

IN THE MATTER OF A FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION  
INDEPENDENT REGULATORY COMMISSION

BETWEEN:

THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

and

(1) COVENTRY CITY FC; AND  
(2) SHEFFIELD UNITED FC.

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WRITTEN REASONS AND DECISION OF  
THE INDEPENDENT REGULATORY COMMISSION FOLLOWING THE  
HEARING  
ON 7 JANUARY 2025

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## **Background**

1. These are the written reasons and decision made by an Independent Regulatory Commission which sat by video conference on 7 January 2025 to consider the consolidated charges against Coventry City FC and Sheffield United FC.
2. The Regulatory Commission members were Mr Gareth Farrelly, Chairman and Independent Football Panel Member, Mr Andrew Adie, Independent Football Panel Member and Mr Brian Talbot, Independent Football Panel Member.
3. Mr Michael O'Connor, FA Judicial Assistant Manager, acted as Secretary to the Regulatory Commission.

## **Coventry City FC**

4. By letter dated 25 November 2024, The Football Association charged Coventry City FC with misconduct for a breach of FA Rule E20.1 in respect of the English Football League Championship fixture between Coventry City FC and Sheffield United FC that took place on 25 November 2024.
5. It was alleged that upon halftime of the fixture Coventry City FC failed to ensure that its players and/or technical area occupants did not behave in a way which was improper and/or provocative.
6. The FA designated this as a Non-Standard Case due to the involvement of technical area occupants.

## **Sheffield United FC**

7. By letter dated 25 November 2024, The Football Association charged Sheffield United FC with misconduct for a breach of FA Rule E20.1 in respect of the English Football League Championship fixture between Coventry City FC and Sheffield United FC that took place on 25 November 2024.
8. It was alleged that upon halftime of the fixture Sheffield United FC failed to ensure that its players and/or technical area occupants did not behave in a way which was improper and/or provocative.
9. The FA designated this as a Non-Standard Case due to the involvement of technical area occupants and/or previous proven breaches of FA Rule E20 in fixtures against Wrexham AFC on 13 August 2024, Watford FC on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2024, and Portsmouth FC on 28 September 2024.

## **Consolidated Proceedings**

10. The above referenced Charges were consolidated pursuant to Regulation 13 of the Disciplinary Procedures Regulations of The FA Handbook Season 2024/25. It was stated on each Charge that the proceedings would be conducted together, and the Charges would be determined at a joint hearing.

## **Rules**

11. 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.*

## **Evidence**

12. The FA included the following evidence with the respective charges:

- Report of the Match Referee, Mr. D Bond, dated 23 November 2024;
- A video clip of the incident; and
- Essential Information for Clubs 2024-25.

13. The Match Referee Mr Darren Bond stated, in his Extraordinary Incident Report Form:-

*“Following the half time whistle both teams left the field of play and a confrontation happened within the tunnel area. This was not witnessed by any match official due to the location within the tunnel area however we have been advised that tunnel CCTV is available. Following the game, Claire Harkness (CCFC Ops Director) attended the dressing room for us to advise a report would be submitted. I was advised by Claire that CCTV is available, with police involvement that could lead to a possible arrest for a Sheffield United coaching member. At the conclusion of the game, there were a number of police officers within the tunnel area”.*

## **Replies to the Charges**

14. Coventry City FC denied the charge by reply on 28 November 2024. They requested a personal hearing.
15. Sheffield United FC admitted the charge by reply on 25 November 2024. They did not request a personal hearing, and their case was dealt with on the papers only. They submitted general mitigation setting out their position on what they claimed to be the cause and culpability of the incident and those involved, the contents of which were read and noted by the Commission.
16. The burden of proving the charges rest with The FA. The burden of proof in this case is the balance of probabilities.
17. 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 the written and video evidence in respect of this case.

### **Hearing**

18. Mr Harry Laidlaw presented the case on behalf of The FA. He led the Commission through the video evidence and The FA position on the Coventry City FC case. It was submitted that the video evidence was clear. Whilst the incident in the tunnel was sparked by the actions of the Sheffield United coaching staff member, the actions of the Coventry City players and staff were clearly improper and/or provocative. It was claimed that their actions escalated matters, specifically in the case of the Coventry City No 22, who could be seen on the video to have returned to the incident and pushed and shoved an opposing player. This conduct of itself was improper and provocative. It could not be said that this was purely defensive. There was further pushing and shoving between both sides in the tunnel area involving another Coventry City player and the first team coach.
19. Coventry City were represented by Club Secretary, Mike Reid and Performance Director, Dr Claire-Marie Roberts. The Commission also heard from club witnesses, Norman Bassette, Joel Latibeaudiere, Bobby Thomas, John Dempster and Harry College. They were honest and credible witnesses. Mr Laidlaw had some questions for some of the witnesses, however there was very little dispute between the witness accounts of the parties.
20. It was the club's case that those involved were acting to protect Mr Bassette, a young player who had been targeted by the opposition, following the sending off of a Sheffield United player in the game. They had requested a personal hearing to provide context, set out the culture of the club, that being one of respect and the reaction of those involved being one in keeping with normal human behaviour.

21. The challenge for the club was that all of these points go directly to mitigation, not the facts of the case, or the charge as drafted. It was clear from the video evidence that the conduct of some of those involved was improper and/or provocative. Mr Latibaudiere admitted this in his evidence. His actions of pushing the Sheffield United player with force were aggressive. It went beyond defensive conduct. Of course, this had to be considered in the context of the incident, but to aver that this was not improper, and/or provocative is difficult to reconcile. Mr Dempster pushing the Sheffield United coach away may well have been to protect Mr Bassette, but it was confrontational, improper conduct and contributed to the escalation of the incident. The Commission accepts the emotion of the game, any subsequent incident and the reaction of the group to protect one of their own, however, it could not be said that the reaction of those involved was anything other than improper, provocative and escalated the incident, in what was a tight, confined space. As to who started it, again, this goes to culpability and is dealt with below. The Commission unanimously found the charge proven.
22. The Standard Penalty for an EFL Championship club that admits a single breach of FA Rule E20 is £5,000.00. In the event that a breach is denied and found proven, the penalty is £7,500.00.

### **Sanction**

23. Having found the charge proven, the Regulatory Commission moved to sanction. They heard submissions from The FA and the club. The FA accepted that the catalyst for the incident was the action of the Sheffield United coaching staff member. For completeness, it was Sheffield United's submission that the conduct of Mr Bassette in the first half of the fixture had contributed to what had ensued. Coventry City FC expressed their disappointment that the charge had been found proven but sought to reiterate the points advanced in evidence as well as their positive disciplinary record to this point. The Commission took account of the submissions and gave consideration to a number of additional factors - the incident itself, the number of players involved from both sides, the duration of the incident, the level of aggression involved and where the incident took place. It was clear that this incident was caused by the initial action of the Sheffield United coach. It is accepted that some of those involved may have been acting as peacemakers, but this incident involved a large number of player and technical area occupants, from both sides, in a confined area where it could have escalated further, and the risk of injury was high. It is of note that the match day stewards played a role in de-escalating the incident. These were aggravating factors for both sides.
24. By way of mitigation, this was the first breach of this type for Coventry City FC in the current and preceding five seasons. However, the charge had been denied and subsequently found proven. It was not possible to apply any mitigation in this regard. Given the seriousness of the incident itself, the culpability of both sides, and their actions, the Commission were minded to impose a sanction of £12,000.00 but it was reduced to £10,000.00.

25. The Commission considered the incident as well as previous sanctions imposed on Sheffield United FC with regard to breaches of Rule E20 which are detailed as follows:
- (1) The club was fined £7,500.00 for an incident that occurred in an EFL Championship fixture v Norwich City FC on 22 October 2022;
  - (2) The club was fined £15,000.00 for an incident that occurred in an EFL Championship fixture v Bristol City FC on 1 November 2022;
  - (3) The club was fined £8,500.00 for an incident that occurred in an EFL League Cup fixture v Wrexham AFC on 13 August 2024;
  - (4) The club was fined 17,000.00 for an incident that occurred in an EFL Championship fixture v Watford FC on 1 September 2024; and
  - (5) The club was fined £40,000.00 for an incident that occurred in an EFL Championship fixture v Portsmouth FC on 28 September 2024.
26. It was noted by the Regulatory Commission that this is the sixth incident of this nature in over two years and one month. This is an aggravating factor. The club submissions were not persuasive. The incident was started by the Sheffield United coach. But for his actions, the incident would not have occurred. This again was an aggravating factor, as was the number of players and technical area occupants involved. Whilst the club makes mention in their submissions that they have reminded the players and coaching staff of their obligations under Rule E20, it does not appear that this has had any effect, or that they have taken any proactive steps to stem this recurring behaviour. For completeness, there are also an additional five youth breaches of Rule E20 on the club record between 18 January 2022 and 7 February 2024.
27. In determining the fines issued to clubs at this level, the Commission considered the Standard Penalty Guidelines for EFL Championship Clubs in relation to such incidents. However, this was not a Standard Case for Sheffield United FC, and the Commission has a discretion with regard to sanction. In the *Essential Information for Clubs 2024-2025*, it is stated, *inter alia*, that the maximum fine for Non-Standard E20 breaches in the EFL Championship is £50,000.00. Furthermore, the Guidance states: - “*for each successive breach of Rule E20, including E20.1 and E20.2, within a 12 month period the maximum fine shall double and then treble (and so on) as set out*”.
28. The Regulatory Commission did take into account the fact that the charge was admitted. The Commission noted that any sanction must be fair and proportionate. However, taking the offending behaviour into account and the club’s previous disciplinary record, notably this being the eleventh incident within the previous five seasons, the fourth non-standard breach since August 2024, the Commission were minded to impose a fine in excess of £100,000.00. However, there was credit given for the admittance and the fine was reduced accordingly to £80,000.00.

## **Conclusion**

29. The Regulatory Commission, having carefully considered the Regulations, have imposed the following sanction:

Coventry City FC

- (i) Coventry City FC is fined the sum of £10,000.00.

Sheffield United FC

- (i) Sheffield United FC is fined the sum of £80,000.00.

**Appeal**

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

Mr Gareth Farrelly, Chairman and Independent Panel Member

Mr Andrew Adie, Independent Football Panel Member

Mr Brian Talbot, Independent Football Panel Member

10 January 2025