

**Football Association Regulatory Commission (the 'Commission')**

**in the matter of a 'Clearly Insufficient Punishment' Claim brought by The Football Association ('The FA') against Liam Roberts ('LR') of Millwall FC ('MFC').**

**Regulatory Commission Decision**

- 1) These are the written reasons for a decision made by an Independent Regulatory Commission which sat on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2025 via Microsoft Teams video conference.
- 2) The Commission members were Mr. Stuart Ripley (Chairman), Mr. Udo Onwere and Mr. Ray Olivier, all three of whom are Independent Football Panel Members of The FA Judicial Panel.
- 3) Mr. Paddy McCormack of The FA Judicial Services Department acted as Secretary to the Regulatory Commission.
- 4) The following is a summary of the principal submissions and evidence provided to the Commission. It does not purport to contain reference to all points made, however the absence in these reasons of any particular point, or submission, 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 evidence and materials furnished with regard to this case.

**Rules and Regulations relevant to the Claim.**

- 5) The IFAB Laws of the Game definition of Serious Foul Play is as follows: *"A tackle or challenge that endangers the safety of an opponent or uses excessive force or brutality must be sanctioned as serious foul play. Any player who lunges at an opponent in challenging for the ball from the front, from the side or from behind using one or both legs, with excessive force or endangers the safety of an opponent is guilty of serious foul play."*
- 6) Where, following a sending off The FA believes that the standard punishment of a three-match suspension is clearly insufficient it may bring a claim pursuant to: *Regulation 20.2 of Section One of Part D: On Field Regulations and Fast Track 6 of Part E: Fast Track*

*Regulations of the Disciplinary Regulations (pages 197 and 264-267 of The FA Handbook Season 2024-2025 respectively).*

- 7) *Fast Track 6* gives The FA the ability to make an 'insufficient punishment' claim so that exceptional cases may be rectified. Such claims may be lodged in relation to on-field offences which result in a dismissal for Serious Foul Play, Violent Conduct or spitting. LR was dismissed for Serious Foul Play.
- 8) *Regulation 6* states: "A Referee's report showing that a Player was dismissed for serious foul play, violent conduct, or spitting shall be conclusive evidence that the Player has breached the relevant Law of the Game and shall not be subject to challenge, save for where any such dismissal is subject to a claim for wrongful dismissal." LR did not seek to claim his dismissal was 'wrongful'.
- 9) *Regulation 7* states that matters falling under Fast Track 6 are to be determined on video and written evidence only.
- 10) *Regulation 11.2* states that an insufficient punishment claim may only succeed if the Commission is satisfied so that it is sure that:
  - I. *The circumstances of the dismissal under review are truly exceptional, such that the standard punishment should not be applied; and*
  - II. *As a result of the truly exceptional circumstances the standard punishment would be clearly insufficient.*
- 11) *Regulation 11.3* states that when considering whether the terms of Regulation 11.2 are met, the Commission shall have regard to (*inter alia*):
  - (a) *the applicable Law(s) of the Game and any relevant FIFA instructions and/or guidelines;*
  - (b) *the nature of the dismissal offence including the Player's state of mind, in particular any intent, recklessness or negligence;*
  - (c) *where applicable, the level of force used;*
  - (d) *any injury to an opponent caused by the incident;*
  - (e) *any other impact on the game in which the incident occurred;*
  - (f) *the prevalence of the type of incident in question in football generally; and*
  - (g) *the wider interests of football in applying consistent punishments for dismissal offences.*
- 12) In the event that a claim is successful, the standard punishment is set aside and the Commission goes on to determine an appropriate and proportionate punishment with the above factors in mind.

### Background to the Claim

- 13) The relevant incident took place during the Crystal Palace FC ('CPFC') v Millwall FC, FA Cup 5<sup>th</sup> Round fixture on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2025.
- 14) Following a challenge and collision around the 6<sup>th</sup> minute of the match between LR (MFC's goalkeeper) and the CPFC striker, Jean-Phillipe Mateta ('JPM'), LR was dismissed for Serious Foul Play.
- 15) In his Official Report Form the Match Referee, Mr. Michael Oliver, stated, *"I have to report that I, as the Referee sent off Roberts, Liam Joseph of Millwall FC Under Law 12 section: S1"*.
- 16) The FA, by letter addressed to LR at MFC, dated 4<sup>th</sup> March 2025, brought a *'claim following a sending off where the standard punishment is clearly insufficient' ('the Claim')*. The Claim by The FA read *'It is claimed that your actions in or around the 6<sup>th</sup> minute, whereby you committed the sending off offence of serious foul play, are such that the standard punishment otherwise applicable to that sending off offence is clearly insufficient'*.
- 17) The FA relied on the following evidence:
  - a) *Dismissal Report of the Match Referee, Mr. M. Oliver, dated 1<sup>st</sup> March 2025;*
  - b) *Letter from CPFC to The Football Association;*
  - c) *Video clips of the incident; and*
  - d) *Photograph of the incident.*
- 18) By way of The FA's Disciplinary Proceedings Reply Form (SPCI) LR denied the Claim and indicated that he understood that the Claim would be dealt with by way of a Paper Hearing.
- 19) The Paper Hearing took place via Microsoft Teams on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2025.

### Documentation submitted by The FA

#### The CPFC Letter

- 20) Observations were sought by The FA from CPFC. CPFC responded with a letter dated 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2025 ('the CPFC letter'). Attached to the CPFC letter at Appendix A was a 'Medical Update' from a medical member of staff within CPFC.
- 21) In summary, CPFC, *inter alia*, made the following observations:

- a) LR left his box and “[propelled] himself and his boot at the head of JMP, striking his head viciously with a high boot”;
- b) JMP is 6ft 4inches tall. He was almost at full height at the point of contact. LR’s boot “must have been between 6ft and 6ft 4 inches in the air”;
- c) LR was fully aware of JMP; had time to pull out of the challenge but proceeded “with the most extreme and violent force he could possibly have mustered”;
- d) [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- e) [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED];
- f) [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED];
- g) [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- h) [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- i) It is unclear how long JMP will be unable to play but, distressingly for him, he is likely to miss his first international call up for the France v Croatia fixture(s) due to take place on 20<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2025;
- j) [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- k) [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- l) It is CPFC’s position that “a harsher sanction must be handed down”. CPFC expect that a “clear and unequivocal” signal is sent that this “cannot and must not happen again”; and
- m) The view expressed in (l) above is supported by the Media and public analysis of the challenge. CPFC quoted five well-known media personalities who had publicly commented on the incident.

22) Attached at Appendix A of CPFC’s submissions was a detailed description of the medical attention and treatment administered to JPM. A still photograph of the collision, with the image showing the moment immediately after LR’s boot made contact with the head of JPM, was also attached to CPFC’s submissions.

### The FA's Submissions

- 23) The FA submitted a document entitled *"Claim by The FA – Standard Punishment Clearly Insufficient"*. Paras 6-12 of the document set out the Regulatory framework applicable to the claim (set out in this document at paras 5 to 12 above). Paras 13-22 set out The FA's submissions on the matter.
- 24) In summary, The FA stated, *inter alia*, the following:
- a) The video footage furnished to the Commission *"is extremely compelling evidence in support of this Claim"*;
  - b) *"LR's decision to jump towards JMP with both feet off the ground was an exceptionally reckless and dangerous one"*;
  - c) LR's decisions and actions meant that his boot was *"inevitably going to come into contact with JPM's face or head in a fashion that would risk serious injury to JPM"*;
  - d) The degree of recklessness exhibited was *"truly exceptional"*;
  - e) Challenges of this nature are scarcely encountered;
  - f) The fact that LR is a goalkeeper is irrelevant and the challenge should be viewed in the same way as if LR were an outfield player;
  - g) *"The inherent force and danger involved in LR's actions are obvious"* and *"such an act is clearly out of the parameters anticipated when legislating standard penalties for serious foul play"*;
  - h) The media attention and commentary on the incident is *"indicative of its startling nature"*. *"It is plainly in the wider interests of football for players to know that such highly reckless actions will have severe consequences"*; and
  - i) The FA invited the Commission to *"uphold the Claim, set aside the standard penalty and impose a penalty well in excess of the standard penalty of three-matches..."*.

### Documentation submitted by and on behalf of Liam Roberts

#### Statement from LR

- 25) LR submitted a signed statement in which, *inter alia*, he stated the following:
- a) LR acknowledged that *"my challenge for the ball was unacceptable and that a red card was deserved"*;
  - b) He *"immediately sought to apologise to Mr Mateta and can only apologise to him again"*;
  - c) He wished to emphasise that *"although reckless, my actions were in no way deliberate"* and that he *"would never set out to deliberately commit a foul like this..."*;

- d) LR went on... *"I have made a mistake, in a fraction of a second, with terrible consequences for Mr. Mateta, which I deeply regret";*
- e) He *"was entirely committed to winning the ball and the decision to use my feet rather than my head was an instinctual one...I would never make this kind of challenge intentionally";*
- f) LR stated, *"Unexpectedly, the ball checked and bounced higher than I had anticipated...this meant I had to come further to win the challenge than I had initially expected...even so, I thought there was time for me to get the ball and win the challenge cleanly. However, at the last second, Mateta and Cooper came into contact...and Mateta was bumped more directly into my path. By this time, I had committed to the challenge and had no opportunity to adjust my body position or alter my approach";*
- g) LR stated, *"although I don't accept that the standard punishment is insufficient, I accept that the challenge was reckless and that the sending off was justified. Again, I am very sorry";*
- h) In respect to the period after the incident LR went on *"I was instantly devastated by the incident. I could see that Mateta was injured and receiving treatment...my immediate concern was for him";*
- i) As the first half of the match proceeded in his absence, LR received a text from his wife asking if he was *"okay?"* – he replied at 12:39pm *"just gutted hope the guy is ok"* as his *"first thought was to express my concern for Mr. Mateta";*
- j) LR said that he obtained JPM's mobile number later that day and at 18:56 he sent JPM the following WhatsApp message, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- k) LR received a reply from JPM at 22:47. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- l) With regard to the fallout from the incident LR said that *"...I began receiving some awful abuse, to the extent that I have now had to delete my Twitter account. I have asked MFC to shield me from the worst of this, but I understand that certain sections of the press have published numerous articles about the Incident and suggested that I acted deliberately. Distressingly, even my wife has received online abuse..."*.
- m) LR recounts that the abuse and knowledge that he caused harm to another professional has *"had a real impact on my mental wellbeing"*.

#### Submissions on behalf of LR

- 26) Submissions were made on behalf of LR. In summary, *inter alia*, the following points were made:

- a) Contrary to The FA's submissions, the hyperbole of the CPFC letter and certain media commentary this is not a case where the standard punishment is clearly insufficient and there are *"significant mitigating factors at play"*;
- b) The hyperbole within CPFC letter does not assist the Commission in assessing the evidence in an unemotional, rational and impartial manner, as *"the vast majority of the CPFC letter must be treated with considerable caution as an exaggerated and partial account of events. The FA's reliance of the CPFC letter is, therefore, somewhat troubling"*;
- c) The General Principles of Fast Track 6 state that *"The ability to claim is provided "only so exceptional cases may be rectified" and "it is envisaged that, in the majority of dismissals, the standard punishment will be appropriate when applied"*;
- d) The Commission should be concerned with whether the facts of the case are *"truly exceptional"* and *"that is a high bar"*;
- e) Where it is decided that circumstances are indeed truly exceptional a second high bar must be reached such that the Commission consider the standard punishment to be 'clearly' insufficient;
- f) The IFAB definition of 'Serious Foul Play' covers certain elements of LR's challenge and the Commission ought to be *"cautious of double counting such elements"* when considering whether the incident is *'truly exceptional'*;
- g) *"A high boot is not per se a sending off offence...Such conduct becomes reckless where there is a risk that a player's high boot comes into contact with the opposition and the player continues with his course of action despite that risk. The degree of recklessness increases with the likelihood of contact"*;
- h) It was accepted that a challenge might cross the threshold of being *'truly exceptional'* where there was an inevitability of boot-to-face contact and a player simply continued on with a challenge such as this one. However, in this case, it was not, as submitted by The FA, *"inevitable that LR's boot would come into contact with JPM's face"*;
- i) This was because at the last moment JPM had leaned in left, shoulder-to-shoulder against the Millwall defender, Cooper, and had then been propelled a 'significant distance' to the right into the advancing LR who had already committed to the challenge (a number of still images were provided to demonstrate how this had unfolded);
- j) LR's actions ought not to be assessed as an outfield player;
- k) It is accepted that *"the level of force involved in the incident was high. This was in part, due to the speed of the incident and the fact that the players were moving in opposing directions (but not directly)"* but JPM was off-balance and *"the fact that he was knocked to the ground does not indicate that the amount force used ...was uniquely high"* such that it reaches the threshold of being *'truly exceptional'*; Furthermore, *"Where players collide having been running in opposing directions, a high degree of force in such a situation is not uncommon"*;

- l) It is accepted that JPM suffered a serious injury but his *“injuries were not as extensive as has been implied by the CPFC Letter and in the media”*. *“For emphasis, this submission is not intended to detract from the seriousness of the injury suffered by Mr Mateta, but is made as to caution the Regulatory Commission against the dangers of reliance on comments in the media and the CPFC Letter. The precautionary actions taken by the CPFC medical staff are laudable, but they do not represent evidence of additional injury”*;
- m) It is correct to say that incidents of this nature are rare. Rarity of an incident however does not equate to it being *‘truly exceptional’*; and
- n) Two other ‘high boot’ incidents were drawn to the Commission’s attention accompanied by two still images. In particular, Sadio Mane’s challenge on Ederson during the 2017 Liverpool FC v Manchester City FC fixture and also a challenge made by Oscar Estupian on Charlie Cresswell during the 2022 Millwall FC v Hull City FC fixture.

#### Character Reference from Andrew Marshall

- 27) Attached to the submissions on behalf of LR was a character reference from MFC’ First Team Goalkeeper Coach, the content of which was noted by the Commission.

#### Decision of the Regulatory Commission

- 28) The Commission thank the parties for their very helpful submissions. In respect to the CPFC letter, it should be noted that the individual members of the Regulatory Commission are sufficiently experienced in such matters so as to recognise that, quite understandably, the CPFC letter may have been intensely drafted with deep concern for the welfare of JPM in mind. Whilst, noting the contents of the CPFC letter, the parties can rest assured that the Commission came to its conclusion having reviewed only relevant evidence in an unemotional, rational and impartial manner.
- 29) The Commission viewed the available footage of the incident on numerous occasions and carefully noted the written submissions from The FA and LR with the Regulatory Framework in mind.
- 30) The Commission agreed that The FA’s use of the word *‘inevitable’* in respect to the ‘boot-to-face’ contact was not appropriate. There were, as pointed out by LR, a number of factors at play as the incident unfolded, including spin on the ball/pass, the angles, speed and movement of the players and the contact/lateral shift between JPM and Mr. Cooper. That said, the Commission felt that, although not quite inevitable, there was an extremely



high possibility and risk that LR's actions in the circumstances would lead to JPM being kicked, studs leading, in the head – as of course, in fact, it did.

- 31) Notwithstanding the above, the Commission members were unanimous in their opinions that LR had in no way intended to injure JPM in the way that he did. LR made his decisions and actions in the heat of an FA Cup tie, in split-seconds – he made a major mistake in acting so recklessly but he had no intention of hurting JPM.
- 32) With 'intent' ruled out by the Commission, this case was primarily (but not exclusively) an analysis of whether or not LR had acted so 'recklessly' that his actions could be considered as having been 'truly exceptional' such that the standard punishment of a three-match suspension is clearly insufficient. This, as pointed out by LR, a high bar.
- 33) Having considered all the factors set out in Regulations 11.2 and 11.3, the Commission members were unanimous in their opinion that the manner by which LR made the challenge that injured JPM was so reckless in nature that it reached that high bar and was 'truly exceptional' such that the Commission was sure that the application of the standard punishment for this particular dismissal would be 'clearly insufficient'.
- 34) In coming to its decision, the Commission noted the following:
  - a) LR is an experienced goalkeeper both in age and appearances;
  - b) The scenario of a goalkeeper leaving his penalty area to 'sweep up' a through ball before a forward latches on to the pass is not an unusual one and one that LR will have encountered many times during his goalkeeping career;
  - c) Regardless of whether JPM was 'bumped' into the path of LR, it would have been obvious to LR that it would be fractional in terms of time and distance as to whether or not he or JPM would get to the ball first and the likelihood of a collision at speed was, if not inevitable, highly probable.
  - d) When the ball 'popped up' due to the spin on the pass, it is arguable that LR could have readjusted and not gone into the challenge at all.
  - e) He didn't, LR chose to go into the challenge at tremendous speed and with extreme force, with his leading boot around six foot high, studs showing. At the moment he made contact with JPM's head LR's leading leg was close to straight. There appeared to the Commission no retraction of the leading boot to mitigate the contact with JPM. If anything, LR appeared to drive the boot forward. Having caught JPM on the ear LR followed through into the body of JPM with his trailing knee/leg, knocking him to the ground.
  - f) In doing so, LR's recklessness was of such a high degree that he exposed JPM to an unacceptable high risk of serious injury.

- g) Whilst the contact and subsequent injury sustained by JPM were without doubt extremely serious [REDACTED], the Commission were of the view that challenges of this extreme nature inherently carry with them an unacceptable high risk that the injury to the recipient could be far more serious than that sustained by JPM.
- h) It was accepted by LR that incidents such as this one are rare. There were only two incidents that were drawn to the Commission's attention from the previous 7/8 years and although furnished with still images the Commission were not furnished with any video footage of these incidents so as to make any worthwhile comparisons.
- i) Whilst not necessarily relevant to the Commission's decision in respect to the incident being 'truly exceptional' the Commission noted that the match was delayed for 8 minutes while JPM received on-field treatment, it is distressing to both players and spectators to see a player badly injured and CPFC have lost their in-form striker for an extended period of time. In addition, JPM has missed out on his first international call up for the French National Team following his good form.
- j) The Commission, whilst aware that the application of consistent punishments for similar offences is an important consideration, and no doubt similar incidents have occurred in the past and will occur in the future, felt that LR's challenge in terms of speed, force and actions was so extreme in its recklessness and brutality that it ought to be categorised as being 'truly exceptional' such that the standard penalty is clearly insufficient.

35) The FA's claim was therefore deemed to have been successful.

36) As such, the Commission turned its mind to what would be an appropriate sanction for such an offence.

37) The Commission noted the apologies and contrition of LR and hope that the media and wider public will acknowledge that LR has made an unintentional mistake for which he is clearly apologetic.

38) Pursuant to Regulation 11.5 in deciding on the appropriate punishment, the Commission gave consideration to those factors listed at Regulations 11.3.1 to 11.3.7 (paragraph 12 above).

39) Having set aside the Standard Punishment, taking into consideration the truly exceptional circumstances of LR's challenge and the factors discussed above the Commission were unanimous that an appropriate sanction for this offence would be that LR is suspended from playing until such time as MFC have completed six (6) First Team matches.

40) Pursuant to the relevant Regulations, this decision of the Regulatory Commission is final and not open to appeal final and not open to appeal.

**Stuart Ripley**

Regulatory Commission Chairman

9<sup>th</sup> March 2025