

Donkey Lane on Saturday 25th April at 5pm should have been the scene of celebration and triumph. After a hard fought and tense match against Witham Town, the dedication and skill of a team that endured so much throughout the season shone through to give the Town the necessary three points to confirm their 5th position and play-off spot that comes with it. But instead of celebration amongst fans and players alike, there was a subdued mutual applause followed by chants from us fans declaring our love for the club as the players wandered off the pitch. The reason for this is that despite the best efforts of the team to confirm that play-off spot, nothing was decided. That spot was going to be decided by administrators and bureaucrats in an office in Wembley.

The entire incident began when Aryan Tajbakhsh was signed from VCD Athletic in January 2015. He was interviewed by the club prior to joining and asked standard questions regarding eligibility. Aryan informed the club that he had picked up eight or nine bookings, so our club secretary checked the FA Disciplinary Database for Aryan. He did not appear on the list of suspended players.

With all necessary checks made, Aryan was selected to play in our home win to Hendon and away defeat to Tonbridge Angels. On his third appearance for the club away to Maidstone he picked up a booking. The record produced by the FA claimed that this was Aryan's first booking. Our secretary immediately recognised that this must be incorrect and contacted the FA to question the record. The FA responded that upon further inspection they had uncovered two further files from former clubs. The file from VCD had no date of birth and the file from another former club, Cheshunt, had Aryan's name spelt incorrectly. The FA asked; 'is this the same player and has he played for Cheshunt, VCD, & Enfield?'. Our secretary responded that it was and the FA advised that Aryan should be withdrawn for the next two matches and they will investigate the situation further. Having sat out two games the FA told the club that the matter was resolved and Aryan was free to play. Nothing more was heard until March 24th when the FA formally charged the club with infringing eligibility rules. The penalty for being found guilty for this offence is the deduction of any points earned whilst the 'offending' player was used.

The club appealed immediately, submitting evidence to dispute that the club had any intent to break these rules and argue that the club had immediately notified the FA when it became clear that the FA's records were erroneous. Despite being given unreasonable deadlines the Club made their representations to both the FA and Ryman League but sadly to no avail. The Club's final throw at the dice was their appeal to the FA. The appeal panel could not reach a decision on the day of the hearing and the FA then submitted further evidence providing a further delay in their decision. All this caused uncertainty for all the Clubs involved in the play-offs and it was interesting to see other Clubs fans complaining at the inconvenience it caused but missing the point that there was a bigger issue at stake.

The difficult lesson that this farce has taught us is that the current system is not fit for purpose. Despite the best efforts of clubs in our league, any one of us could be in the very same position this year. Your club could find itself in the very same room at Wembley, exasperatedly attempting to put your position across to the very same grey uninterested faces. You could find yourself nervously checking twitter for news on where your club finished in a season that finished weeks ago, confused and angered by illogical decisions. It is surely just a matter of time until it is another club facing these same charges.

I think this is wrong. Football should be something decided by players on the pitch, not by pedantic lawyers in offices. For many of us it has reaffirmed our beliefs that the FA is has lost touch with the game at our level and is not suitable to govern the national sport. The sad truth is there is no alternative and there are no signs anything will change any time soon. The FA has shown themselves completely unwilling to even consider reviewing the rules regarding ineligible players,

instead sticking its fingers in its ears and singing its own praises about promoting Fair Play©.

There are many more hypocrisies and abuses of power the FA have shown themselves to be guilty of in this incident, but for the sake of page space and my own sanity I have to end it here. I would like instead end on a positive note and say, on behalf of all Enfield Town supporters, a huge thank you to the board and fans at Lewes for your unwavering support throughout this débâcle. Your #Enfield4PlayOffs tweets helped garner interest in our plight and lead to a number of newspaper articles, mentions on 5 Live and even an appearance on Sky Sports News. The petition you sent to other league clubs to boycott the play-offs if invited in our place went some way to reasserting our beliefs that this sport is not for the corporate suits and lawyers at the FA, but by devoted fans who are committed to standing up for their team and fair play. Best of luck this season.

Daniel Millington
An Enfield Town supporter