

DISCIPLINARY & ETHICS COMMITTEE OF FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA
DETERMINATION IN THE FOLLOWING MATTER:

Player and Club	Rhys Youlley (Sydney FC)
Alleged offence	Offence No 3, R1 Serious Foul Play
Date of offence	18 January 2026
Occasion of offence	Sydney FC and Wellington Phoenix FC
Date of Disciplinary Notice	19 January 2025
Basis the matter is before the Disciplinary Committee	Appeal: see clause 11.24 of the A-Leagues Disciplinary Regulations
Date of Hearing	28 January 2026
Date of Determination	28 January 2026 (oral pronouncement of determination) 29 January 2026 (written reasons for determination)
Disciplinary Committee Members	Anthony Lo Surdo SC Peter Speed David Barrett

A. INTRODUCTION AND JURISDICTION

1. The Disciplinary and Ethics Committee of Football Australia (**Committee**) has jurisdiction under clause 4.4 of the A-Leagues Disciplinary Regulations applicable to the 2025/26 A-Leagues Season (the **Disciplinary Regulations**) to determine matters which have been referred to it pursuant to the Disciplinary Regulations. When a matter is referred, clause 3.3(a) provides that the Committee must determine the matter and impose such sanctions as are authorised and appropriate.
2. This matter comes before the Committee by way of referral under clause 11.24(b) of the Disciplinary Regulations. Rhys Youlley (**Player**) received a direct red card by the Referee in a match playing for his Club, Sydney FC (**SFC**) against Wellington Phoenix FC (**Wellington**) on 18 January 2026 (**Match**).
3. The Match Review Panel (**MRP**) formed the view that, on the material available to it the offence was to be categorised as Offence No.3, being “*Serious Foul Play*”. The MRP proposed a sanction of two matches over and above the Minimum Match Suspension (**MMS**) was warranted.

4. The Player has elected not to accept the proposed additional sanction and, in accordance with clause 11.24(b) of the Disciplinary Regulations to refer to the Committee for hearing the determination of what additional sanction should be imposed (above the Minimum Sanction (inclusive of the MMS which must always be served) applying the Range at the Table of Offences in accordance with the Regulations. The Player does not contend that Exceptional Circumstances apply and therefore a sanction outside of the Range at the Table of Offences should be imposed or that the Offence should be re-classified.
5. The function of the Committee in such circumstances is solely to determine the question of whether an additional sanction should be imposed over and above the MMS, and if so, what that additional sanction should be. In doing so it is not constrained by the recommendation of the MRP and can impose a greater sanction if it thinks fit, or a lesser one. Guilt or innocence is not up for review. That issue has been finally determined by the earlier process. The Committee has no jurisdiction to deal with that question and will not express any view on it.
6. The Committee is satisfied that it has jurisdiction to deal with this referral. Further, neither party contended to the contrary.

B. THE HEARING

7. On the evening of 28 January 2026, the Committee heard the referral of the matter by AVL.
8. Disciplinary Counsel was Mr Ivan Griscti, of Counsel, instructed by Mr Lorenzo Crepaldi, Head of Regulatory, Football Australia and Ms Jessica Lees, Legal Counsel, Football Australia.
9. The Player was represented by solicitors Mr Peter Paradise and Mr Eric Cabrera. Also in attendance was the Player, Mr Alex Wilkinson, SFC Head of Operations, Mr Sebastian Gray, SFC Executive Vice-Chairman and Mr Justin McMahon, SFC Head of Football Analysis.
10. Mr Benjamin Young, Legal Counsel, Football Australia was also present in his capacity as Administrator to the Committee.
11. Disciplinary Counsel relied upon the following evidence:
 - (a) video footage of the incident;

- (b) the referee's report;
- (c) a disciplinary notice; and
- (d) the Player's disciplinary record.

12. Mr Paradise for the Player, relied upon the following evidence:

- (a) video footage of the incident;
- (b) character references provided by Mr Alex Wilkinson, SFC Head of Football Operations and Mr Ufuk Talay, SFC Head Coach each of which is undated;
- (c) a compilation of video clips of the incident and previous incidents which have been considered by the Committee in *Geria, Grant, Sasse, Simmons, Young and Topor-Stanley (Video Clips)*;
- (d) oral evidence from Mr Justin McMahon, SFC Head of Football Analysis;
- (e) oral evidence from the Player; and
- (f) the Player's disciplinary record.

Mr McMahon's Evidence

13. Mr McMahon provided evidence as to the source of the Video Clips which he described as having been obtained from YouTube. He also described the analysis that he performed using technology which enabled him to assess the "centre of mass" speed of players on the field. Using that technology, he calculated that the "centre of mass" speed of the Player immediately prior to the incident was 9.1 km/h compared with *Simmons* immediately prior to the incident for which he received a red card at 25.8 km/h and *Topor-Stanley* who was travelling at 13.8 km/h immediately prior to the incident which led to his dismissal from the field.

14. He accepted in cross-examination that one of the factors as to the risk of injury to an opposing player from a challenge is the speed at which the opposing player is advancing immediately prior to any incident and that his analysis did not extend to assessing the speed at which any of the fouled players in the examples considered were travelling immediately prior to the respective incidents.

The Player's Evidence

15. The Player's oral evidence in chief was, in summary, that:

- he has always played as a defensive mid-fielder;
- this is his first season with SFC;
- in addition to the 65 semi-professional and professional games recorded in his disciplinary history, he had played an additional approximately 25-30 games and trial games at an international level for Australia which included between 10 to 12 caps for Australia in U17, U18, U20 and U23's (Olyroos) squads including appearing for the Olyroos at the Asian Cup in which he played in 7 games. The Player said that he had not received a red card in any of those matches and that to the best of his recollection he may have received 3 yellow cards during those games;
- immediately prior to the incident, SFC had lost the ball and Wellington were in a break. He approached Player Najarine from the side to close the space. By the time that he made contact with Player Najarine, that player had pushed the ball past him. The Player could not withdraw from the challenge once he had commenced his lunge. Initial contact was made by the Player's outstretched left foot with Player Najarine's right knee. The Player's outstretched left foot then ricocheted from Player Najarine's right knee to his left foot just above the ankle. The Player described having no control of his left foot; and
- he has known Player Najarine for some time, each having attended the same high school albeit in different years and having followed similar development programs. Immediately after having brought Player Najarine to ground, he went to check on his well-being and apologised. The Player checked on Player Najarine a second time before being shown the red card. Before leaving the field after being shown the red card, the Player made a final check on Player Najarine and again apologised before leaving the field without remonstration.

16. In cross-examination, the Player agreed that by the time that he had made contact with Player Najarine he was nowhere near the ball. He disputed that the challenge was late. In response to a question from the Committee, the Player maintained that he was trying to win the ball and that a better option to the lunging challenge would have been to step across Player Najarine and not lunge as much as he did.

17. The Committee was also assisted by the written submissions of each of the parties to which they were afforded the opportunity of addressing and did address orally.
18. At the conclusion of the hearing (following deliberations and pursuant to clause 22.4 of the Disciplinary Regulations) the Committee verbally announced the result, being the MMS plus one match (a total of 2 matches). These are the written reasons of the Committee in the “*shortest form reasonably practicable*” (see clause 22.3(c) of the Disciplinary Regulations).

C. FACTS

19. In or around the 43rd minute of the Match, Player Najarine (Wellington #20) was in possession of the ball and engaging in a promising attack near the sideline and in his own half running towards the halfway line.
20. The Player approached Player Najarine from the side and at speed to challenge for the ball. As he approached, the Player lunged towards Player Najarine with his left leg outstretched, foot elevated and studs showing. The Player made initial and slight contact with Player Najarine’s left knee. However, the follow through resulted in more significant and forceful contact being made by the studs of the Player’s left boot with Player Najarine’s right lower leg at or slightly above the ankle.
21. The video discloses the Player approaching Player Najarine immediately after the incident apparently enquiring after his welfare. We accept the Player’s evidence that he also apologised to Player Najarine at this time. We also accept that the Player approached Player Najarine on two further occasions, once before being shown the red card and once after at which time he again checked on the player’s welfare and apologised.
22. In his incident report, the Referee stated that the tackle appeared to be reckless and was committed with high speed (which would have been sanctioned with a yellow card). However, the Referee noted that he was positioned behind the Player and did not see the point of impact.
23. The Referee issued a direct red card upon the advice of the Assistant Referee who recommended a red card for serious foul play because the Player had made contact with his studs to the Player Najarine’s leg above the ankle. The Referee noted in his incident report that “[t]he additional information [provided by the Assistant Referee]...about the point of contact as well as my own observations about the speed

of the challenge satisfied me that the tackle was committed with excessive force and endangered the safety of the opponent."

24. The Player left the field of play immediately upon being shown the red card and without further incident or remonstration with the Referee.
25. The events leading up to and culminating in the sending off of the Player are depicted in the following images taken from the video footage.

Image 1: The Player approaching at speed and beginning to lunge towards the ball with his left leg extended and foot elevated.



Image 2: The Player made initial contact with Player Najarine's left knee.

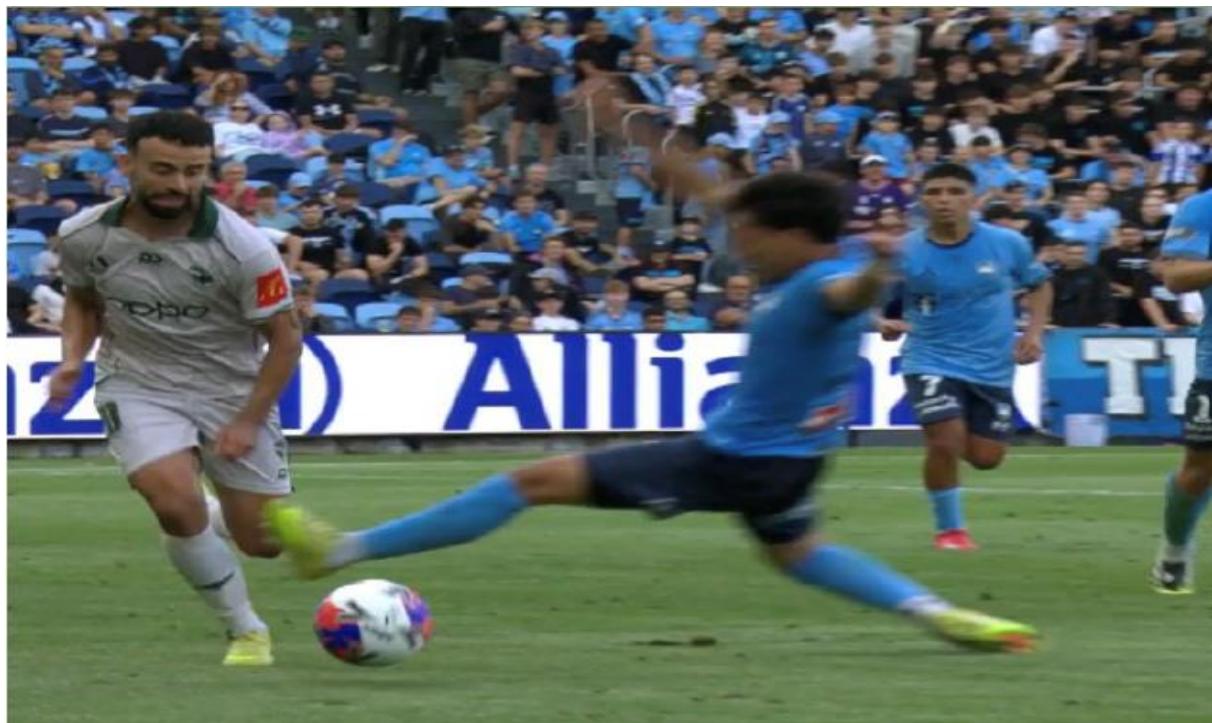


Image 3: The Player making contact with Player Najarine's the right ankle.



D. SUBMISSIONS

26. What follows is a summary of the parties' written and oral submissions. It does not necessarily encompass every contention put forward by the parties. To the extent that it

omits any contentions, the Committee notes that it has considered all of the evidence and arguments submitted by the parties, even if there is no specific reference to those submissions in the following summary.

27. The matters submitted by Disciplinary Counsel, in chief, included:

- the video footage shows the Player lunging at Player Najarine with excessive force, making contact with Player Najarine's right lower leg above the ankle, causing his foot to twist on the ground;
- "Serious Foul Play" is defined in the Laws of the Game as "*[a] tackle or challenge that endangers the safety of an opponent or uses excessive force or brutality must be sanctioned as serious foul play. Any player who lunges an opponent in challenging for the ball from the front, from the side or from behind, using one or both legs, with excessive force or endangers the safety of an opponent is guilty of serious foul play;*"
- the tackle meets the definition of "serious foul play" under the Laws of the Game, as it endangered the safety of the opponent and involved excessive force;
- the Player sought to challenge in a manner that did not have regard to the safety of his opponent who, running with the ball at his feet, was in a vulnerable position. The Player lunged in with excessive force in a manner that endangered the safety of his opponent;
- intent is not required for serious foul play; the focus is on the risk posed to the opponent's safety;
- the Player's challenge was late, reckless, and posed a significant risk of injury to Player Najarine. There was no malice, however, the ball was well passed the Player when the challenge was made;
- the sanction should reflect the potential harm caused and act as a deterrent to similar conduct;
- each case turns on its own merits and circumstances. The most comparable cases to the present are *Simmons* and *Grant*. In *Simmons*, a three-match suspension was imposed, while *Grant* received two matches due to his excellent disciplinary record. In each of *Simmons* and *Grant*, the challenging player had a realistic prospect of winning the ball but elected to challenge in a

dangerous manner. In the present case, the challenge was so late that was no prospect at all of contact with the ball;

- there are no extenuating circumstances relevant to the commission of the offence;
- the Player is 20 years of age and has a limited senior professional playing record, therefore, the Player's past record is not particularly significant, one way or the other;
- the character references from Mr Wilkinson and Mr Talay speak to the Player's positive character and are accepted without question;
- the Player appeared to apologise to Player Najarine after the incident and left the field without complaint following the red card; and
- in all the circumstances, a three-game suspension is warranted.

28. The matters submitted on behalf of the Player, in chief, included:

- the incident occurred when the Player attempted to stop Player Najarine, who had possession of the ball;
- the Player approached from the left side, anticipating Player Najarine's left-foot dominance but made contact with him after a lateral dribble;
- the challenge was reckless but was not brutal, did not involve excessive force, and only minimally endangered the safety of the opposing player;
- the speed of the challenge was 9.1 km/h much less than both *Simmons* (25.8 km/h) who received a 3 match suspension and *Topor-Stanley* (13.8 km/h) who received a 2 match suspension;
- there was no evidence of brutality, as the tackle was not savage, ruthless, or deliberately violent;
- no excessive force was used. He decelerated and performed a 'split-step' before extending his leg. The contact was caused by Player Najarine's knee exerting more force than the Player's boot. The lateral nature of the tackle inherently involved less force compared to front-on challenges. Physics analysis supports the claim that the Player's leg was falling without force prior to contact;

- an acknowledgement of the potential risk of injury due to the lunge but the circumstances leading to the endangerment were minimal and on the low end of culpability;
- the Player has an exemplary disciplinary record, with no prior red cards and only two yellow cards during the 2025/2026 season. He has played 65 professional matches. The Committee should also take into account that in addition to the 65 matches disclosed on his disciplinary record, the Player has competed in both trial and competition games in a representative capacity including for Australia totalling in the aggregate approximately 100 games commencing with U17 representative duties for Australia and extending to U18, U20 and U23 caps. He has not received any prior red cards. The Player is not a repeat offender. The Player's disciplinary record is positive. It should not be characterised as "neutral" (c.f. *Simmons*);
- the Player is of good character and repute as evidence by the references from Mr Alex Wilkinson and Mr Ufuk Talay;
- the Player demonstrated remorse immediately after the incident. He raised his hand twice in apology, checked on the Player Najarine and apologised twice before receiving the red card and again after receiving the red card and before he left the field without complaint. Character references from Alex Wilkinson and Ufuk Talay confirm the Player's genuine remorse;
- the circumstances differ from similar cases cited by the Disciplinary Counsel (*Grant* and *Simmons*), which involved greater force and front-on tackles;
- the Player's case is more similar to *Geria*, where a lateral tackle resulted in only a one-match suspension;
- no additional sanction should be imposed beyond the MMS; and
- alternatively, if an additional suspension is imposed, the Player requests that it only take effect if another offence occurs during a probationary period, as per clause 14.2 of the Regulations.

29. No "extenuating circumstances" as defined in the Disciplinary Regulations are relied upon by the Player.

30. Matters submitted by Disciplinary Counsel in reply included:

- the Player's challenge involved violent contact at speed, posing a risk of injury;
- the Player did not withdraw from the challenge and had the opportunity to do so;
- the nature of the challenge, despite being lateral, was still forceful due to the speed of the opposing player and the contact made with the Player's studs above the ankle;
- each case is evaluated on its own merits; comparisons with past incidents may not provide clear guidance. In *Topor-Stanley*, the challenge was deemed less dangerous than the present, resulting in a two-match suspension, influenced by the Player's good disciplinary record. *Geria* involved a player with a realistic chance to win the ball and a lower leg position, which contributed to a different outcome; and
- a partial suspension is not warranted in this case, as such measures are typically reserved for irregular circumstances or off-the-ball incidents, not serious foul play during a game.

E. CONSIDERATION AND FINDING

31. The sole issue for the Committee is what, if any, sanction should be imposed over the MMS.

32. The Committee has made plain on many occasions that an important consideration is the safety of all players and, relevant to these circumstances, the safety of an opposing player.

33. The Laws of the Game (**LOTG**) state, “[a]lthough accidents occur, the Laws should make the game as safe as possible. This requires players to show respect for their opponents and referees should create a safe environment by dealing strongly with those who whose play is too aggressive and dangerous.”

34. Serious foul play is defined in the LOTG as:

"A tackle or challenge that endangers the safety of an opponent or uses excessive force or brutality...Any player who lunges at an opponent in challenging for the ball from the front, from the side or from behind, using one or both legs, with excessive force or endangers the safety of an opponent is guilty of serious foul play."

35. Further, the LOTG define "reckless" as "any action (usually a tackle or challenge) by a player which disregards (ignores) the danger to, or consequences for, the opponent."
36. Clause 13.2 of the Disciplinary Regulations requires that when determining any appropriate sanction in accordance with the Range at the Table of Offences, a Judicial Body, which includes the Committee, may consider:
 - (a) the nature and severity of the Offence, including whether it was intentional, negligent or reckless;
 - (b) the Player's past record and whether or not this is a repeated Offence;
 - (c) the remorse of the Player; and
 - (d) any extenuating circumstances relevant to the commission of the Offence.

The nature and severity of the offence

37. Having regard to the video footage, the submissions made by Disciplinary Counsel and those made on behalf of the Player, the Committee accepts that the Player did not act with any intention to commit a foul or to necessarily make contact with the opponent, and that his only intention was to prevent a promising attack by Player Najarrine who was in possession of the ball.
38. The Player's mis-timed lunge, however, was initiated at a time when Player Najarrine was to make an imminent touch on the ball and was therefore reckless as to the consequence of his actions on his opponent.
39. Intent is not a necessary element to serious foul play and the primary issue is the risk of safety to an opposing player. That is not to say that the absence of intent is irrelevant. As is plain from cl 13.2 of the Disciplinary Regulations, in considering the nature and severity of the Offence the Committee is entitled to consider whether the offence was intentional, negligent or reckless. In considering the spectrum of "serious foul play", the absence of intent (as opposed to recklessness for example) often points to a less severe form.

40. Whilst, in this case, the challenge did not cause serious injury to Player Najarine it nevertheless had the potential to do so and the nature and severity of the challenge must be viewed in that light.
41. The Player sought to mitigate the seriousness of the challenge by pointing to the fact that at the point of impact he was travelling at 9.1 km/h much less than what he contended were the more serious challenges in *Simmons* (25.8 km/h) and *Topor-Stanley* (13.8 km/h).
42. Whilst the Committee accepts that the speed of an offending player at the point of impact may bear upon the severity of an offence, focusing on it alone without also, for example, taking account of the speed of the player under challenge, would present a skewed and inaccurate depiction of the seriousness of the challenge in its totality. Such an analysis therefore ignores the principle of “relative velocity”, that is, that when two objects move towards each other, the speed of impact, or “relative velocity”, is the sum of their individual speeds. Mr McMahon accepted that one of the factors as to risk of injury is the speed of an oncoming opponent. Further, and in any event, such an analysis tends to distract from the real issue highlighted by the LOTG that serious foul play is concerned with conduct that endangers the safety of an opponent, speed being one but not the only relevant factor.
43. The Player approached the ball at speed to challenge Player Najarine for the ball and to stop a promising attack. Player Najarine was himself travelling at speed and there was a real likelihood of his further accelerating to pass the Player to his left. It was in these circumstances that the Player lunged from the side with his left leg and studs showing. However, as events transpired, the tackle was late. It is plain from the video footage that the ball was well ahead of Player Najarine when the challenge was initiated and at the time of impact. The Player had no real prospect of gaining possession of the ball prior to Player Najarine completing his own touch of the ball.
44. As the Player properly admitted, on reflection he should have “stepped across” and “not lunged as much.” If he had done so, he would have retained some control over the challenge. Having committed to the tackle, he could not pull out or do so in sufficient time to avoid collision with Player Najarine resulting in inevitable and forceful contact with the studs of the Player’s left boot to Player Najarine just above the right ankle and below the shin area. This is yet another regrettable illustration of the inherent risks that arise when a player leaves the ground and lunges with studs raised into a challenge. It is an inherently dangerous and risky manner of effecting a challenge.

45. The Committee is comfortably satisfied that the Player's conduct created an unacceptable risk of injury to Player Najarine who was in a position of vulnerability although. In all the circumstances, the conduct fell within the definition of serious foul play but at the lower end of reckless.
46. As to comparable cases, the Committee has often observed that each case turns on its own merits and circumstances and thus comparing incidents alone without being cognisant of all the circumstances that informed the Committee's reasoning process is of little assistance in achieving the objective of consistency in decision making.
47. The Committee accepts that the tackles in *Grant*, *Simmons* and *Geria* (amongst others) bear some similarity to the present in that they each involved lunging challenges for the ball. There are also points of contrast with those previous incidents. For example, the angle of the challenge in the present case involved a challenge on the ball from the side of the line being run by Player Najarine. As the Committee observed in *Geria*, this type of tackle tends to involve a lower risk of collision with the opponent than a front on challenge between two players running at the ball from opposite directions.
48. The closest comparable case to the present, at least in terms of the nature of the challenge, is *Geria* but a significant difference is that in that case Geria had a good prospect of challenging for the ball and, in fact, his first contact was with the ball. The challenge was marginally late. Here, as the video evidence makes plain, the Player was late, there was no contact with the ball and nor was there any appreciable prospect of him winning the ball. Contact with Player Najarine was inevitable once the Player had committed to the late challenge and lunged to do so.
49. The type and seriousness of the offending is only one factor that the Committee is required to take into consideration in determining the appropriate sanction.

The Player's Disciplinary Record

50. The Player is 20 years of age. His written disciplinary record discloses that he has: played semi-professionally or professionally since debuting in the NPL in 2022 and in the A-League in season 2022/23; played 65 semi-professional or professional games since 2022 with 13 games in the A-League; and he has received 9 yellow cards and only one direct red card being for the offence the subject of these proceedings.

51. However, in addition to the 65 semi-professional and professional games recorded in his disciplinary history, he had played an additional approximately 25-30 games and trial games at an international level for Australia which included between 10 and 12 caps for Australia in U17, U18, U20 and U23's (Olyroos) squads including appearing for the Olyroos at the Asian Cup in which he played in 7 games. In those games, the Player had not received a red card and to the best of his recollection may have received 3 yellow cards.
52. The Player clearly has had good disciplinary record which stands in his favour and has been taken into consideration.

The Player's Remorse

53. Immediately after having brought Player Najarine to ground, the Player went to check on his well-being and apologised. The Player checked on Player Najarine a second time before being shown the red card. Before leaving the field after being shown the red card, the Player made a final check on Player Najarine and again apologised before leaving the field without remonstration.
54. The character references provided by Mr Wilkinson and Mr Talay (see below) each refer to the Player having expressed to them sincere regret and remorse for his conduct.
55. These actions are consistent with the Player being truly and sincerely remorseful for the challenge and is consistent with his character which we address below.

The Player's Character

56. Mr Wilkinson states that he has known the Player for six months and during this time has "...consistently found him to be a respectful, disciplined and, and dedicated individual. He approaches both training and matches with a strong work ethic, a positive attitude, and genuine respect for teammates, opponents, and officials. Importantly, Rhys is not a malicious or violent player. The challenge that led to his dismissal does not reflect his usual conduct on the field, where he is typically composed, fair, and focused on playing the game in the right spirit..."
57. He notes that, "...[s]ince the incident, Rhys has expressed sincere regret and remorse. He has spoken openly about his extreme disappointment in himself and the fact that he let his teammates and club down. He has not sought to excuse the challenge, but instead has reflected on his actions and the consequences they carried for others. He

understands the seriousness of the situation and is committed to learning from it to ensure it is not repeated.”

58. Mr Wilkinson concludes, “*I firmly believe this incident was an isolated lapse in judgement rather than a reflection of who he is as a player or person...*”
59. Mr Talay states that the Player, is “*...an extremely respectful, hard-working, and professional young man. The incident in question is totally out of character for him... Since the match, Rhys has shown genuine and immediate remorse for his actions. He has taken full responsibility, expressed sincere regret, and made it clear that he understands he let his teammates, the coaching staff, and the club down. He has not attempted to make excuses. Instead, he has reflected maturely on the incident and is determined to learn from it and ensure it is not repeated.*”
60. The Player is obviously of good character, is well-liked and respected by the coaching staff and his teammates and the incident would appear to be out of character.

Conclusion

61. Weighing up these factors, the Committee considers an appropriate sanction in this case to be the MMS plus one match making a total of 2 matches. But for the Player’s sincere remorse, positive disciplinary record, good character and contribution to the Club and football (including in a representative capacity) and the fact that, whilst reckless, the seriousness of the offence is at the lower end, the Committee considers that the offence would have warranted the MMS plus at least two additional matches.
62. Whilst under clause 14.2 of the Disciplinary Regulations the Committee may suspend the additional match, the Committee does not consider the circumstances warrant the exercise of that discretion and it declines to do so.

E. RESULT

63. The sanction we impose is the MMS plus one additional match.

F. APPEAL RIGHTS

64. A participant has a right to appeal against any Determination of the Disciplinary and Ethics Committee. To initiate the appeal the Participant must notify Football Australia of its intention to appeal within seven (7) days from the date of the written Determination, or by 5 February 2026. The Participant must use the Prescribed Forms DR02 found in the Disciplinary Regulations and be accompanied by an appeal fee of

\$2,500 to Football Australia. The grounds of appeal specified in clause 23.5 of the Disciplinary Regulations are the following:

- (a) The participant was not afforded a reasonable opportunity to be heard on the issues;
- (b) The Determination was affected by bias; and
- (c) The decision was one that was not reasonably open to the Disciplinary and Ethics Committee, having regard to the evidence before the Disciplinary and Ethics Committee.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. Lo Surdo".

Anthony Lo Surdo SC, Chair, Disciplinary & Ethics Committee

29 January 2026