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THE INDEPENDENT  
FOOTBALL OMBUDSMAN

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**IFO COMPLAINT REF: 11/02**

**Disorder at the Southampton v Manchester United**

**FA Cup Tie, 29 January 2011**

**The 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 Football League) 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 operates a system of non-binding arbitration. In exercising its jurisdiction, the IFO does not seek to question the merits of judgements made by properly constituted Regulatory Commissions and Appeal Boards, unless there were shortcomings in the administrative processes which led to those judgements. It is not the role of the IFO to retry cases, but it is its role to explore and review the procedures under which complaints have been decided 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 must make clear at the outset that he has received full cooperation from Southampton Football Club, Manchester United Football Club, the Football League and the FA.

## **The Complaint**

3. A woman complained that when she took her sister, who suffers from severe epilepsy, to see the Manchester United (Man U) FA cup match at Southampton on 29 January 2011, the Southampton stewards had failed to prevent their view being obstructed by Man U fans standing in front of them.

## **Investigation**

4. On 30 January the complainant wrote to the Safety Officer at Southampton complaining about what had happened at the FA cup tie against Man U the previous day. She said that she had taken her sister, a lifelong Man U fan who suffers from epilepsy. Her sister had been very excited as she had not been to a game for five years because of illness. Their tickets had been in row A of the away end, adjacent to the wheelchair users. As the game started (at 17.15 hours) about 100 non-disabled fans came to the front of the stand and stood in front of the disabled supporters. After 10 minutes she complained that neither stewards nor police had asked the fans to move. A steward told her that the fans had refused to sit and there was nothing more the stewards could do. A steward had offered her and her sister seats among the wheelchairs as the view from that area at that time was only partly blocked. She had pointed out that other people adjacent to them could not see either as they were unable to stand. The stewards had said that they were afraid to ask the non-disabled fans to return to their seats as they might start a fight or set off a flare.

5. By then the complainant's sister had been quite upset as more fans were gathering at the front and she was getting pushed around and had hot coffee spilled on her hand and trousers. At half time the fans cleared from the front and the complainant asked stewards to prevent them from returning. The stewards said they would try but the fans returned. A fan threw a mobile phone onto the pitch; to the complainant's horror a steward retrieved it and gave it back. The complainant asked to speak to the Head of Security as she was concerned about safety. She was told the Head was not available but could see her after the match. By that time the fire exits and stair wells had been blocked by standing fans; anyone trying to get past was verbally or physically abused. One man who had been pushed down the stairs was stretchered away. After Man U

scored a fan got onto the pitch. The complainant said that by the time Man U scored again the area was like what she described as "a mosh pit", with fans jumping into and abusing them, signs being smashed, and seats being ripped out, but the stewards just stood and watched. After the game the complainant and others waited to see the Head of Security who said that her stewards were very good and had won awards for their work and she did not want anything bad said against them. The Head said they should expect such behaviour from Man U fans and advised the complainant to write to Southampton's Safety Officer.

6. The complainant attached photographs showing fans standing at the front during the game, blocked exits and broken signs. The complainant alleged that there had been insufficient stewards to cope and those present had been too scared to deal with the situation.

### **Southampton's Response to the Complaint**

7. The Safety Officer replied promptly. The fixture had been classified "high risk" and the club's intelligence had been that Man U fans rarely adhered to police or steward requests to sit or clear areas where they should not be. Although the club had reduced Man U's ticket allocation to allow for segregation lines and sterile areas, they had not expected the blatant disregard the fans had had for police, stewards, property and indeed their own supporters. There had been a number of incidents ranging from turnstile crushing to setting off smoke flares. Although there had been several arrests and ejections, the club had had to prioritise, which meant containing the Man U fans as best they could. Stewards had been met with constant verbal and sometimes physical abuse when attempting to move fans, including in the area in front of the disabled fans. Police had been dealing with segregation lines, arrests and assisting stewards with defusing confrontation all over the away supporters' areas. The Safety Officer's log book showed that at 17.36 hours he had informed the senior steward in the away end to offer to relocate all disabled fans to the raised disabled deck so that they could watch the match in a non-volatile area. One fan and his carer had taken up the offer. The Safety Officer said that a large number of Man U fans had refused to adhere to the ground regulations and the aftermath was that Southampton had been left with broken turnstiles, more than 50 seats damaged beyond repair and extensive damage to toilets. The Safety Officer said that while it had been a challenging day for the club, everyone had left the ground safely,

and there had been no serious casualties. The Safety Officer accepted that Man U fans had undoubtedly impeded the complainant's view of the game by their blatant disregard of the ground regulations, but he pointed out that she had been offered relocation. The Safety Officer offered his apologies for the fact that the complainant's day had been marred by the actions of her own supporters. He said that the safety of fans and his own staff was paramount. He accepted that the club had a duty of care to do their best to ensure that all fans have an enjoyable experience, but at that match they had struggled to comply in the away section of the ground. In the circumstances he had decided to refund the cost of the complainant's tickets without accepting any liability.

8. On 3 February the complainant sent her complaint to the FA. She said that the Safety Officer's letter contained lies. She was adamant that she had not been offered relocation to a less volatile area.

### **The FA's response**

9. On 4 February the FA's Senior Safety and Security Manager wrote to the complainant saying that he was sorry to read about her experience. The 100 or so Man U fans who were standing in the walkways in front of her should have been removed, but there was an operational decision that had to be considered by the stadium's Safety Officer and the police match commander and it appeared that they had decided to leave the fans in situ, while recognising the problems caused to fans at the front by offering relocation to a raised viewing platform. The fact that only one disabled fan and his carer appeared to have taken up the offer begged the question as to whether other fans had been made aware of the offer.

10. The FA Manager said that to meet the requirements of Southampton's safety certificate they had to have 140 stewards on duty for a capacity crowd – for Man U they had 250 on duty, plus 63 police officers inside the ground. In the Manager's experience, situations involving 100 or so unruly away fans cannot be resolved by stewards alone – police support would be needed. It was also necessary to consider what the reaction of 4,100 Man U fans in the ground would have been to police physically trying to remove the fans from the front; it could have led to a more serious public order problem. The Manager could understand why, in such circumstances, the fans may have been left in situ. The Manager said he would forward the complainant's comments to the Safety

Advisory Group (SAG) who would be reviewing the safety operation at the game. (The SAG comprises the Stadium Safety Officer, Southampton City Council, the Football Licensing Authority, members of all the emergency services and St John Ambulance.

### **The complainant's response to the FA**

10. The complainant remained unhappy. She felt that 110 extra stewards for such a match was inadequate and maintained that no disabled fans had been relocated. She said that a man who had been pushed down the stairs was ignored by stewards for several minutes; he had been picked up by fans who had fallen on him and pushed over the wall to the pitchside. Stewards had not attempted to help him. She regarded the offer of a ticket refund an insult considering the stress she had felt trying to protect her sister and the distress suffered by her sister. At great expense she had travelled from Brighton to the Isle of Wight to collect her sister and then on to Southampton in order to treat her sister to see her beloved team. She considered that someone would be badly hurt or killed if Southampton continued to adopt their blasé attitude.

### **Football Licensing Authority Inspector's Match Day Report**

11. The Inspector reported that there 4,109 away fans in a crowd of 28,433. There were 240 stewards and 63 police on duty. The club had had reason to believe that there would be persistent standing at the game and had submitted a risk assessment and management plan. Around 1000 home fans had stood persistently; the whole of the away end had stood and there had been problems of ingress and egress. 20 minutes before kick off there had been a problem with the away turnstiles, queues had surged forward and searching had been suspended as stewards were forced back against the stadium walls and had to be rescued by police. The pressure of the crowds had forced barriers open and a general melee had developed. While that was happening the police had been called to support stewards in the away concourse as a flare and smoke bomb had been discharged. Throughout the match away fans had stood en masse continually chanting "We're United, we do what we want". The Inspector commented "and they certainly did". The Inspector said that Man U fans had continually abused stewards, filled gangways, smoked, crowded perimeter fences and were generally aggressive. Further flares had been discharged in the crowd and smoke bombs thrown. At the end of the match Man U fans had refused to clear the away concourse until forced out by police, and threw waste bins at stewards, police and home fans. Outside the ground they were

overturning bins and generally being a nuisance. There were 19 ejections and 7 arrests, including for pitch incursions. 7 casualties were treated at the medical centre; one went to hospital.

### **FA Safety Inspector's Match Day Report**

12. The Inspector reported that a briefing held by the Safety Officer with all the senior supervisors at 13.45 hours had been very thorough, with a comprehensive briefing sheet available for everyone. Normally, Southampton used only their own stewards but for such a high profile match they had in addition employed two external agencies and Salisbury FC to enhance the stewarding levels. There had been a steady build up to the start of the match with "not surprisingly" a large contingent of visitors in the last few minutes. Police and stewards had been kept very busy both in the city and at the ground as the visitors approached, many under police escort. About 15 minutes before kick-off, instructions to search every visitor went by the board at one of the turnstiles when the pressure on the searching stewards forced them to move away. Police endeavoured to assist but, with "the ground lost", several hundred gained access without being searched. The situation was not helped by the failure of one of the turnstiles which required attention before being put back into operation. At least one fan was refused entry as drunk. The visitors had been allocated 4300 seats all of which had been sold. The Safety Officer had reduced the allocation by 400 to allow for better steward access; some additional partitioning and netting had been installed in the concourse area.

13. The Inspector said that, as is normal for Man U supporters, every single one stood throughout the match, despite some planned initial encouragement from the stewards to take their seats. There was considerable banter throughout the match with supporters from both teams aggressively inciting each other across the divides. When Man U scored a supporter ran onto the pitch; he and another who had crossed the barrier were detained and dealt with very efficiently by stewards. During the event a flare was set off in the visitors' concourse and another in the visitors' stand. Both were dealt with by stewards and neither caused injury.

### **Further evidence from the complainant**

14. The complainant told the Deputy IFO that she is actually a Tottenham fan but was trying to give her Man U supporting sister a special treat. She was annoyed that both

Southampton and the FA were trying to shift the blame onto Man U. She said that from the IFO's investigation she was seeking an acknowledgement that Southampton had got their planning and staffing wrong, and to accept that the lies which they had fed her were just to try to cover up the grim reality that she had had to put up with on the day. She said that she was not seeking gain but felt her tickets and travel expenses should be reimbursed. She said that what she would really like is to be able to take her sister to Manchester to watch her beloved Man U in a safe environment at Old Trafford; that would go a long way as an apology for what happened.

### **Evidence from Southampton and SAG members**

15. The Deputy IFO visited Southampton to meet members of the SAG who had been holding an emergency meeting called to discuss the events at the Man U match. The Safety Officer said that Man U had not sold the tickets for the raised deck for disabled fans. The Man U ticket office had asked if they could sell to ordinary fans the raised deck seats and the surplus carer seats in the disabled area at the front; Southampton had agreed to the sale of the seats at the front but not those on the raised deck. The disabled area at the front is actually a lateral walkway. The Safety Officer said he normally allocated 20 -22 stewards to the away end – for Man U he had allocated 44 and had then reallocated a further 21 during the second half. There had been two separate pitchside incursions from Man U fans, both of whom had been arrested. The SAG members were satisfied with the arrangements made for the match, but it was clear that some Man U fans had been out to cause trouble from the outset. There had been trouble in the concourse prior to the match, including a broken turnstile and the discharge of a flare and smoke bomb. That had resulted in crushing and the suspension of searching. During the match many Man U fans had been continually confrontational and abusive and had caused considerable damage. There had been arguments between disabled Man U fans and the transgressing Man U fans, who had been very abusive. SAG members described the match as the most challenging ever at the stadium. The Safety Officer said that his stewards had offered relocation to disabled fans (confirmed from his log and from evidence obtained from stewards) but conceded that some may well have been missed in all the confusion, particularly if they were ambulant (as the complainant and her sister were). One disabled fan and his carer had taken up the offer. The Deputy IFO confirmed that by viewing CCTV evidence. CCTV recordings also showed some of the problems which had been described, but also showed periods in the away end where gangways

were clear and fire exits unblocked. There was insufficient footage of the area where the complainant was situated to confirm to what extent and for what periods her sightlines were blocked, but the fact that there were problems in that area is not in doubt.

16. Although the SAG members viewed the circumstances of the match as exceptional, the Safety Officer has agreed with them certain measures for future high profile matches, particularly any involving Man U. The away ticket allocation will be cut; only 24 tickets will be available for 28 seat rows; tickets for the first three rows will not be sold, thereby creating a sterile area between the disabled fans and others; the raised deck disabled area will be sold before the seats at the front; and the SAG will meet in advance to review arrangements. The Chairman of the SAG, who is the City Council's Principal Building Control Surveyor, said that he would be writing to the complainant.

17. On 29 March the SAG Chairman wrote to the complainant. The SAG members had all agreed that the behaviour of a significant minority of Man U fans had caused problems for match day stewards and police. SAG members had noted from CCTV coverage of the game that stewards had managed to keep exits clear for the majority of the time and the Safety Officer's log showed that he had instructed stewards to try to get the fans seated. As the FA Senior Safety Manager had noted, for reasons of public order it was not always possible to eject a large number of spectators who defy repeated requests to sit. SAG agreed that the number of stewards allocated to the area had been sufficient and in accordance with the safety guide. He outlined the measures agreed for future high risk fixtures and assured her that the City Council and SAG members take the matter of safety at the stadium very seriously.

### **Complaint from another Man U fan**

18. On 31 January a man who had been in contact with the IFO emailed Southampton. He said:-

"I am a Man U supporter and attended the cup tie at your ground on Saturday and was appalled at the safety of the disabled fans who for the whole of the match were surrounded by mindless thugs and were offered no protection by the stewards on duty. I repeatedly begged different stewards to take action before anyone got injured and even when bodies were on the floor there was little reaction. After United's winning goal and

hooligans were rampaging around the disabled area the stewards just watched while they kicked a barrier down. After repeating my concerns to stewards I was told they had asked the fans to return to their seats and that was all they could do and if I was not happy to write to the club. I spent £250 in petrol, hotel cost and general expenses to visit your ground and two hours trying to push drunken louts back. The result twenty or thirty louts were allowed to rule the day.”

### **Manchester United’s response to the complainant**

19. On 17 February an officer of Man U’s Customer Care team emailed the complainant thanking her for taking the time to document her concerns following the match at Southampton. The officer said that the club had received several reports about unacceptable behaviour exhibited by some Man U supporters and take reports of that nature very seriously. As a rule, all supporters attending domestic away matches as part of the club’s visitors’ allocation are required to be registered holders of either executive or standard season tickets. Because the match was played on a Saturday evening, 183 miles from Manchester, there was a strong possibility that a lot of the attendees had not been the official holders of the tickets. The officer said that senior club officials would be meeting to review the problems which had occurred at Southampton and to discuss what could be done to eradicate in the future the kind of behaviour the complainants had encountered.

### **Manchester United’s comments to the IFO**

20. Although the complaint was basically against Southampton Football Club, in light of the fact that the problems stemmed from the actions of Man U fans, the IFO invited Man U to comment on the events from their perspective. He also asked what the outcome was of the review meeting held by senior club officials (paragraph 19). Finally, the IFO suggested that it would be a nice gesture if Man U were to recognise the distress caused to the complainant and her sister by granting her desire (paragraph 14) to be able to take her sister to Old Trafford. In reply, Man U’s Club Secretary said that as the complaint related to Southampton Football Club, the club had no comment to make on what had taken place. He said that while acknowledging the difficulties and issues which stewards face, and while not condoning such actions and behaviour of the club’s away fans, Man U did not accept responsibility in this case. However, he said that would continue discussions and work with all relevant bodies in an attempt to stamp out the

sort of behaviour which the complainant has described. The Club Secretary said that Man U were prepared to join forces with Southampton to arrange a better match day experience for the complainant and her sister for a game at Old Trafford next season. The club would be happy to provide two complimentary tickets if Southampton would be willing to offer the complainant some assistance toward travelling expenses. The IFO welcomed that offer. The Club Secretary also provided some observations by Man U's Disabled Liaison Officer (see paragraph 21), which the IFO considered carefully.

### **Observations by Man U's Disabled Liaison Officer (DLO)**

21. Among other things, the DLO pointed out that the Accessible Stadia Guide makes specific reference to the dispersal of wheelchair spaces around a stadium, recommending that 75% should have an elevated viewing position and 25% a lower position. The Guide also recommends that a physical barrier is placed between the front row of seating and any disabled spectators placed forward of that position. These are of course not mandatory as they are only recommendations but the IFO recognises the value of such measures which are obviously intended to promote safety and to help disabled spectators enjoy matches. **The IFO recommends** that **all** football clubs, as far as is physically practicable, should implement these recommendations.

### **Findings**

22. The main facts of this unfortunate story are not in dispute. Some Man U supporters caused massive disruption, which had a particularly adverse effect on the complainant and others situated at the front of the stand, and despite having had additional resources allocated, the stewards and police were unable to enforce the ground regulations. The IFO does not doubt that the enjoyment of the game was totally spoiled for the complainant, her sister and others who were caught in the trouble. Both Southampton and Man U have received several complaints about the situation. The question for the IFO to consider is whether Southampton, in not having been able to rectify the situation, were culpable over what happened. First of all, the IFO is satisfied that Southampton, together with the police, gathered appropriate intelligence, allocated significant additional resources and planned carefully for the match. The number of stewards used was some 80% above that required by the stadium's safety certificate for a capacity crowd; the number allocated to the away section was double the norm. Secondly, the scale of the

disruption caused by Man U fans was much worse than expected, the most challenging ever experienced at the stadium. Southampton cannot be blamed for that, but were the stewards lax in their efforts to rectify the situation? Clearly the complainant believes that the stewards should have done much more and the IFO understands her view, but he cannot ignore the evidence of the FA's Senior Safety Manager that, once the stewards had been unable to get the offending fans to move, there could have been significant danger of serious public disorder in engaging police to remove those fans from the front of the stand, particularly in light of the confrontational mood which seems to have been prevalent in those involved.

23. The IFO also sets great store on the evidence provided by the FLA Inspector, both in his post match report and in discussions, together with other SAG members, with the Deputy IFO. The IFO is satisfied that Southampton were faced with a serious situation not of their own making, which they felt unable to rectify for fear of even more serious trouble. The policy of containment which they adopted was an operational decision which they viewed as the best way to avoid potential escalation. The stewards' role is to provide assistance to help ensure the safety of all fans, but not at the expense of their own safety, and there is sufficient evidence of aggression and confrontation to suggest strongly that the safety of the stewards, and indeed the police, was a real issue. The stewards were required to be extra vigilant in protecting the perimeter of the playing area, particularly so as there were two incursions by Man U fans.

24. The IFO is also satisfied that some effort was made to re-house disabled fans but, for whatever reason, that was not communicated to the complainant, nor to another Man U fan who complained to the IFO. That was certainly unfortunate but perhaps understandable in the confusion of the situation when it might have been difficult identifying ambulant disabled fans. The Safety Officer, together with the SAG, has put in place plans to help to prevent any recurrence at future high risk games. In that respect **the IFO recommends** that the club should not allow the sale of surplus carer tickets in the disabled areas to ordinary fans. **The IFO also recommends** that away clubs should be asked to sell tickets for the elevated disabled section in order to minimise the numbers of wheelchair users located behind the lateral walkway. As a follow-up to this report, the Deputy IFO, at the invitation of Southampton, is to attend a high profile match at St Mary's stadium to view the safety arrangements.

25. The Safety Officer has expressed his apologies to the complainant and has offered to refund the cost of the tickets. In light of Man U's offer of complimentary tickets, he agreed to increase the ticket refund (£25) to £50 to help with the complainant's travelling expenses. The Deputy IFO discussed the matter with the complainant, who warmly welcomed the offer of a trip to Old Trafford and assistance with her travel expenses. She requested that the tickets be suitable for her disabled sister.

26. The IFO has great sympathy over what happened to the complainant and her sister but also sympathises with the situation in which Southampton found themselves. Given that the majority of the problems were outside the club's control, the IFO is satisfied with their response to the complaint.

### **Conclusion**

27. Crowd safety is a serious matter and the IFO deplores what took place at Southampton. It is hard to comprehend why some individuals set out to cause trouble, particularly with such total disregard for disabled fans from their own club. The IFO certainly would not condone a failure of a club not to take safety seriously, nor a failure of stewards to do their job properly, but he cannot criticise the policy of containment adopted by Southampton in order to avoid the risk of even more serious trouble. Unfortunately, that meant that people like the complainant suffered the consequences, but things could have been even worse for them had the stewards and police intervened further. The IFO does not find Southampton to blame over what they found to be an insurmountable problem. The IFO welcomes the offers from Man U and Southampton which, it is hoped, will provide an enjoyable experience for the complainant and her sister.

**Professor Derek Fraser, Ombudsman**

**17 May 2011**

**Mr Alan Watson CBE, Deputy Ombudsman**