



## The lack of morality in the beautiful game

Hello, as EVB's roving sports reporter it's impossible for me not to cover the Adam Johnson child rape trial. For those of you who don't know Adam Johnson is a footballer who plays for his hometown team of Sunderland AFC.

Now it's no secret here that I'm a complete Newcastle United fanatic, as I am born and bred here, and follow my dad, grandad and great grandad's history of falling in love with the Magpies. However this is not about local rivalries. It's not about regional tribalism. I would feel as passionately and angrily about this if not more so if it were Newcastle United involved.

Last year the news broke that a footballer with a history of playing for England had been arrested on child sexual abuse and within hours [Adam Johnson was named as the player involved](#) and was being questioned at a police station in County Durham. Within hours Sunderland Football Club announced [he had been suspended](#).

When he answered his bail, Johnson had the bail terms extended by five weeks. In the time between his initial arrest and the bail being extended Sunderland Football Club had sacked their manager Gus Poyet and hired Dick Advocaat to manage the first team. [Johnson's suspension was lifted](#) and he was free to play for the first team again. Football fans and feminists all over the country voiced their incredulity at the decision.

The CPS decided there was enough evidence to charge Johnson with Grooming and three counts of Sexual activity with a minor. Sunderland did not consider this to change his ability to play for them at this point. In the mean time some people scrabbled to try and identify the child involved with some mistakenly picturing Johnson's wife, Stacey Flounders, as the child and saying there was no way that child looked under 18 (see tweet below). Ms Flounders is 25 by the way.

Johnson maintained protesting his innocence during the pre-trial proceedings and continued to play for Sunderland, scoring vital goals to save them from relegation last season and has continued to play this season under Sam Allardyce, Sunderland's third manager since this time last season.

Johnson's trial started in Bradford this week and it was with shock yesterday that he changed his plea for grooming to guilty and admitted one charge of sexual activity with a child. He still stands accused of two more charges of sexual activity with a child involving penetration.

Johnson was happy to torment a child, who has been savagely attacked on social media as being a "slag", a "slut", a "lying whore", a "money-grabber" for 11 months leading up to the trial. For a child those 11 months must have been torture, and these last few weeks must have felt almost impossible to get through.

I watched social media closely yesterday to see what Sunderland's official reaction would be. But the club remained stoney silent about the news that one of its own most important players



had admitted sexual activity and grooming with a child. I've seen plenty of Sunderland fans who have still defended Johnson despite his isn admission of guilt. Some have continued to blame the child involved. Some believe the girl that Johnson admitted grooming had been met in a nightclub, and have spread these rumours by social media.

<https://twitter.com/Butler21james/status/697782824976457728>

<https://twitter.com/JDLA1/status/697751792029925376>

(this is an image of Stacey Johnson)

<https://twitter.com/CalGrieve/status/697717230159659008>

<https://twitter.com/JamesPettyx/status/697495686691078144>

<https://twitter.com/OllieG29/status/697451091273912320>

It has been muted that Sunderland are waiting until the trial's conclusion before making an official announcement regarding his position at the club. That may well be, however Adam Johnson has admitted he groomed a child. He has admitted sexual activity with a child. His legal team advised him to change his plea, and it is incomprehensible that Sunderland's legal team and PR team were not in communication with Johnson's legal team and were not made aware of his plea. His position at the club must now be untenable.

Sunderland, like Newcastle and Middlesbrough, are a community inspired, family club, whose loyalties are passed down generation after generation in the North East of England. At times these clubs have been the only constant in a world where heavy industry, the main stay of employment in the region has been murdered and poverty has impacted on many. It's usual to see grandparents, parents and children at the match together and the local clubs have recognised that and implemented pricing policies to capture the economic needs of those in the area.

However, it is morally bankrupt that a club like Sunderland AFC have not spoken about Adam Johnson. It was reprehensible that Johnson's suspension was lifted in the first place. Of course the accused is innocent until proven guilty. He has the right to a fair trial. But there is a child involved in this case. A child who supported Sunderland Football Club and whose idol groomed her.

Footballers do not just kick a ball around for 90 minutes, [they are ambassadors for the club they play for](#). they regularly go into schools and on projects that bring them into contact with children. Footballers, like it or not, are role models. Just look at how many children wear their club's shirt with pride, often with their favourite player's name on it. Footballers inspire many youngsters to dream of having the life they have through the beautiful game.

Sunderland football club did announce that [Johnson will not be available to play this weekend against Manchester United](#).



You have to ask why this even needed to be announced. Are Sunderland thinking about playing him in the future? Do they expect the fact that one of their players admitted to grooming and sexual activity with a child can be swept under the carpet in a couple of weeks? Do they think that Johnson will not face legal punishment for his activities.

Johnson should be sacked immediately for what he has admitted to. He is likely to face a custodial sentence anyway. Sunderland AFC cannot justify not reacting to this verdict while claiming to care about its image and its fans. And if it were Newcastle United and one of the players I support in this boat I would feel the same way. I would not be back to watch them play while this matter is unresolved. Football is truly rotten to the core, both financially and morally and now is the time for fans to take a stand and say this is not acceptable.

**UPDATE:** [Sunderland has now terminated Johnson's contract.](#)