

16th June 2012

This is an Open Letter from Bill Hamilton, the recent Shoulder-to-Shoulder League Secretary, to all members of the Lothian Smallbore Shooting Association. It is directed particularly to those who attended the recent Annual General Meeting, and also to participants in the Shoulder-to-Shoulder League in the recent winter season.

In case you need background information on the subject of this letter, the AGM, which I could not attend due to being away on holiday, voted to disqualify retrospectively all of James Brown's cards in the three matches he shot for the Watsonian Rifle Club's team as a substitute in Division 2 of the S-S League. The vote specifically reversed decisions I had made at the start of the recent programme of matches to allow his cards to stand and to act only as a substitute in future matches for the only one of the nominated team who had a comparable average.

Firstly, let me explain exactly what took place, as the meeting may or may not have been given the full facts, and others reading this who were not there might want to know them:

The nominated Watsonian team was Gordon McDougall (captain), Rhona Dove, Laura MacNeil and Robin Thomson. As Gordon was still feeling rusty after taking the previous season off, he dropped himself for the first two matches, which were held quite close together, in favour of James Brown, whom Gordon regarded as part of his pool of shooters for the team's programme of matches. James was deemed by Jim Scott of Pathhead to have a higher average than Gordon (and contravening Rule 5g) so he made a protest to me about it. I made a judgement in what I thought was the best interests of the competition as a whole, and allowed James's scores to stand in that match, and also in the second. That second match had already taken place before I received the result card for the first match. At that point I had a frank exchange with Gordon and I requested and he agreed to use James only as a sub for Robin, who was the only one in the declared team with a comparable overall average to James's. I considered that any difference in actual performance would not make any significant difference, and I set up that condition in the spirit of allowing the team to field someone very keen to participate for a club with a restricted number of available shooters. James is now totally disillusioned with the Association and will never shoot in at least this competition again.

When Callum Seale shot in a later match as a sub for Laura MacNeil, Mr Scott was again on the case. How he was aware that Callum's "last three recorded score" average was better than Laura's declared average I do not know. I asked Gordon to produce details of Callum's average, because, as anyone would agree, hard evidence is required before making any decision. As a result I had to disqualify Callum's scores. The club had had the warning, knew the situation, and it was a case of two strikes and you're out. Gordon admitted to mismanagement and accepted the penalty with no problem. James did shoot in Watsonians' last match in place of Robin Thomson, as Gordon and I had agreed he could. His score was exactly the same as Robin had shot in his last match. Some might say that's not the point, but I say it vindicates my approach. Also, it might be of interest to know that if Gordon had actually shot in the two matches in which James took his place, the results would not have been different, assuming Gordon shot to anything approaching his average score for the programme. Again, not necessarily relevant but it is a fact: his inclusion made absolutely no difference to the results.

I'd now like to make the following six substantive points.

1. First and foremost it is my firm belief that any elected competition organiser must be allowed a degree of freedom in deciding how to run their competition. After many years of running local competitions of all kinds, I know that in that environment there are some rules that must be applied without question (and that's pretty-much all of them), there are some which can be ignored for pragmatic and practical reasons (and which perhaps should be changed¹) and some which can be applied or not applied using a dose of common sense and a feeling for what's in the spirit of and in the best interests of the competition as a whole. I

¹ Such a rule is the one that requires match results to be intimated to the league organiser within three days (that is three calendar days, not working days). This rule was written long ago at a time when there were two or even three postal deliveries a day, as well as universal Saturday and Sunday collections. It is not practical to enforce that rule these days. Another is the one which permits only the team captains to handle the targets. It's well-intentioned but completely unenforceable with no penalty described, so is merely advisory and is, I know, occasionally ignored.

have the view that enquiry and negotiation and agreement (which is what happened here) after a first (alleged) offence are much preferable to going in with the big heavy boots right away, and I think most competitors would appreciate the softly softly approach. I realise that the ISSF and the NSRA will apply every word in their rulebook for the competitions they run because they are the governing bodies and must be seen to uphold their own rules, but my view is that we are not them and can afford to be a little more relaxed and friendly about things. The matches in this competition are as much social occasions as anything else. I stand by that philosophy, which those at the AGM obviously did not share, if they even thought about it. If they did not, then I can only say that none of them have run public local leagues and have had to make such decisions.

2. The AGM was the wrong forum for making the decision it did. The Executive Committee is the only body with authority to adjudicate on disputes in this competition. Here are the relevant clauses from the Association's Regulations governing this competition:

21. In the event of any dispute arising, the Secretary of the aggrieved Club shall intimate to the League Secretary of the Association within three days of the purports of such protests for arbitration purposes by the Executive Committee, and pending a decision all matches must be fired.

23. Any breach of the foregoing regulations, on being proved to the satisfaction of the Executive Committee, may be penalised by the imposition fines, deduction of points, cancellation and re-firing of matches, suspension of Teams or individual members thereof, etc., as may be deemed to meet the case adequately. The Executive Committee shall have power to settle, after consideration, any matter not dealt with in the foregoing regulations. They shall also be the sole interpreter of these Regulations in the event of a question arising therefrom.

I have two points to make regarding these clauses:

- a. Neither of the secretaries of the clubs involved in matches in which Watsonians fielded James Brown or Callum Seale contacted me about the possibility of any rules being breached in those matches, as is required by clause 21. The teams involved were Prestonpans A and Pathhead B (two matches each). Only Mr Scott contacted me but I understand Mr Scott is not the Secretary of Pathhead RC so he had no authority to represent that club in this issue. He took it upon himself to object to James Brown and Callum Seale's inclusion in the Watsonian teams that shot against Prestonpans as well as Pathhead B, which he also had no authority to do. This leads me to believe that at the very least Prestonpans had no objections as their club secretary did not get in touch, and the Pathhead club secretary either didn't know what was going on or Mr Scott couldn't persuade him to write in on his club's behalf.

- b. The last sentence in clause 23 specifically defines the limits of authority in making decisions concerning irregularities in this league. The Executive Committee should have ruled on the matter and the AGM decision was illegal and should be struck from the records.

If we are told we must play by the rules, then let's make sure we play by all the rules. Can't have it both ways.

On more than one occasion during the exchanges I had with Mr Scott over the season (and there were many), I invited him to bring the matters he was concerned about to the notice of the Executive Committee. He chose not to do so. This issue could have been resolved without acrimony much earlier if he had done so.

If anyone thinks the Annual General Meeting somehow 'trumps' the Executive Committee in this matter, then they will have to show where it says it has that authority. It cannot just be assumed.

The points I make here may be subjectively regarded as technicalities, but are no less valid for that. *If we are told we must play by the rules, then let's make sure we play by all the rules.*

3. The AGM did not have the facts of James Brown's average in order to disqualify him. To remind readers, the rule requires the comparison of the original shooter's declared average with their substitute's average of his "*last three recorded scores at the time he first shoots as a substitute in the competition*". It must have been originally just assumed by the complainer, and the AGM was no doubt so informed by him, that James's averages *in those terms* was greater than Gordon McDougall's on the occasion he first shot. He cannot have known that for a fact. It may well have been correct, but I am certain no documentary evidence was ever requested from Watsonians or produced by anyone to verify it. That's like an alleged burglar up before the beak. The prosecution says "We're pretty sure he did it, M'lud, but can't actually prove it." M'lud would throw the case out immediately. James Brown, Watsonians and myself have all been condemned on hearsay and assumption and not on evidence. The chairman at the AGM should not have allowed a vote on this issue. Discuss it, fine. Make comments, fine. Send it to the Executive, fine. But the meeting was not sufficiently informed to make a decision on it.

I believe there was a police officer at the meeting who actively engaged in persuading the Meeting to vote my decision down without any supporting evidence being available. He more than most should be aware of the principles of justice and condemning someone in the absence of evidence is not one of them.

4. I am very annoyed that I was not given the opportunity to provide a submission to the AGM giving my side of the story. I'm sure the meeting was only given the black and white version provided by Mr Scott. It was known in advance that I would not be able to attend, yet, as the individual most closely involved, I was not even told it was on the agenda. If I had known, I could have provided a written report. As it turned out, I am told that Bev Burnside, the Secretary of Watsonians, who knew very little or nothing of any of this, got a bit of a roasting as she could not say anything on Watsonians' behalf either. That was not fair. The Chairman should not have allowed a vote as only the prosecution was allowed to put their case. That also goes against natural justice, and again, the agitative police officer present ought really to have been arguing against a vote being taken at all, instead of leading the charge to hang me out to dry. He should be ashamed of himself. Talk about kangaroo courts. He is now metaphorically off my Christmas card list.
5. Any implication that Watsonians were somehow "at it" is an insult. It is obvious to anyone who knows the people and the reputation of the club involved that, to use the time-honoured phrase, it was cock-up, not conspiracy. Anyone who thinks otherwise is way off base. The Captain of the team did not know the rule and just used one of his other 'pool' shooters. Watsonians did not shoot in this league in the previous season when the new substitute rules were brought in and so did not have it pointed out as it had been to the teams that did shoot that year. OK, ignorance is not much of an excuse, but see my para 1 above.
6. I would like to propose that the Executive, in time for next season, revises the rules about substitute shooters to give penalty points for substitutes with higher averages, as in the Postal League and standard NSRA rules. When our Postal and S-S League rules were updated a couple of years ago to align them with the NSRA rules in this area, it was thought that the determination of what a sub's average was would prove too difficult to implement in the S-S League environment. The Postal League adopted the penalty point system, but the S-S League rules implemented disqualification. It was left for the clubs to police themselves regarding subs' averages as the organiser has no inside knowledge of any substitute shooter's average. It's plainly not working and I ask that a way be found to introduce a penalty point system in this league also. Facebook comments (yes, it got that far) on this topic from shooters in other parts of the country are appalled that we do not do it that way, and see disqualification as completely over the top.

The current rule is also not clear about how to deal with the same substitute replacing different declared team members in different matches.

In conclusion:

I see no way to reverse this perverse decision. An Extraordinary General Meeting might be required to rescind it (seeing it took place at a General Meeting, validly or not) and either send the matter to the Executive for it to take a view on or just to revert to the *status quo ante*. I have given several arguments above that make the decision taken unsatisfactory and unsafe. I leave it to others to do what they see fit, but as Webmaster, I would appreciate being notified of any procedure undertaken and/or outcome so it can be reported on the website.

The reason I resigned so abruptly towards the end of the S-S League programme was entirely due to what I can only call harassment by Mr Scott both at that time and earlier in the season. I provided him with the full background and rationale for what I was doing and he chose to ignore it all and kept effectively demanding that I disqualify James Brown's scores. He seemed to be running a vendetta against Watsonians and I was getting the thick end of it. We're all entitled to our opinions but his were constantly in my ear and I finally had had enough. Call me Mr Sensitive if you like, but that was not what I signed up for. I would have resigned anyway after this decision at the AGM. I wish my successor well.

I hope Pathhead B enjoy the Division 2 Championship title they have inherited. If I were feeling vindictive (see previous paragraph) and, as there is now a precedent, if I still had the cards I could have gone back and retrospectively disqualified quite a few of Pathhead's Postal League cards from last season due to incorrect witnessing procedures. (If you were unaware, I was also the Postal League Secretary last season.) Some of their shooters were signing their cards and then putting the date on as well. That's the job of the witness as specified in NSRA Rule 7.6.3.2. It's not a hard thing for a scorer to spot but I ignored that in the spirit of the competition and because I was pretty sure there was nothing underhand going on in such a reputable club. Softly softly does work and Mr Scott's club was on this occasion the beneficiary.

I have served this Association in one capacity or another since the early 1970s (sometimes doing up to five jobs at a time) and have been involved in many initiatives and activities in the Association's affairs over that period. Some of them were my own invention and got dropped when I could no longer pursue them (anyone remember the Newsletters I used to produce when I was Association Secretary?). I affirm that I will not take on any further elected position in this Association as I now see how it treats officials it trusts and gives responsibility to, and allowed my name, integrity and reputation to be blackened in open meeting without right of reply.

However, I will continue to run the World Cup and act as Webmaster, mainly because I can see that it is unlikely that volunteers will be forthcoming to take them over. Both of these activities were started up by me for the benefit of the Association as sole inventor, developer, implementer and so far only organiser. I had thought of throwing all my toys out of the pram and give them up too, but decided that there were too many people relying on these services to disappoint them.

I am sad that my almost unbroken tenure on the Executive Committee of 40 years has come to this pass with one of the Association's longest-serving and experienced servants being so shabbily treated, but I wish the Association well in its future endeavours. It will be carrying them out without my help. Even though I do say it myself, it is the Association's loss.

Bill Hamilton
Former Shoulder-to-Shoulder League Secretary

PS If anyone wants to reply to this, please don't bother unless they have something positive and/or constructive to say. I was not given the opportunity to respond so I don't see why anyone should be given the same in return, so I reserve the right to respond to or to ignore argumentative replies.

WFH