JUDGMENT

In the matter of Keith Laughlin
Percy Park RFC
dob 11.9.86
RFU ID 851235

Panel members: Alan Beddis (Chair)
Martin Page
Ruth Scott

Secretary: Frazer McDermott

Background

1. A complaint of match official abuse was made by referee Alun Ross in relation to a match between Percy Park RFC and Morpeth RFC which was played on 21st March 2026. The alleged abuse was from Keith Laughlin (KL) who was a coach with Percy Park RFC. The final score was 19-36.

2. Following an exchange of correspondence with the club and the County Discipline Secretary, a formal charge was laid pursuant to rule 9.28.

3. The alleged match official abuse related to an incident at the end of the game when the players and the referee were shaking hands and KL said to the referee that 'you are fucking terrible'. The referee responded by saying that he should not be spoken to like that to which KL responded 'get out of my face'. KL further stated 'he is the same every week' before making comparisons to another referee and walking off.

4. A hearing was arranged for 7th April 2026 at 6.30pm at Northern RFC.

5. A response from the club was received on 2nd April 2026 in which KL raised a number of complaints regarding the performance of the referee in this game as well as on previous occasions. He specifically indicated that he was not going to apologise for his comments.

6. Correspondence was then received by the County Disciplinary Secretary in which KL had indicated to Percy Park on 27th March 2026 that;

> *"I am not attending the hearing. I do not see the point. The more I have thought about it- all this fuss is about my using one swear word to abuse the ref. If I just said 'you are terrible' implying exactly the same thing would we be having this situation? I have held my comments for all the previous games but not Saturday. The ref is beyond frustrating to deal with, I am*

unable to have a respectable conversation with him. I have tried in the past. I am not wasting any more time on it'

Hearing on 7th April 2026

7. Keith Atkinson Percy Park Director and acting Club Discipline Secretary attended the hearing on behalf of KL. The referee was available by telephone to answer any questions on behalf of KL or from the Panel. As it was he was not required.

8. In answer to the charge Mr Atkinson confirmed on KL's behalf that the charge was admitted but that KL did not accept using the words 'get out of my face' but did accept telling the referee that 'he was fucking terrible', that 'he was the same every week' and also refusing to shake the hand of the referee at the end of the game.

9. The Panel was advised that their options were;

(a) to hear from the referee as to the issue denied by KL and make any determination they felt appropriate; they could then sanction KL or adjourn for any sanction with a requirement for KL to attend; or

(b) to simply adjourn the proceedings for KL to attend;

10. In the event that the Panel did not wish to conclude in KL's absence then they had a power under reg 19.4.26 to impose an interim suspension if they had concluded that he had no reasonable grounds for failing to attend

11. The panel retired to consider their approach. When the hearing was resumed Mr Atkinson expressed the view that the case should simply proceed without further delay. That approach was rejected by the Chair and the Panel determined that an interim suspension should be imposed to cover all aspects of rugby activity save for spectating until such time as KL attended a hearing.

12. After the hearing the County Discipline Secretary received communication from Mr Atkinson in which it was confirmed that KL was now keen to engage with the disciplinary process and a hearing was provisionally set for either 14th or 16th April 2026.

13. Following the hearing a letter was received from Percy Park dated 7th April 2026 in the following terms;

Dear Frazer,

On behalf of Percy Park, I wish to formally raise a strong complaint regarding the conduct and actions of the Chair, Alan Beddis, during the MOA disciplinary hearing concerning a charge brought against Keith Laughlin of Percy Park RFC, following the post-match incident against Morpeth RFC on Saturday 21/03/2026.

I was disappointed that I was not afforded the courtesy of having my representation properly considered by the panel. This lack of consideration was disrespectful and left me feeling both angry and humiliated. Furthermore, Mr Beddis' unwillingness to listen demonstrated behaviour that came across as unnecessarily overbearing and conveyed a sense of superiority that was neither appropriate nor conducive to a fair hearing.

As Club Discipline Secretaries are volunteers, I attended in good faith to represent my club in what were already challenging circumstances. Throughout the process, I acted with honesty and integrity, where doing so placed my club in an unfavourable position. However, I left the hearing questioning the value of my participation and with serious concerns about the fairness of any future proceedings involving Mr Beddis.

Of particular concern was his reference to alleged historical abuse from the sidelines. This matter fell outside the scope of the charge being considered and, in my view, should not have been introduced. Its inclusion suggested an overreach of authority and gave the impression of a predetermined viewpoint, which is wholly inappropriate in a disciplinary setting where both admission and mitigation must be considered impartially.

Given these concerns, I strongly request that Mr Beddis does not participate in any future disciplinary hearings involving Percy Park, in order to ensure fairness and maintain confidence in the process.

Yours sincerely,

Keith

Keith Atkinson Director Percy Park RFC and acting Discipline Secretary

14. The County Discipline Secretary responded on 12th April 2026 as follows:

Afternoon Keith

Thank you for your letter dated 7th April 2026.

*Firstly can I confirm that the hearing will be reconvened on **Thursday 16th April at 6.30pm at Northern RFC**. I understand that Mr Laughlin will only be able to join the hearing by way of Teams so can you please ensure that I have an e mail address in order to send him a link. Perhaps his phone number as well would help.*

In terms of the points set out in your letter can I comment as follows;

(a) At the commencement of the hearing last week you confirmed that you had no objection to the constitution of the Panel. As such your objection now to Alan Beddis remaining on the Panel seems based on what you perceive to be his unwillingness to consider your representation on how the hearing ought to proceed. I had outlined to the Panel at the start what their options were as Mr Laughlin had not attended. I

accept that after you made your representations that the case ought to proceed in Mr Laughlin's absence that Alan Beddis indicated an unwillingness to do so without further reference to the other Panel members but they had by this time discussed between themselves how they wanted to proceed and it was clear that the failure to attend by the coach was the most significant issue for them.

(b) The Panel have not made any determination as to sanction and you will be invited to make submissions on Mr Laughlin's behalf on Thursday.

(c) Alan indicated that he wished to hear from the coach as to the behaviour that he has in the main admitted and that is the prerogative of the Panel. I note your concern that this may be construed as the historical abuse but as you correctly point out the charge covers the one incident and any sanction must relate to that incident alone. It is the context of that incident however that is relevant as there is a clear suggestion of bad blood between the referee and the coach which in my view the Panel are entitled to hear about. It is my role as Discipline Secretary to ensure that the Panel approach any sanction appropriately and I will of course remind the Panel of the correct approach on Thursday. If you feel that the Panel deals with any sanction unfairly then Mr Laughlin of course will have a right of appeal to the RFU.

(d) I cannot agree with you that Alan Beddis should be excluded from any future discipline hearings involving Percy Park. It is open to you to raise any objections to the constitution of the Panel at the adjourned hearing on Thursday or at any subsequent Percy Park hearings but any such objection must be well founded.

I look forward to seeing you on Thursday

Kind regards

Frazer McDermott
Discipline Secretary
Northumberland Rugby Union

Hearing 16th April 2026

15. Having been asked to arrange the hearing for either 12th or 14th April KL then advised that his work commitments prevented him attending the hearing on 16th. He was advised that he remained suspended from rugby activity and a further hearing would be arranged in the week commencing 20th April.

Hearing 22.4.26

16. KL attended the hearing by way of telephone as he had technical issues preventing him joining the Teams link set up. Mr Atkinson from Percy Park again attended the hearing in person. At the recommencement of the hearing no objection to the make up of the Panel as previously constituted was raised by KL or Mr Atkinson; KL when specifically asked agreed to the Panel continuing.

17. KL confirmed the guilty plea to MOA with the exception of using the words 'get out of my face'. He stated his frustration at the refereeing decisions made but expressed his regret at the use of swear words. He confirmed his comments in the letter dated 2.4.26 that the Panel had already seen. That letter largely sought to criticise the referring performance.

18. The referee was questioned by the panel. He confirmed the comments made by KL as set out in his report and stated that he remembered distinctly the 'get out of my face' comment. He stated that there had been issues between KL and him other over previous performances. He felt dejected by the criticism he received but did confirm that it would not prevent him from completing further appointments at Percy Park.

19. KL stated that he had not wished to speak to the referee after the game but that he wanted to raise six points regarding the match performance. KL confirmed that the reason he did not speak to the ref was because he did not want a heated exchange and he did apologise if what had been said was heated but he accepted that he should have communicated in a better manner. The referee had been willing to speak with him.

20. The Panel took the view that the previous history between the ref and the coach did not have relevance to the alleged MOA and that the purpose of the hearing was not to review match official decisions on the field. As KL had raised a number of issues regarding previous performance the Chair of the Northumberland Rugby Referees Society, Dave Pearson, who was in attendance, confirmed that the referee has been watched at L6 inside and outside County on 5 or 6 occasions this season and that as a result he has now been appointed to a L5 game.

21. In submissions on behalf of KL, Mr Atkinson confirmed that Percy Park RFC will address the negativity that has been expressed by KL. As a coach he is very experienced and very good one. He is a role model at the club.

22. Prior to the previous hearing Percy Park RFC had sent a letter of apology from the club (to the referee and the Panel) reinforcing that the behaviour from KL did not meet the standards of the club and reiterating the welcome the referee will always receive at the club in the future.

23. The Panel considered that they did not need to make a determination as to whether the words ‘get out of my face’ were made. The Panel considered that the offence merited a mid entry sanction of 12 weeks*. In view of KL’s previous good record, guilty plea and his belated apology he would receive a one third discount bring the sanction to 8 weeks. However the Panel viewed the initial refusal to engage with the disciplinary process and the impact upon the referee to be aggravating factors and merited two further weeks bringing the total suspension to **10 weeks**.

24. As there had to be two separate hearings costs were ordered in the sum of **£200**.

25. The sanction will run from the interim suspension imposed on 7th April 2026 and will cover all aspects of rugby save for spectating. Taking into account the remaining fixtures this season and that pre season training commences on 30.6.26 KL will remain suspended until and including 18.8.26

* The Panel initially mistakenly considered that the mid entry sanction was 24 weeks and as such the sanction handed down was at the higher level but this was rectified shortly afterwards

Frazer McDermott
Disciplinary Secretary
Northumberland Rugby Union