

# Football Australia Circular – Competitions



Competitions Circular No. 24-01

18 November 2024

**TO: A-LEAGUES CLUBS CEOS AND FOOTBALL MANAGERS**

## **CONDUCT TOWARDS MATCH OFFICIALS**

The purpose of this Memo is to reiterate Football Australia's expected standard of behavior and treatment of Match Officials in light of conduct and commentary last season and into this season.

Football Australia notes a concerning increase in abuse, vilification and criticism towards Match Officials, which is contrary to the core values of safety, respect, and well-being which should be afforded for all participants in our sport. Football Australia adopts a zero-tolerance policy towards misconduct directed at Match Officials.

The impact of such behaviour is damaging to the continued viability of Football in Australia. Annually, Football Australia loses 40% of registered Match Officials, which equates to approximately 4,200 individuals leaving their roles as Match Officials at all levels of the game. Despite significant increases in participation of the game broadly, our base of 11,000 Match Officials has not grown since 2011.

Players and Club Officials are reminded of their obligations to adhere to the National Code of Conduct and Ethics (the **Code**), particularly as it pertains to any public comments made in respect of Match Officials. Players and Club Officials are free to make comments in the public domain, including, but not limited to, via official media conferences, social media, Club media statements or to media outlets, but must at all times refrain from making comments, statements or representations to the public that are disparaging or derogatory of Match Officials.

As you would be aware, the Code serves to promote and strengthen the reputation of football in Australia and deter conduct that could impair the integrity and good character of our game. The relevant provisions of the Code that deal with public comments are addressed further below, together with commentary (including examples) on the types of comments that may or may not constitute a breach of the Code.

Football Australia acknowledges the value that engaging and meaningful content from Players, Club Officials and Clubs brings to the game and the importance of promoting the personalities and brands within the game. These objectives are also positively promoted through APL's Competition Policies and Procedures (as approved by Football Australia) which encourage the production of informed and entertaining content, with the individuals involved able to provide insights and commentary on the game.

It is however important to ensure that public comments do not cross the line into conduct that is damaging to the game including the recruitment and retention of Match Officials. A-Leagues Players and Club Officials benefit from a significant public platform, which, if used incorrectly, has the capacity to set a dangerous precedent in fostering a culture which is potentially hostile towards Match Officials not only at the professional level of the game, but at lower leagues and grassroots levels.

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**Relevant Provisions of the Code**

Section 2.6 of the Code provides that:

- (a) *A Constituent [which includes a Club, a Player or a Club Official] must not make any comment, statement or representation to the public, including via any contribution to any form of Media that:
 
  - (i) *is disparaging or derogatory of an Official (including a Match Official), opposition team or any Player;*
  - (ii) *is disparaging or critical of a Football Administrator, including any decision or regulation made by a Football Administrator Judicial Body, tribunal or committee of FA or a Football Administrator, without reasonable basis or justification; or*
  - (iii) *comments on any matter the subject of an ongoing hearing or proceeding before a Judicial Body, tribunal or committee of FA or a Football Administrator.**
  
- (b) *A Constituent must not disclose to any unauthorised person or organisation any information of a Football Administrator that is of a private, confidential or privileged nature.*

**Conduct that is NOT likely to constitute a breach**

Where a Player or Club Official merely offers an opinion on an incident or decision from an A-Leagues Match or Australia Cup Match, even where that opinion may not agree with the Match Officials, such comments are unlikely to be a breach of section 2.6. Examples of such comments may include:

<i>From where I was standing, it didn't look like a penalty to me. But that's football.</i>	<i>They should not have been suspended for a challenge like that.</i>
<i>The MRP should have given a longer penalty – I believe we should be stamping that behaviour out of our game.</i>	<i>Football Australia needs to look at the interpretation of the rule and change it on these issues.</i>
<i>I know things can look different when slowed down on video replay, but live, I didn't think it was a red card.</i>	<i>It all happens so quickly, but I didn't think it hit the arm or that the arm was outstretched.</i>

Generally, these types of comments tend to be an opinion regarding the application and/or interpretation of the Laws of the Game.

**Conduct that IS likely to constitute a breach**

Comments may attract possible sanction under the Code where they question or impugn the honesty, integrity or independence of an individual or body or process, or where they are gratuitous personal comments directed more at the individual rather than the incident or decision. Examples of such comments include:

<i>He/she is a dirty player.</i>	<i>The referee ruined the match. The referee decided the outcome of the match.</i>
<i>We got back into the game when we had 10 men but it was difficult playing, you know, mainly against 12 the whole night...</i>	<i>We always seem to get more hard calls against us when X is refereeing</i>
<i>Only an idiot could have come up with that decision</i>	<i>Our referees always favour the 'big' clubs.</i>

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Please note that indirect comments that imply or suggest a statement or imputation of the kind shown above will be construed as if the direct comment had been made. For example, the following will likely be construed as the ‘referee was against us all night’:

*Some might say that the ref was against us all night, but I am not saying that.*

Breaches may also occur when a Player or Club Official posts content on social media (including on “stories” and other video content) which amounts to a representation of the kind shown above. The full context of a post (including images, words, emojis and sounds) will be considered in each case.

It is permissible and feasible to offer a contrary opinion regarding something that happened in a game, therefore there should be no basis for Players or Club Officials to respond along the lines “*I am not going to comment on that incident because I don’t want to get fined*” or that “*I prefer not to comment because we are not allowed to have an opinion*”. Such comments may be deemed to be a breach of section 2.6(b) as they are without reasonable basis or justification given the guidance provided in this Memo. There have been instances of coaches, in particular, making this type of unfounded comment. We recommend that this point in particular is drawn to the attention of your Club Officials and Players and contact us if there is any need for further clarification.

Clubs are also reminded to take care when publishing content online on their official websites and social media pages to ensure that they are not disparaging or are unjustifiably critical of Match Officials or opposition players. Again, engaging content is to be encouraged, but any material which is in breach of the Code will likely lead to sanction.

### **Conduct towards Match Officials during Matches**

Football Australia further notes that conduct by A-Leagues Players and Team Officials towards Match Officials during a match set an example for the game at all levels.

These in-match incidents are governed by the Laws of the Game. Accordingly, referees have been encouraged to take appropriate disciplinary action with respect to any offences against Match Officials. Any such Red Card offences will be subject to the process in the A-Leagues Disciplinary Regulations involving the Match Review and, if applicable, the Disciplinary & Ethics Committee.

Players and Team Officials are reminded that displaying respect for Match Officials was, and remains, a key focus of FA’s Referees Department, as set out in its communications to Clubs prior to the beginning of the 2023-24 A-Leagues Season including the Match Officials Memo dated 3 October 2023.

As part of this initiative, the Referees Department have set out several focus areas which Players and Team Officials should be aware of, including:

- **Communication:** Team Captains are responsible for relaying referee decisions to their respective playing groups; referees will not engage in conversations while being surrounded by players and will only engage with Captains in times of conflict.
- **Surrounding the Referee:** Any instance where three or more players surround a referee will result in at least one caution. Further disciplinary actions will be considered for the third player in showing visual dissent.
- **Dissent:** This will be proactively dealt with. Immediate sanctions may include public warnings or cautions for gestures like throwing arms in disgust or confronting Assistant Referees.
- **Technical Area Behaviour:** Coaches and support staff are expected to behave respectfully. Continuous questioning of decisions, clear visual dissent, or use of unacceptable language directed at Match Officials will be promptly addressed. Team Officials must remain in the Technical Area for the duration of the match unless otherwise permitted by the Match Officials.

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**Direct Engagement with Match Officials**

Players and Team Officials are also reminded to pursue the correct formal channels should they wish to provide feedback to Match Officials following a match, in order to maintain a respectful and open dialogue between FA's Referees Department and A-Leagues Clubs, Team Officials and Players.

Following a match, the Head Coach and/ or Assistant Coaches may request to have a formal Post-Match Discussion (**PMD**) with Match Officials in order to clarify decisions made during a particular match. A formal PMD will occur no sooner than 30 minutes after the A-League Men or A-League Women match in a neutral area within the operational space and will be facilitated by the Match Commissioner.

During the PMD, only the Head Coach or Assistant Coaches will have the opportunity to discuss specific decisions or general items. No vision or technology is permitted in the PMD given the Match Officials have yet to complete their Referee Match Review. Team Officials are reminded that PMDs are not an opportunity to criticise the performance of Match Officials, and that the Match Commissioner may terminate the PMD at any time should the discussion become hostile.

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We hope this Circular has been instructive and assists to inform you on the expected standard of behavior and treatment of Match Officials. If you have any queries, please contact me.

Yours sincerely

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