



THE INDEPENDENT
FOOTBALL OMBUDSMAN



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IFO COMPLAINT REF 18/23

STEWARDING AND OVERALL EXPERIENCE AT QUEENS PARK RANGERS

Role of the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO)

1. The office of the IFO has been established by the three English football authorities (The Football Association [FA], The Premier League and The English Football League [EFL]) with the agreement of Government. The IFO has been designated as the final stage for the adjudication of complaints which have not been resolved within football's complaints procedure. The IFO is an Approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body and its findings are non-binding. IFO Adjudications will normally comprise two parts: an impartial assessment of the substantive complaint and a review of the procedure by which the complaint was handled. The IFO's role is to investigate the complaint and judge whether it was dealt with properly and whether the outcomes were reasonable for all parties concerned. Under the procedure agreed by the Football Governing Bodies, the adjudication of the IFO is final and there is no right of appeal against IFO findings

2. The IFO acknowledges that in investigating this complaint he has received the full cooperation of Queens Park Rangers FC (QPR) and Milton Keynes Dons (MK Dons).

The Complaint

3. A young lady complained of an extremely negative experience at Loftus Road while attending with her boyfriend as away supporters of MK Dons. She contended that stewards had been rude and aggressive and had ejected several supporters, including her boyfriend, for no reason.

The complainant's account

4. On 6 January 2018 MK Dons of League 1 played away to QPR of The Championship in a FA cup match. Following the match the complainant made a complaint to QPR's Chief Executive. She said that she had felt intimidated by the QPR stewards who had ejected a number of MK Dons youngsters without reason, and had left them in an alien environment with no duty of care. MK Dons stewards who were present had tried to get information from the QPR stewards, but were not provided with adequate reasons. The complainant and her boyfriend, on showing their tickets, had entered the ground at block Y3. She had then put the tickets in her handbag for safekeeping. An incident had occurred near them and stewards had moved her across the aisle; her boyfriend, who was not involved in the incident, was not moved. When a steward asked to check his ticket, he had politely asked to get it from the complainant, but the path between them was blocked by stewards and by the time she got the ticket to him, stewards were removing him. She followed but the gate steward was aggressive and told her to go and sit down: she felt unsafe being left by herself. She spoke to a MK Dons steward but he was unable to find out anything. The complainant said that she works as a steward at another ground and is well aware of the role and responsibilities of stewards and how safety should be paramount. She suggested that safeguarding training was necessary. As the complainant did not receive any response from QPR, she felt that she was left with no choice but to approach the IFO, which she did on 18 May.

The Club's response to the IFO

5. The Chief Operating Officer told the IFO that the Chief Executive had asked MK Dons' Head of Safety and Security to obtain information from those MK Dons stewards who had assisted at Loftus Road, but, despite several reminders, none had been forthcoming. Following a final attempt in March, the Club had written (date unspecified) to the complainant, but unfortunately she had not received the letter, for which the Club offered apologies.

6. The Officer said that 6,314 had attended the game, including away support of 1,163, which should have been a low key, low risk game and was classed by police as category A. However, the match had been challenging with eleven away fans and one home fan ejected. The Officer said that they do not normally have away stewards present, but had accepted an offer from MK Dons because of the reputation of a group of anti-social young fans who follow the Club away from home. Before and during the match it was apparent that a group of around 50, all under 18, were intent on anti-social behaviour and were refusing to

comply with reasonable requests from stewards. The youngsters were intent on trying to sit together despite having tickets for different parts of the stadium. Stewards met resistance, which escalated quickly, as they tried to enforce the Club's policy of ensuring that ticket holders use their allocated seats. Seven youths were ejected before the match started; after kick off one was ejected for failing to comply with stewards, one for assault, one for drinking, and one for sitting in the home area. All the youths were handed to police who established if they were juniors and if they had travelled with a responsible adult. A number of parents were contacted and were happy for the youths to make their own way home.

7. The Officer said that the Club had kept CCTV footage of all the ejections and the complainant was welcome to visit the Club to view it. The Club had received four other complaints about the match: one from a QPR fan regarding inappropriate behaviour in the family stand; one from a QPR fan complaining about abusive behaviour from MK Dons fans; one from a MK Dons fan complaining that bad behaviour by his own fans was not dealt with, and one from a QPR fan about the actions of a steward outside the ground. The Club had investigated and responded to all those complaints within 14 days.

8. In conclusion, the Officer said that he was satisfied that the stewards had acted professionally in the face of provocation and unreasonable behaviour from a number of fans. He had spent the afternoon in the control room monitoring supporter and steward behaviour and did not accept that stewards had acted with undue aggression or had been confrontational.

The investigation

9. At the request of the IFO, the complainant supplied a photograph of herself and her boyfriend and explained that their seats had been at the back of block Y3, and he had been ejected before kick off. On 4 June the Deputy IFO visited Loftus Road and met with the Operations Manager. The Deputy viewed all available footage of the ejections (pictures only). Of the footage seen of ejections before the match started, most of the MK Dons fans looked to be well under 18 and were said to have been trying to access blocks which did not match their tickets. There was no footage of the fans being removed from the seated areas, only from the entrances to the stand. It was not possible to identify the boyfriend; nor was the complainant seen on any of the footage. It was not possible to view more general CCTV footage of the stands as tapes are routinely recorded over after 30 days, unless there is a reason to keep them.

10. The Club directly employ around 25 response stewards who, in the main, were involved in the ejections; the majority of other stewards are from agencies. The Manager was able to name most of the Club stewards on the footage and was confident that they would have acted professionally on the day. Because there had been trouble in the away end at MK Dons previous visit to the

stadium, QPR had decided to enforce the allocated seats only policy. Of the footage seen, one young fan was frogmarched down the stairs by two stewards and another was roughly manhandled; the other ejections seemed to be conducted without aggression or resistance.

11. The Deputy IFO asked why more general footage had not been kept following receipt of the complaint. The problem seems to have been that the complaint was directed to the Chief Executive rather than to Customer Relations or the Operations Department. In fact, Operations did not learn of the complaint until the IFO intervened in May, well outside the 30 day period for retaining CCTV tapes. The Deputy IFO also asked for a copy of the letter purportedly sent to the complainant in March, but no copy has been kept.

!2. On 22 June the Deputy IFO met with the complainant and her boyfriend, who is 19. They are both employed by MK Dons: he works full time on the groundstaff and she is a match day steward. They both attend all home and away matches and have never been in any trouble. They are not part of the group of under 18s cited by the Chief Operating Officer. They usually attend matches with two or three friends. They said that at the turnstiles they were given no warning about having to use allocated seats, something which is rarely required in League 1 matches. They felt that the stewards had been looking for confrontation from the outset; stewards had warned them not to stand or sing. At the time of the ejection, a few minutes before kick off, the boyfriend was in the correct block, but not in the correct seat, across the aisle from the complainant talking with friends. When asked to produce his ticket (which he had produced twice previously) he explained that the complainant had it in her handbag. He asked the steward to pass it across. The steward said "Have you not got legs?" and took the ticket off the complainant. He told the boyfriend that he was in the wrong place. The boyfriend said that he would go to the correct seat, but the steward would not give him the ticket and said he was being ejected. The boyfriend showed his MK Dons work identity card and explained that he would not risk his job by misbehaving at a football match. He was ejected but not given a specific reason. The boyfriend was NOT handed to the police. There were a number of very young fans who had already been ejected, simply running around outside the stadium.

13. Following his ejection, the boyfriend had spoken through the gate with one of the MK Dons stewards who had been trying to establish what had taken place, and to get him re-admitted to the ground. That was unsuccessful. The boyfriend said that he just loves football and was devastated at missing the match; he had, therefore, then gone to the Box Office and had purchased a home ticket, having given his correct name and address (MK post code). However, he was spotted by stewards who ejected him from his seat in the home end. The boyfriend was emphatic that he had done nothing to deserve the original

ejection and on neither occasion had he been rude or resistant, or had failed to comply with stewards' instructions.

14. The complainant said that she had followed her boyfriend down to the gate, trying to establish why he was being ejected. She was in tears but all the steward on the gate would say was that if she did not calm down, she would be "out too". The complainant said that MK Dons stewards had tried to find out the reason for the ejection, but home stewards had refused to comment.

15. Also on 22 June the Deputy IFO visited Stadium MK and met with the Safety Officer and three of the stewards who had been on duty at QPR. The Safety Officer explained that the Club regularly send their stewards to away matches. With the agreement of QPR, he had sent five stewards to the match because, at the Club's previous visit, fighting had broken out among MK Dons fans. The stewards worked under the direction of QPR. There had been no intelligence suggesting that trouble was likely. The match had taken place immediately after the EFL directive on the prohibition of pyrotechnics, and there had also been Local Authority licensing officers present using video cameras, which might have made stewards take a harder than normal line on the behaviour of fans.

16. The MK Dons stewards, all of them very experienced and regular attendees at away matches, explained that things had got off to a good start with the searching process done very professionally in a friendly manner. However, after that the approach of QPR stewards, in their opinion, had been heavy handed, with an apparent lack of a common sense approach. Zero tolerance had been mentioned by the stand supervisor. None of the stewards had actually witnessed the ejection of the boyfriend, but they all know him and could not believe that he would have done anything to merit ejection. He is well known as a friendly young man who loves football, enjoys singing with his girlfriend at matches, and is never in trouble. They tried to find out what had taken place prior to the ejection, but home stewards would not say and away fans could only speculate that either he was in the wrong place or could not produce his ticket. There had been plenty of empty seats around. One of the stewards was concerned that the complainant had been left alone and followed her down to the gate, where she was visibly upset. One of her friends had then looked after her. The MK stewards were also concerned that youngsters had been ejected with no thought for "duty of care"; they reported that to the police who took it on board.

17. On 3 July, in light of the knowledge that the boyfriend was the person ejected from the home end, the Deputy IFO again visited QPR and viewed the footage of the ejections. That ejection the boyfriend from the home end was carried out at 15.12 hours and there was no sign of argument or resistance from him. Having viewed that footage it was possible to identify the boyfriend's first ejection, at around 14.48 hours, which again was achieved peaceably, although there was no footage of the interaction between the boyfriend and the stewards

within the stand. Outside the ground, there was a lengthy discussion between the boyfriend, the ejecting steward and a MK Dons steward, after which the boyfriend walked away from the stadium. The stewards' reports of the seven ejections before kick off, between 14.36 and 14.57 hours, simply lumped them all together as "failing to comply with the reasonable instructions of stewards".

The findings

18. It is not clear precisely why the boyfriend was ejected as there is no definitive evidence of what precisely took place. Neither he, nor the complainant, nor the MK Dons stewards appear to have been given an explanation. The IFO is satisfied that QPR were determined to be on the front foot to prevent potential trouble, even though there was no specific intelligence and the match was classified as category A. That may well have prompted what the MK Dons stewards described as a heavy handed approach to stewarding. The catalyst for the boyfriend's ejection was not covered by the CCTV footage available. From what the Chief Operating Officer told the IFO, the most likely reason for his ejection seems to have been as a result of the stewards trying to enforce the Club's policy of ensuring that ticket holders sat in their allocated seats, and a subsequent refusal to move. The QPR stewards' records show that all seven fans ejected before kick off were for failing to comply with instructions, but they were all lumped together rather than recorded with individual circumstances. The boyfriend was attending the match with his girlfriend and a couple of other friends and was not part of the group of under 18s thought likely to be intent on antisocial behaviour. The complainant maintains that they were given no warning about the use of allocated seats, something which they rarely encounter in League 1 matches. The boyfriend has readily admitted that he was not in his allocated seat when asked to produce his ticket. However, the match had not even started at that stage and, by his own account, he willingly agreed to return to his own seat. To deny him that opportunity was harsh, particularly when he showed his work identity card and explained that he could not risk being in trouble at a football match. The complainant, the boyfriend and the MK Dons stewards were all very credible witnesses and the IFO accepts that the boyfriend was unlikely to have engaged in inappropriate behaviour which would carry a risk to his employment. The IFO was also impressed by the character reference statements of the MK Dons stewards. The IFO is satisfied that, on the balance of probability, the boyfriend is unlikely to have behaved in such a way as to have merited ejection, not least because of a perceived threat to his employment; it seems most likely that not being able to produce his ticket immediately led to the problem. In passing the IFO should also point out that he has investigated previous complaints of overzealous and forceful stewarding at QPR.

19. The IFO is also critical of how the QPR staff dealt with the complainant after her boyfriend's ejection. By her own account, and that of the MK Dons stewards, she was visibly upset but appears to have been given neither explanation nor empathy. QPR also failed spectacularly to answer her subsequent complaint. The

problem seems to have stemmed from a lack of communication from the Chief Executive's office to say that they were dealing with a complaint. However, it took over two months for the Club purportedly to respond to the complainant. The fact that the complainant did not receive a reply, and QPR have not been able to produce a copy or prove what was in it, strongly suggests that there was no such reply. The delay between receipt of the complaint and the Operations Department becoming aware of it also meant that potentially helpful CCTV evidence was overwritten. The failure in customer service was particularly disappointing in light of the fact that in a previous adjudication involving a complaint against QPR (Reference 13/08), the IFO reported that "The lines of communication between the customer service function, the matchday organisation, the Safety Officer and the Operations Manager were blurred". In that case the IFO recommended that the Club review their complaint handling process to ensure that a clear and consistent procedure was adopted. **The IFO, therefore, repeats that message and recommended that QPR ensure that they take a co-ordinated approach to all complaints, irrespective of whichever department is the first point of contact.**

20. In light of the fact that there is considerable doubt about the justification for the boyfriend's ejection, and the poor treatment of the complainant both at the time and post complaint, **the IFO recommended that QPR make goodwill payments of £50 to each person. The IFO also recommends that QPR ensure that their stewards do not adopt an overzealous approach.**

Conclusion

21. The IFO was satisfied that, in having been ejected from the stadium, the boyfriend was treated harshly, and that the complainant was treated unsympathetically at the time and received poor customer service thereafter. The IFO welcomed the fact that QPR accepted the IFO recommendations.

Professor Derek Fraser, Ombudsman
Alan Watson CBE, Deputy Ombudsman

30 July 2018