by using plainly abusive and insulting words towards that Match Official whilst purporting to 'explain' his previously improper behaviour. It demonstrates an attempt to minimise his wrongdoing.

17. It was submitted that Mr Heckingbottom continued to minimise his wrongdoing throughout his submission as did the Club within its submission. The FA did not accept that the Match Referee attempting to shake the hand of a manager prior to the start of the game in any way "pressurised Mr Heckingbottom into a position" where he expressed his views in a way he might not have done otherwise. The evidence in fact suggests the contrary, with the Watford FC Officials noting that Mr Heckingbottom appeared upset / angry prior to any engagement with the Match Official. It is unreasonable to suggest that the Match Referee should have foreseen Mr Heckingbottom would display such hostility towards him in light of the January Misconduct Charge. Notwithstanding this apparent ill feeling towards Mr Bell, Mr Heckingbottom is bound by the FA Rules and is expected to adhere to the standards of General Behaviour as set out within the FA Rules. On the evidence, Mr Bell carried out his duties of Match Official in the usual way and to the satisfaction of opposition Participants present at the time.
18. As far as Mr Heckingbottom's intent was relevant to sanction, The FA claimed it to be fanciful for Mr Heckingbottom to suggest he had no intention of acting improperly or of using insulting language toward the Referee. It was apparent that Mr Heckingbottom harboured ill feeling and to infer it was the result of the Referee's actions was not supported and contradictory to the evidence provided by a number of witnesses, whose accounts had not been challenged.
19. The FA invited the Commission to impose a sporting and financial penalty in this case. They considered Mr Heckingbottom's previous disciplinary record to be an aggravating factor. This was the third breach of FA Rule E3.1 in just over 10 months, and the fourth since February 2023. This demonstrated a pattern of behaviour toward Match Officials which Mr Heckingbottom has seemingly failed to address. He has received varying sporting and financial sanctions as well as warnings to his future conduct, yet he appears unable to improve his behaviour toward Match Officials. By way of mitigation, it was accepted that Mr Heckingbottom had apologised to the Commission and admitted the charge at the earliest opportunity.
20. The FA invited a sanction of not less than four matches and that this sanction be in the form of an Extended Touchline Suspension including the tunnel area. This would mark the circumstances and nature of the present and previous misconduct. Equally, there should be an uplift in the financial sanction imposed.

Sanction

21. Given that the charge was admitted, the task of the Commission was to determine sanction. The Commission were mindful that any sanction should be fair and proportionate based on the material facts of the case. There is no exact formula for doing so. This was also an unusual case given the nature of the incident, where it occurred, the timing of the incident, that being before the game. It is not the role of the Commission to scrutinise the policies of PGMO on the appointment of Match Officials suffice to say that they will have a better knowledge of any residual issues with players, managers or staff and how best to mitigate any risk associated with this. Conversely, the Club would equally be sensitive to this. Whilst Mr Bell was appointed to the game, and Mr Friend had factored in Mr Heckingbottom's potential problem with this, it appears the Club took no

steps to mitigate this eventuality. It was not persuasive to retrospectively seek to deflect all responsibility to PGMO or the Match Officials themselves. There could easily have been a contingency plan to avoid the issue at all, however, they do not appear to have taken any steps. It would appear from all parties that the Referee performed well in the game and there were no actual issues on the field of play.

22. As to Mr Heckingbottom's grievances with the previous case involving Mr Bell, the Commission have had the benefit of reviewing the written reasons for this case. For completeness, the Commission were also provided with the written reasons for his two other cases.
23. On 15 February 2023, in a fixture against Middlesbrough FC, Mr Heckingbottom admitted two breaches of FA Rule E3.1. Charge 1 in respect of his dismissal for "violently kicking the substitute board and smashing it whilst in the possession of the 4th official" and Charge 2 for "sarcastically clapping" the decision of the match referee to dismiss him. For this he received a three-match touchline ban and a fine equivalent to one weeks' net wages.
24. On 21 January 2025, in a fixture against Watford FC, Mr Heckingbottom was charged with two breaches of FA Rule E3.1 arising from his behaviour during the half time interval of a fixture. He admitted Charge 1, albeit on a limited basis: namely that he had used abusive and insulting language as alleged but had not struck the wall of the tunnel as also alleged. The Commission found that he had struck the wall. Charge 2 was not found proven. This charge alleged that following his dismissal, he acted in an improper manner by entering the technical area prior to the commencement of the second half. The sanction imposed for the conduct in respect of Charge 1 was a two-match touchline ban, £7,500 fine and a warning as to future conduct.
25. Finally, on 21 April 2025, in a fixture against Hull City AFC, Mr Heckingbottom was charged with a single breach of FA Rule E3.1 following his dismissal for two cautions. In the 55th minute, he was cautioned for leaving the confines of his technical area. At full time, he entered the field of play and shook the hands of the Assistant Referees. He then turned away and glanced back to the Match Referee and shouted, "get fucked". He admitted the misconduct and received a two-match touchline ban, a fine of £6,000 and a warning as to future conduct.
26. Having considered all of the aggravating and mitigation factors, it was agreed that a sporting and financial sanction was appropriate. It was accepted that the charge was admitted, at the earliest opportunity, and that Mr Heckingbottom had apologised to the Commission. In addition, this season he had avoided any censure up until this incident. However, that had to be weighed against the incident itself. It took place during what was the pre-match briefing. Mr Heckingbottom will have known who the Match Referee was in advance of the game and will have been aware of his feelings towards him. It was not accepted that the Match Referee in some forced him to shake his hand. The reaction of all those in attendance is telling. They were shocked at his reaction and conduct. Mr Heckingbottom has admitted himself that he acted in an improper manner and/or used abusive and/or insulting words. These were highly aggravated factors given Mr Heckingbottom is a very experienced football manager. Furthermore, this was his fourth breach since February 2023. It is evident that sporting, financial sanctions and warnings as to future conduct to date have had little deterrent effect. The FA submissions were noted but it was unanimously agreed that a three game Extended Touchline Suspension be imposed.

27. The Commission were also provided with Mr Heckingbottom's football remuneration. In determining a financial sanction, the Commission undertook the same exercise of scrutinising the aggravating and mitigating factors in detail as done above and agreed that a financial sanction of £10,000.00 be applied. For completeness, credit was applied when determining both the sporting and financial sanction.

Conclusion

28. The Commission, having carefully considered all of the written and evidence imposed the following sanction on Mr Heckingbottom:

- (i) He is given a 3-match Extended Touchline Suspension; and
- (ii) He is fined the sum of £10,000.00.

29. The Guidance Document for Technical Area Dismissals, Touchline Suspensions and Ground Suspensions sets out that for a period of an extended touchline suspension, a Participant, in addition to the above restrictions, may not:

Enter the changing rooms at any time from 30 minutes before kick-off to 30 minutes following the end of the match, including extra time and kicks from the penalty mark. This also includes the half-time period.

30. This decision is subject to the relevant Appeal Regulations

Mr Gareth Farrelly, Chairman and Independent Football Panel Member
Mr Ian Atkins, Independent Football Panel Member
Mr Francis Benali, Independent Football Panel Member
16 December 2025