

The FA has joined the Premier League and the EFL in announcing a collective undertaking to improve behaviour across the game

English clubs risk an early-season flurry of red and yellow cards if a move to combat “intolerable behaviour” does not yield instant results.

The warning comes after the Football Association, Premier League and Football League announced a joint approach to clamp down on “unacceptable participant conduct”, under which match officials will be told to take a harder line on behaviour of players and managers. The last four seasons, in particular, are viewed as a period in which conduct has crossed the line on too many occasions, with a particular focus on behaviour towards referees and their assistants.

“If participant behaviour doesn’t improve, then there will be more yellow and red cards,” the Premier League executive chairman, Richard Scudamore, said. “The game has put a huge effort into education to try to ensure we don’t have this extra spate of yellow and red cards. But the game is prepared if we have them. The clubs are committed and we are committed to see this through.”

The initiative, which is backed by the Professional Footballers’ Association and the League Managers’ Association, arguably does not come before time. There has not been a red card for foul and abusive language in a Premier League game since Javier Mascherano was dismissed during Liverpool’s 3-0 defeat against Manchester United on 23 March 2008, and that was after two yellow cards.

The refreshed approach will see red cards automatically issued to players who “confront match officials and use offensive, insulting and abusive language and/or gestures towards them”. Yellow cards will be given to players who, among other offences, “respond aggressively to decisions” or “confront an official face to face”. Had it been in place last season it is likely that, to give one example, Jamie Vardy would have been dismissed for his finger-jabbing outburst at Jonathan Moss in April. Others would have faced sanctions too and, although Premier League clubs will be reminded of the laws when they meet before the season starts, teething problems are thought possible.

“Where you’ve seen similar recalibrations in the past, it takes a while for people to adjust,” said Mike Riley, the general manager of the Professional Game Match Officials Board, although the hope is that the message’s clarity will limit any disruption. Among others to respond was Gary Lineker, who tweeted: “At last! Might be bedlam for a few games but players will soon learn.”

Codes of conduct in the technical area will also be enforced more rigorously, with officials reminded to “retain professional detachment from players and club staff at all times”. Scudamore continued: “We still want to see the passion fans enjoy and demand, but players and managers have to be aware there are lines that should not be crossed.”

The move is largely motivated by an appetite to clean up the sport’s image, with unbecoming behaviour now reaching a wider audience than ever and also filtering to the grassroots. “That mimicry factor, the poor behaviour is picked up,” said Martin Glenn, the FA chief executive. “We’ve all got a responsibility for promoting the game in its wider sense.”