

IFO

THE INDEPENDENT
FOOTBALL OMBUDSMAN



Chartered Trading
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The Independent Football Ombudsman is approved by Government under the Alternative Dispute Resolution for Consumer Disputes (Competent Authorities and Information) Regulations 2015

IFO COMPLAINT REF: 18/18 **DISORDER AT THE BLACKBURN ROVERS V** **OXFORD UNITED MATCH, MAY 2018**

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 must make clear that in investigating this complaint he has received the full cooperation of Blackburn Rovers FC.

The Complaint

3. A Blackburn Rovers season ticket holder complained that at the final match of the 2017-18 season at Ewood Park her 7 year old son had been hit during a fight between two adult supporters, which had caused him great distress. As a consequence, he did not wish to attend matches again. The complainant was dissatisfied with the Club's response.

The background to the case

4. The match on 5 May was on the final day of the 2017-18 season. Blackburn Rovers had already secured promotion back to the Championship and were still hoping to win the League title. Whereas the average crowd was around 10,000, for this match there were nearly 28,000 present in the Stadium. There was a celebratory atmosphere, but it was anticipated that there might well be a pitch invasion and extensive dialogue had taken place with the police beforehand. The away supporters were located in an upper tier to minimise the possibility of confrontation; extra stewards were brought in; and the police deployed extra resources in support of the stewards. It had been agreed with the police that in the event of a pitch invasion force would not be used to prevent it, for fear of injury to spectators and staff. In fact, a pitch invasion did take place just before the end of the match and the referee took the players off while the pitch was cleared. This was done in a calm and planned manner but the delay to the game angered many supporters. When the pitch was cleared a single person ran the length of the field and was received in a hostile manner by supporters and it was during this altercation that the young boy was hit, leaving him in a very distressed state. The complainant reported the incident to a steward who advised that she should email the Club, which she did on 8 May, enquiring if the two men involved could be banned.

The investigation

5. The IFO reviewed the complaint submitted, together with a full and helpful report from the Club Safety Officer. He explained the preparations for the game and for the expected pitch invasion. He had reviewed the extensive CCTV footage, as well as posts on You Tube, but it had been impossible to identify the complainant and her son as the crowd was packed closely together. Although the complainant was seated on the front row and had given a description of what the two men had been wearing it had not been possible to pinpoint the men involved and it was thus not possible to take any action against them. He added that "the whole atmosphere was one of celebration and it is very regrettable that a small moment of aggression impacted" on the complainant and her son. In response to a subsequent enquiry by the IFO the Safety Officer confirmed that no report on the incident had been filed by the steward who had witnessed it. This was no doubt due to the general crowd disturbances which stewards needed to deal with on the day and the matter would be addressed in the next pre-season stewards' briefing.

Findings

6. The complainant was understandably concerned about what had happened to her son and his distress was compounded by discovering on returning to their car that it had been broken into and his football things had been stolen. The car was parked some distance from the ground and clearly not the Club's responsibility. However, the Safety Officer did make some enquiries and confirmed that the matter was being dealt with by the police. The incident involving the boy is an example of the consequences which may follow from anti-social and hostile behaviour by supporters. The IFO is satisfied that the Club had made adequate preparations for the match and its expected large crowd and there was little more the Club could have done to prevent the incident, which occurred spontaneously and could not have been anticipated. It was unfortunate that the culprits could not be identified and the Club would have taken action against them if it had been possible to do so. The complainant did not make it clear what more she expected the Club to have done and she received a response on the same day that she contacted the Club. The Safety Officer offered to invite the boy back to the stadium next season to find ways of restoring his confidence. The mother has not followed up this offer and is encouraged to do so, as this seems a positive way forward.

7. Although the IFO finds no shortcomings in the Club's preparations and response to the complaint, the distress the child suffered merits a goodwill gesture from the Club. The IFO wishes to recommend that the boy be given a full child's replica kit, which, it is hoped, will give him a more positive feeling about Ewood Park and Blackburn Rovers. However, the Club believes that an alternative would be better to achieve the required objective. It will offer the child and his mother two tickets for a home game next season and provide them with a tour of the control room/safety operation and the opportunity to meet a player pre-match. This, the Club believes, would allow him to return to the ground and give him a great matchday experience which, ultimately, could be a more constructive way of restoring their confidence in the club going forward.

The IFO considers this a reasonable offer and recommends that both offers are put to the complainant, who can choose *either but not both* as a resolution of the complaint.

Conclusion

8. It was decidedly unfortunate that a joyous occasion was marred by some thoughtless behaviour of a few supporters. While the Club could have done nothing more to prevent the incident, both the IFO and Blackburn Rovers are agreed that a goodwill gesture is merited. There are two options for the mother to choose and the IFO finds that either one represents a reasonable resolution.

**Professor Derek Fraser, Ombudsman
Alan Watson CBE, Deputy Ombudsman**

5 July 2018