



League Cup

RULES & REGULATIONS

2023/24

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NIFL LEAGUE CUP

1. Title

The competition shall be called the Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL) Cup. On occasion a sponsor may be included in the title.

2. NIFL Competition Committee

- a. The control and organisation of the competition shall be vested in the NIFL Competition Committee.
- b. The NIFL Competition Committee shall be formed in accordance with the appropriate Articles of the Association and shall have powers to deal with all matters delegated to it by the Board.
- c. The Competition Committee will be responsible for the drafting of competition rules and for the organisation of all the cup competitions played within the League, this will include decisions as to which clubs may participate, the eligibility criteria for players playing in these competitions, and the drawing of ties and dealing with all matters pertaining to the Competitions.

3. Participant Clubs:

Only the clubs in membership of the NIFL shall participate in the Competition.

4. Awards:

Prize money shall be distributed to participating clubs as determined by the NIFL Board annually and shall be subject to sponsorship being secured for the Competition. The Club winning the trophy will retain it for one year. The trophy shall remain the property of the NIFL.

5. Competition Format

- a. The competition shall be played on a knockout basis. All ties shall be played to a finish. If at the end of normal playing time the scores are equal then two periods of fifteen (15) minutes each way will be played. If there are no goals scored during extra time the tie shall be decided by kicks from the penalty mark in accordance with the conditions set out in the laws of the game.
- b. There shall be two (2) entry levels;
 - i. Preliminary Round – the draw will consist of all clubs from Premier Intermediate League (6 fixtures plus 2 clubs to receive a bye)
 - ii. Round 1 – will consist of Premiership (12) clubs, Championship (12) and the remaining PIL from the Preliminary Round (8)

- c. The twelve (12) NIFL Premiership Clubs and the top four (4) NIFL Championship Clubs from the previous season shall be seeded in Round 1.
- d. In principle the Club that is first drawn in the ballot shall play at their registered home venue in all matches up to and including the semi-finals. However, the first drawn Club may forfeit home advantage with the agreement of their opponents and in such circumstances written confirmation of same must be notified to the secretary by both clubs not later than five (5) days following the date of the relevant draw.
- e. Should any match require the use of floodlights, and with only one club meeting such requirements, the match shall be played at the home venue of that club.
- f. Should a match be postponed twice at the registered ground of the first drawn club the NIFL League Cup Committee reserve the right to switch the tie to the registered ground of their opponents on a date to be determined by the Committee.
- g. The final tie shall be played at the National Football Stadium, Windsor Park unless otherwise determined by the Committee.

6. Matches and Kick Off Times

- a. Matches may be played on natural turf or artificial turf, provided that such artificial turf meets the "FIFA Quality Standard".

The owner of the artificial turf and the home club must be in receipt of a valid FIFA Certificate.

The NIFL cannot be held responsible for any damages to third parties resulting from the use of artificial turf.

All pitches, including grass pitches, must be maintained in a standard acceptable to the NIFL Competition Committee. Should a Protest be made in regards to the condition of a pitch by a club, or should it come to the attention of the Committee by other means, the League Cup Committee reserve the right to have said pitch inspected by such competent persons as they may appoint.

A club whose pitch is deemed to be unfit for play shall then be responsible for arranging an alternative venue(s) which meets all League Cup requirements, until such time as the work deemed necessary to make the pitch suitable for play has been carried out, the pitch has been re-inspected and the NIFL League Cup Committee has given approval for matches to take place on the pitch.

- b. All matches shall be played under the Laws of the Game as approved by the International Football Association Board and in accordance with the Articles and Rules of the IFA.
- c. All NIFL League Cup matches shall be played on the dates scheduled at the commencement of the season, except:
 - i. When otherwise directed by the NIFL Competition Committee; or when
 - ii. A club is engaged on a Thursday in a competitive fixture under the auspices of UEFA (either 'home' or 'away') and wishes to rearrange its fixture scheduled on the subsequent Saturday (ie two days later) to the following Sunday, Monday or Tuesday; or when
 - iii. National and regional association senior cup ties take precedence.
 - iv. Agreed in writing by both clubs and approved by the NIFL Competition Committee.
- d. The kick-off time for all matches shall be 7.45pm unless otherwise directed by the NIFL Competition Committee, or agreed by the two competing clubs and approved by the NIFL Competition Committee.
- e. The NI Football League reserve the right to schedule the final on a Sunday.

7. Eligible Players

- a. All players must be registered in accordance with the IFA Professional Game Player Registration Regulations and the NIFL Player Registration Regulations.
- b. No individual shall play for more than one Club in the NIFL League Cup in the same season.
- c. For the avoidance of any doubt to be eligible to play in this competition a player must also be eligible to participate for his club in the relevant league competition and must have been registered during one of the two professional game registration periods.

The registration periods are:-

- 9th June 2023 to 1st September 2023
- 1st January 2024 to 31st January 2024

For clarity, an exception is a professional whose contract expired prior to the end of a registration period. In this scenario the player may be registered outside a registration period and is eligible for the League Cup.

- d. However, no player who is registered by his club after 31st January shall be eligible to participate in the League Cup that same season.

8. Inquiry into and Punishment of Offences

The NIFL Competition Committee shall have full power to deal with all clubs, officials, and players which they shall deem guilty of having offended against or committed a breach of the Regulations of the NIFL League Cup, and they shall be entitled to take such action and award such punishments either by way of reprimand, fine, suspension, expulsion or any other form of punishment as they may think fit in the circumstances.

Note – This rule will not apply to any field offences or any other matter which would normally be dealt with by the IFA Disciplinary Committee.

9. Commission and Reports

- a. The NIFL Competition Committee may at any time appoint a Commission or Sub-Committee consisting of such number of persons as they deem the circumstances warrant for the purpose of inquiring into any matter appertaining to the NIFL League Cup or its affairs.
- b. The NIFL Competition Cup Committee or any duly appointed Commission or Sub-Committee shall be entitled to publish in the public press or in any other manner they shall think fit report of their proceedings, acts, resolutions, and findings whether the same shall or shall not reflect on the character or conduct of any club, official or player and all evidence tendered on such inquiries, and all such inquiries and reports shall be privileged and every such club, official, player or spectator shall be deemed to have assented to such inquiry and to such publication, and to regard the same as privileged in law. On any inquiry such order may be made as to payment of expenses by clubs, players, or officials as the NIFL Competition Committee may think fit.

10. Misconduct in Pre-arranging Results/Gambling on NIFL League Cup matches

- a. Any club, official or player offering or receiving a payment or any form of undeclared inducement from any other person or organisation to win, lose or draw a match shall be deemed guilty of misconduct and shall be liable to a fine of £5000 and shall be subject to such further sanction as the NIFL Competition Committee shall see fit.
- b. All players, technical staff and club officials are forbidden from taking part, either directly, or indirectly, in betting, gambling, lotteries and similar events and transaction

connected with football matches under the control and organisation of the NIFL Competition Committee.

- c. The NIFL Competition Committee shall have the power to investigate any such allegations brought to their attention and if deemed necessary/applicable shall pass the case, including all evidence relied on to the IFA Disciplinary Committee.

11. Protests

- a) Protests by all clubs must be sent by email to protests@nifootballleague.com within four days after the cause of the protest, accompanied by a deposit of £100 which shall be forfeited in all cases where the Protest has not been sustained. A copy of the Protest must also be sent by the appellant club by email to the secretary of the club protested against within four days after the cause of the Protest. Clubs must also transfer the £100 deposit to NIFL via bank transfer. Any club submitting a protest must retain proof of delivery that the protest was lodged within the required timescale.
- b) Upon receipt of a Protest the NIFL Competition Committee shall, appoint a Sub Committee or a Commission consisting of a minimum of three persons to hear and determine the Protest. No person shall sit on a Protest which involves himself/herself or any club in which he/she may have an interest. All Protests shall be heard, where possible, within fourteen days of receipt of the Protest.
- c) In the case of a Protest, if the NIFL has any doubts as to the qualification of any player taking part in any competition it shall have power to call upon such player, or the clubs to which he belongs or for which he played, to prove that he was qualified according to the Rules and Regulations of the NIFL League Cup.
- d) A club may be represented at the hearing of a Protest or Inquiry. Any person summoned to attend a Protest or Inquiry must attend personally.
- e) All questions of eligibility or qualification of clubs or players, or of the application of the Laws of the Game, or of the Articles of Association or Rules shall be referred for a ruling to the NIFL Board.

12. Appeals against decisions of the NIFL Competition Committee or any NIFL Committee

All appeals against a decision of the NIFL Competition Committee must be made to the IFA in accordance with the relevant IFA Articles of the Association.

13. Pitch Inspections

- a. In case of unfavourable weather conditions or concerns regarding the playing surface the Home Club must request the NIFL for an early inspection not later than five hours

before kick-off. The Match Referee or an alternative Referee appointed by the NIFL must inspect the ground at least three hours or more previous to the advertised time of kick-off and shall decide as to the fitness of the ground not later than three hours prior to the pre-arranged time of kick-off, his/her decision being final after consultation with the Club Secretary and the NIFL.

- b. No game shall be postponed without an inspection by a referee appointed by the NIFL, who shall take due cognizance of local advice and the travelling supporters.
- c. Notwithstanding the above, in the event of extreme weather conditions the NIFL Chief Operating Officer, in consultation with the NIFL Competition Committee Chairman, may declare any match or matches postponed without a formal pitch inspection.
- d. Where possible the officially appointed match referee should carry out the pitch inspection but if he/she should not be available for an inspection then the NIFL will appoint an alternative official from a panel approved by the committee, who will decide on the state of the pitch. If obviously 'playable' he will then declare his decision.
- e. It is agreed that in addition to the £5 fee an allowance of £5 per hour be paid up until 1hr before kick-off when the referee would be due to arrive at the ground in normal circumstances. This will only apply when the match referee has had to travel 30 miles or more (single journey/one way). Any distances shorter than this would result in the match referee returning home following the inspection and travel back to the ground at the normal time and he would of course be entitled to add this extra travel and £5 inspection fee onto his expenses for the game.
- f. The Referee, Assistant Referees and 4th Official shall be paid half match fee and expenses for a postponed match which they have arrived at and inspected.

14. Referee to wait before abandoning a match

- a. In the case of matches where it is found necessary to stop play owing to weather conditions, the referee must wait for a period of 15 minutes before deciding upon abandonment.
- b. If through any cause a match has been abandoned before the completion of the full playing time the Committee shall have power at its discretion to award a win according to the goals scored at the time of such abandonment, or order the unfinished time to be played, or to order the match to be re-played in its entirety, on a subsequent date to be fixed by the NIFL League Cup Committee under such terms and conditions as it may impose.

15. Postponed or Abandoned Matches

Postponed or abandoned matches shall be played on a date to be determined by the NIFL Competition Committee.

16. International Duty

- a) In the event of a club having two or more players, who have made a senior appearance in the respective NIFL League, League Cup, or Irish Cup, selected to represent their National Association representative team(s), in matches recognised by the FIFA International Calendar, they shall be permitted to request a postponement of their scheduled fixture during the period of release in respect of such International Duty. Furthermore, a club whose goalkeeper is selected for such International Duty, and who have made a senior appearance in the respective NIFL League, League Cup, or Irish Cup, shall also be permitted to request a postponement due to the specialist position.
- b) In the event of a club having three or more players, who have made a senior appearance in the respective NIFL League, League Cup, or Irish Cup, selected to represent their National Association representative team(s) in matches not recognised on the FIFA International Calendar or Development and Schools FA squads, they shall be permitted to request a postponement of their scheduled fixture during the period of release in respect of such International Duty. Furthermore, a club whose goalkeeper is selected for such International Duty, and who have made a senior appearance in the respective NIFL League, League Cup, or Irish Cup, shall also be permitted to request a postponement due to the specialist position.
- c) The NIFL Competition Committee shall consider all such requests and determine whether or not such requests are approved or rejected.

17. Substitute Players

- a) A club may at its discretion use five substitute players at any time in any match, except to replace a player who has been dismissed from the game by the Referee. The substitutions can be made in accordance with Law 3 of the Laws of the Game.
- b) Only five substitutions by each side will be permitted in any match and clubs may nominate up to a maximum of seven substitute players prior to the commencement of the match.

- c) Substitutions may only be made on at most 3 occasions during the game (excluding half time).
- d) One additional substitute may be used when a match goes into extra time (whether or not the team has already used the full number of permitted substitutes).
- e) A substitute player shall be construed as taking part in the game for which he was nominated only if he has actually played in such game.
- f) Should any nominated player or substitute sustain an injury or become otherwise incapacitated after the submission of the team sheet to the referee and before the kick-off he may be replaced provided that the referee and the opposing club are informed prior to kick-off.

18. Replacement of Players on the Team Sheet

After the team sheets have been completed and submitted to the Football Management System to the Referee and if the match has not yet kicked off, the following shall apply:

- a) If any of the first eleven players named on the team sheet are not able to start the match due to unexpected physical incapacity, they can be replaced only by any of the seven (7) substitutes named on the initial team sheet. The substitute(s) in question can then be replaced by a player(s) not named on the initial team sheet, so that the quota of substitutes is not reduced. During the match, five (5) players can still be substituted. The replaced player(s) must be removed from the team sheet and not be available for selection for this fixture.
- b) If any of the seven (7) substitutes named on the team sheet are not able to be fielded due to unexpected physical incapacity, they can be replaced by any player not named on the initial team sheet, so that the quota of substitutes is not reduced. During the match, five (5) players can still be substituted. The replaced player(s) must be removed from the team sheet and not be available for selection for this fixture.

Any amendments to the team sheet in accordance with points (a) and (b) above must be communicated to the opposing team manager in the presence of one of the Match Officials as soon as possible prior to the commencement of the match.

19. Player Identification

- a. The players shirts must be clearly numbered on the back and must correspond exactly with the instruction input into the IFA FMS system.
- b. The team captain shall wear a distinguishing armband to indicate his status.

- c. Clubs shall be fined a minimum of £50, for each offence, where they fail to observe this rule.

20. Team Line Ups

- a. Each Club shall input their Team Line Up including the names of players and club officials and their functions taking part in each match (including the name of the nominated substitutes) via the IFA Football Management System not later than 75 minutes prior to kick-off.
- b. The home club shall be responsible for distributing copies of the official team sheet (automatically generated by the IFA FMS System) to both clubs and representatives from the media not later than 45 minutes prior to kick off.
- c. Any club failing to provide such documentation by the stipulated deadlines will be fined in the sum of £50 for each offence.

21. Late Start

The NIFL League Cup Committee may fine clubs up to £500 for late start of matches except in exceptional circumstances. Referees must report late starts to the NIFL.

22. Objection to Field of Play etc.

Any objection to the field of play or goal posts, must be lodged with the Referee before the game is started, and the Referee shall have power to have such objections made right before the match is started.

23. Fines

- a. All fines imposed by the NIFL Competition Committee, unless appealed against, shall be paid within 21 days from the date of the letter imposing the fine unless a payment plan has been agreed with the club.
- b. Otherwise, offending clubs will be fined 20% of the fine per week or part of a week that a fine is outstanding.

- c. If any club fails to make any payment to the NIFL League Cup Committee in accordance with the requirements of these rules NIFL shall be empowered to deduct the amount of any such payment(s) from any money payable to the debtor club.

24. Qualification of Players

Only players who have been registered by their clubs in accordance with the IFA Professional Game Player Registration Regulations and the NIFL Player Registration/Eligibility Guidelines shall be eligible to compete in the competition and no player will be eligible to play for more than one club at any stage in the competition.

25. Penalty for Playing Unregistered or Ineligible Players

Notwithstanding anything in any Rule, if the NIFL Competition Committee, has any doubt at any time and whether arising out of a protest or otherwise as to the qualification of any player taking part in the Competition, they shall have the power to call upon such player, and or Club to which he belongs, or for which he played, to prove that is qualified according to the rules. Any club found guilty of fielding an ineligible player in any round of the competition and prior to the next round being played, up to and including the semi final tie may be fined up to a maximum sum of £250. Furthermore, the said club will be dismissed from the competition and the club losing the game in such circumstances shall replace the dismissed club and progress to the next round.

26. Technical Areas

- a) Each club shall provide separate areas adjacent to the pitch for the sole use of team officials, medical staff and substitute players for both teams in accordance with the Laws of the Game.

6 team officials (must include physio) and 7 substitute players are allowed to sit on the substitutes' bench. The names of all these persons and their functions must be listed on the match sheet. In addition, clubs may nominate a club doctor to take up a position in the technical area.

Technical areas shall be clearly marked 'Home' and 'Away', shall have direct access onto the pitch, shall be located equidistant from the halfway line on the same side of the pitch (unless not possible) and shall be under cover.

- b) Any player who is dismissed from the field of play shall proceed immediately to a suitable location as directed by a club steward.
- c) Smoking/Vaping is not permitted in the Technical Area. Any club found in breach of this will be dealt with by the NIFL Competition Committee.

27. Ball Tenders

- a) The colours of clothing worn by ball tenders must not clash with the colours of either of the competing clubs.
- b) Clubs may utilise a multiball system to the immediate replacement of a match ball when it has left the field of play. Clubs who adopt this procedure must ensure that the system is used consistently for the duration of the match, and for both teams, unless directed otherwise by the referee and/or the host club safety officer following permission from the 4th official.

Any club found guilty of removing multiball system without direction will be referred to the NIFL Competition Committee for an appropriate sanction.

28. Official Match Ball & Goal Nets

- a. The official match ball to be used in all matches shall be the ball approved by the NIFL and supplied to the clubs at the commencement of the Season. Additional match balls, if required, may be purchased from the NIFL.
- b. Goal nets must be used.

29. Colours of Clubs

In the event of a clash of colours in matches prior to the semi finals the visiting club shall change.

In the semi finals and final ties both clubs shall change unless otherwise agreed by the clubs concerned or as directed by the NIFL Cup Committee.

30. Admission Charges

Attendance admission fee to be set by the home club but should be no greater than the maximum admission fee for their respective league.

31. Financial Regulations

- a. In all ties previous to the Final, the gate receipts after payment of the costs pertaining to referees, hospitality, professional security company, turnstiles, ambulance/first aid cover and ticketing shall be equally divided between the two (2) competing clubs. (The home club shall ensure that copies of the receipts for such costs are furnished to the away team upon request)
- b. Payment shall be made to the away team within 7 days following the date on which the match was played, except when the match has been designated as an 'all ticket' match. In such circumstances, all revenue generated from the sale of tickets by the away Club shall be paid to the home Club within 7 days following the date on which the match was played together with a reconciliation of unsold tickets (the Home Club shall then make payment to the Away Club within seven (7) days of receiving such revenue.
- c. Non-payment by the deadlines for either the Home or Away Clubs shall result in an automatic increase of 10% of the monies due for up to seven (7) days late payment and 20% between seven (7) to fourteen (14) days late payment. All other cases shall be referred to the committee who will deal with the matter as they consider appropriate.
- d. Members' tickets shall not be valid for any tie played in this competition.
- e. In the Final 20% of the net profit shall be payable to the NIFL, and the balance divided equally between the two competing clubs.
- f. All money generated from the sale of tickets in respect of the final must be submitted by the respective clubs to the league within fourteen (14) days following the date of the match together with a reconciliation of unsold tickets. Non-payment by this deadline shall result in an automatic increase of 10% of the monies due for up to seven (7) days late payment and 20% between seven (7) to fourteen (14) days late payment. All other cases shall be referred to the committee who will deal with the matter as they consider appropriate.
- g. In respect of the use of facilities in the final tie 10% of net gate receipts shall be paid to the host club except in the case that the host club is participating in the Final.

32. Match Official Fee

In all ties previous to the Final Referees fees and expenses shall be paid at the appropriate rate by the 'home' club.

33. Half-time interval

The half-time interval in all matches shall not exceed fifteen (15) minutes.

34. Processional Entry and Fair Play Handshake

The match officials shall lead both teams together on to the field of play five minutes prior to kick-off time. The teams shall line up either side of the officials, at the half way line and the visiting team shall move towards the home team, when both teams will shake hands.

35. Unforeseen Circumstances

- a) The NIFL Competition Committee shall be empowered to take decisions on all matters not provided for in these rules and such decision shall be final.
- b) Should a club be disqualified from the competition at any stage and for any reason whatsoever the club concerned shall forfeit all claims to any monetary award to which it may have otherwise been entitled.
- c) Clubs competing in the Final of the competition at a neutral venue are advised to inspect the ground facilities, and especially the seating at such venues, prior to and immediately after each game so that any damage caused can be identified as soon as practicable.