Taking a stand? Examining fan culture and the proposed re-introduction of allocated standing areas in British football stadia

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Abstract

It may be speculated that the conditions in which British spectators watch live football has been an issue of political, cultural and socio-economic relevance for several decades. Following a number of high profile tragedies in British stadia, safety concerns may have caused governing bodies to insist, in the mid-1990s that high level professional grounds should become all-seater. This development had a considerable impact on fan culture, with many subcultural elements seemingly resistant to such structural changes. Consequently, some supporter groups have started campaigning to re-introduce standing sections in British grounds, which would replicate a similar initiative implemented in German football. This paper explores the proposition for developing allocated standing areas in Britain and concludes that standing at matches may be a good thing but needs careful consideration and further research is required that may be specific to certain venues or occasions.

NB: The Following acronyms are used in this article,

BF, British Fan
GF, German Fan
PC, Police Constable
CS, Club Steward
FE, Fanzine Editor
UL, University Lecturer

Introduction

The aim of this study was to give voice to informed opinion on the issue, with data obtained through unstructured interviews and focus groups. The research participants included British and German football fans, as well as British police, stewards, fanzine editors and academics. The article contains an examination of some of the fatal events that have inadvertently helped shape the existing plight of football fandom in the UK. Subsequently, this exploration will relate to aspects of fan culture, football stadia disasters and the problems of an architectural nature as seen from both and English and German fan perspectives. Findings from interviews seemed to indicate that the majority of fans were in favour of erecting allocated standing areas, although
many doubted such plans would ever be implemented in British stadia. Supporters referred to other crowd events where standing is permitted in claiming that terracing is not intrinsically unsafe, and argued that spectators should be able to choose whether they stand or sit. However, some respondents, including police and stewards, were against such proposals, justifying their arguments relative to behavioural, cultural, safety and security issues. The investigation concludes by recommending an experiment of introducing a standing area at certain matches as the political and social climate within football may have shifted positively towards the issue of standing over the last twenty years.

**Theoretical background — standing or sitting?**

It could reasonably be argued that the behaviour of, and conditions in which, supporters watch live professional football has proven to be an issue of considerable political, cultural and socio-economic significance, both historically and currently. The globalisation of the game, expansion of international competition, increasing media coverage, improvements in stadium architecture and developments in fan culture have seemingly collectively served to propel these issues into public consciousness on an international scale (Rookwood and Palmer, 2008; Finn and Giulianotti, 2000). The movement, containment and disorderly conduct of British supporters have produced fatal consequences on a number of occasions. Far from merely being a recent phenomenon, such problems seem to have been common to football in the UK since the late nineteenth century. It may have been the case that as the English and Scottish leagues became professionalized, teams began attracting large crowds, with spectator disorder becoming increasingly apparent. Inglis (1987: 28) argues this was partly because, “…clubs did virtually nothing to protect spectators. Thousands were packed onto badly constructed slopes with hardly a wooden barrier in sight”. Whilst the severity and degree of crowd problems prior to the First World War remains unclear due to the lack of historical records, several notable cases from this era have been documented. The partial collapse of a stand at Ibrox Park in Glasgow during a home international match in 1902 for instance resulted in the deaths of 25 supporters. Evidence suggests that this was caused by a combination of structural design and the movement of fans trying to get a better view (Walker, 2004). Holt (1989: 144-5) suggests that the growing trend of “spectatorism” was problematic not only due to insufficient conditions and stadium structures, but also because of fan conduct, which sometimes reflected, “Mindless fanaticism, obstinate and arbitrary partisanship devoid of sense, morality, or self-restraint”. Importantly however, as Dunning, Murphy and Williams (1988) argue, ‘high-spirited’ fan behaviour during this period such as pitch invasions, were not generally greeted with the exaggerated and sensationalised moral panic seen in modern reporting.
In 1946 during a game at Bolton’s Burnden Park stadium 33 people died, “…following a ‘break in’ to the ground and overcrowding” (Williams, 1991: 163). This illustrates that examples of what contemporary society would view as disorderly behaviour were apparent during this period (Sharr, 2003). Average attendances at football matches steadily declined from the 1950s to the early 1990s (Dunning et al., 1988). Davies (1996) argues that this demise can partly be explained by the perceived increase in football disorder, the conditions of grounds and economic factors. It may also be speculated that a more sensationalising media also began to develop, using militaristic rhetoric in describing the behaviour of supporters Crolley and Hand (2002) warn that such coverage effectively advertised football as a location and opportunity to engage in violence. The increasing number of televised games displaying pitch invasions and crowd disorder on the terraces conveyed a different image of spectators to that portrayed in pre-war Britain. The media also started to use the term “hooligan” to describe such supporters, probably in effect, creating the phenomenon of football hooliganism. In stadia, spectators often fought in the terracing behind the goals, in a bid to preserve and claim territories (Pratt and Salter, 1984). The Heysel disaster was the most prominent example of such behaviour, which occurred at the European Cup final in May 1985 (Neal, 1986). The dilapidated Belgian stadium was more than 60 years old, and proved to be unable to withstand the fatal stampede by Liverpool supporters towards their Juventus counterparts in the “neutral stand” before the game (Scraton, 1999: 27). A wall collapsed under the pressure of fleeing supporters and many were crushed, resulting in 39 deaths. The scale of the tragedy, together with the inevitable media response, rendered the problem an unavoidable concern both nationally and internationally. This was particularly the case as the match was televised in over eighty countries (Young, 1986).

English clubs received a five-year ban from European competition after Heysel. However, the problems with fan behaviour and conditions remained unresolved, “…Once again the spectre of hooliganism overshadowed the reality of inadequate, dangerous terraces, ineffective policing and flawed crowd management” (Chisari, 2004: 215). Two other disasters that occurred during this decade substantiate this claim, namely the Bradford fire in May 1985, and the Hillsborough tragedy in April 1989. These events “exposed in the most vivid manner possible the complacent attitudes in football towards safety” (Ticher, 1997: 20). Regarding Bradford, Firth (2005) claims that the design and materials used in constructing the stand played their part in the start and rapid spread of the fire that killed 56 supporters. In relation to Hillsborough, in which 96 people died, Scraton (2004: 196) discusses, “…the Thatcherite obsession with ‘secure containment’, resulting in the penning of fans, the acceptance of stadium neglect and the compromising of crowd safety”. A number of football-related tragedies have been followed by detailed reports. The Shortt Report of 1924 for example, made public safety suggestions applicable to large attendances on special occasions.

Taylor (1991) indicates that the extensive economic problems clubs experienced in the 1990s initially prevented some from refurbishing stadiums. As a consequence, many clubs aimed to attract more affluent spectators to increase revenues. Perryman, (2002) argue this also related to the movement to alienate or invoke a change amongst disorderly supporters. This infiltration of a “new breed of supporter” was in effect a “colonisation” of supporter culture (Sugden, 2002: 42). The renovation, reconstruction and relocation of grounds, and the manner in which supporters were then policed, Sugden, (2002) suggests, drastically changed football subcultures. The physical structure of grounds, the development of a more family-orientated football experience generated by clubs, and the extended use of CCTV facilitating the prosecution of hooligans, helped decrease disorder in and around football stadiums (Inglis, 2002). Subsequently, violence was largely displaced in order to avoid police detection and intervention. Club officials claimed that stadium developments were executed principally to maximise safety. Some commentators however, suggest that preventing violence was also part of this rationale (Williams, 1997). Also, Elliott and Smith (2006: 304) argue that after Hillsborough, “…despite the greater emphasis placed upon crowd safety the prominence of crowd control with regard to hooliganism remained high”. However, Inglis (2002: 91) claims that this transformation, “…towards seated accommodation had precious little to do with the eradication of hooliganism and more to do with the marginalising of terrace culture”.

It is probably the case that all-seater facilities had a considerable impact upon the once participatory nature of collective supporter behaviour. Football crowds were previously a swaying mass of bodies, whose movement was restricted only by occasional internal barriers and perimeter walls and fences. The seated accommodation that replaced terracing confined the physical movement of spectators. This involved allocating a specific area of the stadium, i.e. a seat to each supporter. Fans have since then been coerced into remaining seated in their own ticketed seats by stewards and if necessary, the match police. Standing therefore has all but been removed from British grounds in recent years. However, Greenfield and Osborn (1995) point out that there have been calls to re-introduce terraced sections in grounds to cater for those who wish to stand. Given the historical gravity and sensitivity of this issue, the matter of standing at football stadiums becomes relevant to economics, policy, stewarding, fan experience and atmosphere. This paper explores a variety of perspectives on the proposition of re-introducing standing areas in British stadiums, for which there is mounting support.
Data collection strategy for this research

A national campaign (‘Stand up Sit Down’ (SUSD) was launched by football fans in July 2004 in response to the growing conflict between supporters, clubs and safety authorities with regards to persistent standing in seated areas. Membership now covers supporters of over 130 clubs, and includes both those who wish to stand and those who prefer to sit. The campaign’s objective is to introduce an area of each ground where standing will be allowed, provided that supporters respect a code of conduct.

Despite the current significance of this issue, limited action has been undertaken, which served in part as the rationale for this investigation. Data was obtained here through unstructured interviews and focus groups. The 30 participants included fans from five British and five German clubs, as well as British police, stewards, fanzine editors and sport-based university lecturers. Subjects were only selected if they had attended a minimum of fifteen live games a season during each of the last fifteen seasons. This ensured that participants had experience of terracing in top-flight football stadiums before the imposed introduction of seated accommodation. Consequently, all respondents had some experience on this issue. The study explores attitudes towards fan culture, the affects of fan movement and violence on the safety of standing and the viability of the proposal. Opinions on key football safety reports, and the roles and effectiveness of the police and stewards are also discussed. In addition, a German perspective is examined, as the Bundesliga currently permit standing in allocated areas, an arrangement which commentators claim is completely safe (Pilz, Wolki, Steffan, Klose, Behn and Schwenzer, 2006).

Standing in British football grounds — fan’s perspectives

All respondents agreed that the plight of British football during the 1980s, for example, one person commented that, “…things were so bad that something had to be done… authorities and clubs acted… seats have helped, you can’t deny that” (BF). Similarly, a policeman claimed that, “…the ‘80s was terrible, and it was hard to police fans as structurally nothing was in place… grounds now have segregation and seats have helped” (PC). Participants were also in agreement that, “…seats are safer. It wasn’t as dangerous before as people say, but with Hillsborough and Heysel, they proved that how fans act and were treated had to change” (CS). However, some respondents argued that the imposed developments have “…gone way too far. The culture we took years building is starting to slip away” (BF). Barrett (2007) discusses how many spectators consider themselves to have been marginalised by authorities, who have attempted to modify fan behaviour. Although the participants employed different dialogue, many explored similar issues. One supporter for example, argued that the police were, “…trying to change every part of going the match, so we won’t want to go anymore” (BF). Another respondent claimed this is a futile objective, “…
of course we'll always go. The harder they make it the more we hate them, and that’s never going to solve anything” (BF), suggesting that this marginalisation includes the police and stewards “…not letting us do even little things. Standing, swearing, smoking, singing what we want, drinking where we want, leaving when we want… there’s restrictions on every level now. They’re trying to make us all one breed of fan” (BF). Academics have offered similar remarks. Inglis (2002) for example, claims that the authorities have attempted to prevent, restrict or redirect several aspects of football subculture, which they perceive to be dysfunctional. Also, Williams (2002, 44) argues that there have been attempts to “seal off” certain fans from attending football matches. He contends that this exclusion has been aided by rising prices and restrictive and oppressive crowd management.

Respondents stressed the significance of this marginalisation, claiming that many fans, “…feel negative towards sitting… and don’t like the feeling of being controlled or ignored” (CS). It was argued that this perceived attempt at a homogenisation of supporters only strengthened the ties they had with their subculture, often causing a rift between them, and those considered responsible for attempting to destroy these subcultures (authority figure), “…seats might have been the answer once, but they aren’t need now. Fans have had enough” (BF). Some participants suggested there was “…evidence of resistance at most grounds now. A lot of fans stand even though they’re told to sit. Fans only sing when they’re standing, so it’s a problem trying to get an atmosphere going” (UL). Weed (2007) also claimed that the desire to improve the atmosphere is the main reason the campaign to re-introduce terracing has gained such momentum. Another subject contended was that, “…the clubs’ refusal to meet the wishes of supporters who want to stand has caused problems” (UL). Contextualising this viewpoint, he added, “…Liverpool fans in the Kop we’re sick of being told to sit. Now when they sing the Torres song they go one further and bounce… it’s even preceded by the shout we’re gonna bounce in a minute… fans are determined to stand. It started with 20 fans, now 45,000 bounce.” This example emphasises the view that a majority of supporters are unhappy with the current plight, and feel they “…deserve the choice of whether to sit or stand” (BF). This is an important point that was raised by supporters, “…It’s not everywhere that people want to stand. It’s usually only in one section, like the Kop at Liverpool” (BF).

The issue of safety was also addressed by a number of respondents. This wasn’t explored simply by those responsible for ensuring the safety of fans, but also by supporters themselves, “…I was at Hillsborough and Heysel, so I know it must be safety first… but what you need to look at is whether seats are always safer and if there’s a risk with standing” (BF). In addition, “…Liverpool fans are reluctant to instigating changes because of the sensitivity of Hillsborough… but the Kop was the greatest stand on earth when it was terracing. Even Liverpool fans want terracing, but
would want assurances that it was safe” (UL). In addition, another participant asked that, “..if standing is dangerous how come they’re still allowed in the lower divisions? Did [Lord Justice] Taylor believe them to be less dangerous somehow?” (BF). Barnes (2007) claims that in the lower British leagues, hundreds of thousands of fans across the country stand every week without incident. However, top flight matches clearly attract a higher average attendance, with most elite level fixtures played in grounds which are virtually full to capacity. As one respondent noted, “…forget the lower leagues. It’s only when the ground is fuller that problems can happen. But most grounds are anyway so that’s irrelevant” (GF).

One respondent claimed that, “…seating is safer… the worst injury I’ve had is bruising my knee knocking into seats” (BF). Conversely, others argued that due to the tendency for many fans to stand in areas not designed for such activity, injuries can occur. As Garland and Rowe (1999) state, safety and the containment of disorder inside football grounds are primarily the responsibility of stewards, with the police enforcing the law outside stadiums. However, due to variations in the significance and time of a game, the location, the competition, and importantly the attitude of the stewards, there is thought to be a marked inconsistency in how supporters are treated, “…fans stand by their seats at away or night games or against rivals, and stewards let you. But at home against most teams they make you sit. So we sing, they don’t care about singing, they don’t care about fans, all the stewards are in the wrong stands” (BF). Respondents noted that when large numbers of supporters are permitted to stand in seated areas, and sometimes on their seats, “…and there’s a goal scored and everyone pushes forward, people can go flying as there’s nothing there to stop them… especially if people are pissed or on their seats. At Leverkusen a few years ago, a lad fell about five rows and split his head open” (BF). Also, “…because fans ignore the stewards or they don’t enforce the rules, lads stand. Happens at most clubs as you see it at away games too. Lads falling over seats, they get hurt” (BF). Even a steward admitted that, “…having seated areas but letting fans stand is a recipe for disaster. But more and more are standing now so what can you do?” (CS). Another claimed that attitudes differ because, “…fans from some clubs are different. But having to sit comes from the local authority. They have to enforce it as a condition of the safety certificate being granted, most places do, but not all” (CS).

Furthermore, as another interviewee stated, “…the crux of the issue is whether standing can be safe” (FE). On the SUSD campaign website, the following comment from Lord Justice Taylor is on the homepage, “Standing accommodation is not intrinsically unsafe.” One respondent argued, “…Taylor had to suggest seating, but that’s not all he said”. Indeed, there were 75 other recommendations in his report, illustrating his view that a number of deficiencies were apparent in the British football industry at that time. As another participant argued, “…the report came out when lots
was wrong with football… but grounds are good now… you’ve only to look at other
countries to see how far England has come… fans behave and proved they can be
trusted. But still no terraces” (GF). When questioned on the issue of standing, several
respondents referred to the 2007 European Cup final between AC Milan and Liver-
pool in the Olympic stadium in Athens. Although no one was seriously injured, there
was considerable disorder at the game, “…It wasn’t hooliganism, like fighting against
Milan. It was Liverpool fans forcing their way in, but it was bad” (BF). The two clubs
had met in the final in Istanbul in 2005 where both sets of fans were praised for their
conduct. In the latter encounter however, there were organisational problems with
ticketing, ground management, but primarily stadium selection. As Sampson (2007:
179) states, the final was held at an, “…inadequate athletics stadium with checkpoints
instead of turnstiles. It had been built for spectators, who observe and applaud, rather
than fans, who are, well, *fanatical*”. One interviewee who was present at that game
claimed that illegal entry into grounds, known as “bunking in”, can produce problems
and, “…make people think that standing is dangerous as grounds get over full” (BF).
Also, in reflecting on the final, Barrett (2007: 277-8) discusses,

> If the odd few manage to bunk in, then hardly anyone bats an eyelid. But if thousands
do it, then the risks to everyone’s safety are there for all to see. Our end was uncom-
fortable, such was the volume of people in there, and the fact that the Greeks clearly
had no way of counting the number of people entering the stadium is something that
should send a chill down the spine of anyone who has ever read the Taylor report.

Importantly however, as the following respondent claimed, “…loads of fans would
bunk in if they could, but in England clubs are experienced… it’s so rare anyone gets
away with it so few bother… overcrowding isn’t the issue, it’s what you do with the
fans in the ground that’s the issue” (UL). Participants unanimously agreed that Brit-
ish grounds are considered “…among the best in Europe, they’re big and safe” (GF).
In addition, a police officer with experience of observing supporters in more than
thirty countries claimed that, “…British grounds, at the top level especially, are as
good as any in the world” (PC). Therefore many claimed that British grounds are “…in
an ideal position to trial standing” (FE). Another respondent argued, “… terraces
are not unsafe, poor exits and steep stadiums are unsafe… that’s what ‘80s terraces
had, English grounds now aren’t like that” (BF).

Hill (2004) claims that the measures implemented to ensure that stadiums do not ex-
ceed their safety capacity are achieved via effective ticket allocations and regulations.
However, fans in this research disagreed with this point of view. For example, the
following respondent offered a more specific assessment, “…it’s mostly about control
at the turnstiles, good security and communication between the police and stewards”
(BF). Stewards offered similar opinions, “…it all happens at turnstiles. Some get away
with bunking in but it’s rare… we’ve got that under control now, so we control the
numbers in the ground” (CS). In addition, it is not simply the difficulty of gaining
illegal entry into grounds that is perceived to have changed. The attitudes of other supporters towards such behaviour have also altered. In offering a sense of perspective since the 1980s, Prentice (2007: 48) notes that,

At the first all-Merseyside FA Cup final we gazed in awe and secretly smiled in admiration. Back in 1986, fans prepared to go to such lengths to watch their beloved team were seen as loveable rogues. But times have changed. Ticketless fans who try to gain entry to football matches may be rogues. But loveable they are not.

Clearly therefore, attitudes towards “bunking in” and opportunities to engage in such behaviour were reported to be limited to the extent that, “…they shouldn’t affect the decision of whether to get terracing back” (FE). Supporters feel that the “…climate in British football is building towards having terraces again… not in the same way, but controlled. Fans are standing anyway, and this can be a problem” (UL).

When questioned on the notion of introducing standing, some made comments such as, “…you need to be clear on what’s actually being suggested and what Germany’s done” (FE). The SUSD campaign essentially suggests replicating the model implemented in the Bundesliga. As one interviewee explained, it involves, “…rows just like with seats but with a bar on each row that stops everyone going forward. In olden days barriers were only every few rows and didn’t go the length of the row, so people moved more. I’ve stood in Munich, Dortmund… its safe there, no problem” (GF). German supporters noted “…how safe terraces are in the Bundesliga” (GF). Some English spectators however were sceptical of the applicability of the German model, highlighting perceived differences in behavioural tendencies, “… they act better than the English, our fans are more dangerous” (BF). Conversely, the majority of English respondents who had travelled to Germany in European competition made statements such as, “… in the ground at least, Germans act like our fans. If it works there, it would here” (BF). Others were critical of British stadium structure relative to German grounds, “… would our stadiums be able to put up with standing again? The German grounds are mostly new” (BF). However, most respondents offered dissimilar views, claiming that, “…English grounds at the top level and beyond are as sturdy and new as anything in Germany. Both countries lead the way in Europe really, so they are ideal places… passionate fans and good grounds” (UL).

There were a number of negative opinions offered on the subject however. As previously discussed, there has been an increase of what one supporter termed “family-fans” (BF), that is, those watching matches since seating was introduced. Some commentators suggest that incorporating standing areas would affect the atmosphere and the cross-section of fans attending games (Malcolm, Jones and Waddington, 2000; Lowrey, 2002). In spite of such work, it remains unclear whether terracing would discourage family-fans from attending. However, as one respondent stated, “…we’re only trying to get one stand to be terraced, the dad who brings his kids will still have
his ‘family section’, the other end should be terracing” (BF). At the start of the 2007-2008 season Liverpool agreed to relocate season ticket holders who wanted to congregate together in the Kop to improve the atmosphere in the ground. A spokesman for the ensuing campaign entitled Reclaim the Kop gave an interview for this research. He stated, “…we’re called the 1892 Block, it’s the year the club were founded and the number of seats they gave us… to make room for us they moved the dads-and-lads section to the [Anfield] Road End. So you can cater both for family types and for passionate fans” (FE). Another supporter said, “…the Kop at Anfield, the North Bank at Arsenal, Stretford End at Man United… historically every club has the hard core at one end and family types elsewhere. It’s the same now there’s seats” (BF).

In addition, a number of police respondents claimed that “…potential hooligan problems should prevent any terracing in Britain” (PC). Samuel (2006, 72) argues that there has been a recent rise in what he terms “vicious fanaticism” amongst football crowds, arguing that fans, “buy a ticket, not the right to quit the species for the day”. However, when questioned on the subject, one supporter stated, “…what is ‘viscous fanaticism’ anyway? Hooliganism? You don’t see much trouble nowadays, there’s the odd naughty song but that’s as far as it goes” (BF). Poulton (2002) claims that football disorder has been overstated, whilst Stott and Pearson (2006) note that such problems have incurred disproportionate response from the police. Also, Pearson (1999, 35) states that,

> When fans are correctly segregated, it can be argued that the simulated display of indecent and threatening behaviour in fact replaces violence in the ground rather than leading to it, and this appears to have become common knowledge to fans.

Supporters gave similar reasoning for standing to be re-introduced, “…fans always sing songs, what harm are they? That’s not changed when they’ve put seats in… it won’t change if they put stands back in” (CS). Another fan in the same focus group added, “…fans are segregated now. In the ‘70s the segregation was useless so terracing was dangerous. But now fans are split, so what’s the problem?” (BF).

Other critics of the plan made reference to related financial implications. Although the German Football Association currently permits standing areas in domestic matches, such accommodation must be temporarily assembled for those involved in international competition. This is because FIFA and UEFA do not allow terracing in European tournaments. According to Slater (2007: 2) the German federation, ...

> …asked FIFA for permission to allow standing at international games. So far that permission hasn't been granted. Nothing will change until other national associations such as England join Germany in asking for standing areas.

For some the temporary stands arrangement served as a reason to argue against implementing standing in Britain. One fan stated that, “…I would rather see the money
go on a top player than more stadium changes” (BF). Academics have also suggested the move would represent an unnecessary expenditure for clubs (Malcolm et al. 2000; Martin and Petro, 2006). However, many supporters did not perceive the proposed initiative to involve a financial burden, “…what expense? The basic structure is there of a step per row, it would take time changing for European games but that only affects half a dozen clubs who qualify for Europe… it would cost a bit but most fans in those stands would want it and would pay the extra I reckon” (BF). This opinion is reflected in a survey conducted by SUSD, which found that from 2000 football fans 92% were in favour of standing provision (Nicolson, 2008). However, although the group did not indicate whether the survey was conducted by SUSD members, who are likely to approve the proposal, nearly all respondents in this research argued that, “…most fans want the option of standing” (PC).

Another criticism of the idea which was primarily expressed by police and club stewards, was that the majority of such personnel “…would feel vulnerable as troublemakers can’t be highlighted as easily when standing compared to sitting… fans are monitored so if they persist in being a nuisance they can be approached by their seat number… with standing it would be harder” (CS). Another respondent argued that “…hooligans have fewer places to hide in seated stadiums. It’s more difficult to detect troublemakers if they are standing in a crowd” (CS). In addition, from a police perspective, a respondent claimed, “…if standing was introduced more police would be needed… terrace culture has always been linked with hooliganism and disasters” (PC). Another participant believed that, “…officers would never feel comfortable if standing came back as society has deteriorated over the last twenty years so there could be even more trouble on the terraces than before” (PC). However, in contrast to the perceived ‘deterioration of society’, football supporters are considered to be better behaved than previous generations, with some claiming football disorder is “all but dead” (O’Neill, 2005: 226). Evidence suggests that hooliganism has not been completely removed from British football, with Astrinakis (2002: 101) contending that “…soccer-related violence is quantitatively extensive and qualitatively significant”. Yet Pearson (1999: 30) notes that hooliganism is overstated and that football supporters are mistreated.

Despite this ‘embougoisification’ of football, criminal law has not responded to the policing of football supporters in a more accommodating and liberal manner in accordance with these changing attitudes. Instead, social control sanctions upon all football fans have become more stringent.

Furthermore, given the details of the proposal which would limit the number of people per row, CCTV footage would evidently be no less effective at helping identify disorderly fans if the proposed arrangement came to pass. The majority of comments from police officers were clearly made relative to an understanding of the “…1980s
style terracing, the new idea is totally different” (BF). Also, “...every ticket has a place in the ground and a number on it that can be traced to who bought it... if someone plays up there’ll be consequences, fans know that so the deterrent is there... the idea would work” (BF). Finally therefore, although some participants were critical of the notion, the majority agreed that it would “...improve the football experience and could easily be done safely and effectively” (UL). Some police officers and stewards claimed that the move may “...increase trouble at football matches” (PC), but there is no evidence to suggest this would happen. Examinations of terraced areas in Germany prove there is no direct link between standing and hooliganism (Merkel, 2007; Pilz et al., 2006). The dislocation of football violence and the improvements in spectator conduct in the UK would appear to add weight to the argument to re-introduce safe standing areas in Britain.

Conclusion

Although participants agreed on “some obvious facts” (BF), responses gauged on the proposed re-introduction of safe standing in British football can essentially be divided into two camps. Those responsible for ensuring the safety of supporters and controlling their behaviour i.e. police and stewards were “inevitably conservative and maybe a little over safety conscious” (CS) in their outlook. Conversely, those involved in the construction of and reflection on fandom i.e. fans, writers and academics, claimed that the notion, “has far more pros than cons” (FE). Participants compared the experience of watching football to other spectator events, for example, one respondent asked “…what’s the difference between watching Oasis or a footy game? It’s the same venue, you can stand at concerts, rugby matches... I know football is more tribal but fans only cause problems if they’re allowed to fight, with segregation fighting in grounds doesn’t happen... so why can’t we stand?” (BF). The research subjects agreed that, “…most fans want the option of standing so it’s ridiculous fans are forced to sit against their will” (BF). However, many supporters conceived an injustice of the situation, as Inglis (2002) also discovered, respondents were not surprised that their opinions were neglected, “…we are used to being ignored and treated like thugs... not letting us stand typifies the view that fans are dangerous, especially when we stand... when will they leave us alone?” (FE). As Stott and Pearson (2007: 27) note, the treatment of supporters during the last two decades has been,

Controversial, ranging from contentious legislation that infringes human rights to extreme police tactics such as hard-line crowd coralling and crowd control methods, undercover operations and intelligence-led surveillance. These policies would not appear out of place in the fight against international terrorism.

Supporters argued that despite the extensive nature of the Taylor Report, the fact that the implementation of its most significant suggestion involved removing terracing
renders it unlikely that such a position will ever be reversed. It was claimed that the Heysel, Bradford and Hillsborough disasters are wrongly perceived to have all been the consequence of certain forms of behaviour which emanate simply from allowing fans to stand on terraces. It was also suggested that decision makers consider seated accommodation to be largely responsible for the prevention of disorder, “…the authorities want seats to confine fans, they assume that bringing back standing means hooliganism would return… that defies logic and misses the point about what causes hooliganism and how fans act these days” (FE). The sensitivity towards the Hillsborough disaster was considered another factor which would hinder any move to incorporate seated accommodation in British grounds, “…the history of English football prevents us from leading… if Spain and Italy joined Germany first then pressure would grow, but if it’s going to happen here, it’s a long way off… there’s still opposition” (BF). It was also suggested that other countries were not inclined to copy the model, “…Italy have problems with fans and the Spanish are more family-based and prefer to sit, I doubt it will spread and UEFA won’t back it” (BF). The lack of support from politicians and governing bodies is a concern to supporters who perceive the political climate to be the determining factor regarding the implementation of the proposal. However, some considered the mounting pressure from fan groups and the recent collaboration across clubs and localities provided by SUSD to have provided some hope. It was also suggested that the resistance to sitting has resulted in many fans overlooking the rules and standing in seated areas. The danger of such behaviour is something that participants consider clubs to be aware of, but currently unable or unwilling to act on.

As Frosdick and Newton (2006) note, there is a requirement to better our understanding of contemporary football fan culture. Their view indicates that further research from different perspectives; from authority figures to fan culture is required. For example, Governing body and club employees at boardroom level could be consulted to develop an understanding of their views relative to the views presented here. It would also be beneficial to trial a terraced stand at a number of matches in Britain in the mould of the German model. Such an experiment might be difficult although certainly not impossible to administer, considering the relative lack of cost and the depth of support the campaign has received. The trialled initiative would have to be included for friendly matches only, as standing is currently illegal in many elite domestic and European competitions. The test would have to satisfy concerns regarding the restriction of movement, entries and exits, stewarding, policing and behaviour and ground structure.
References


Firth, P. (2005) Four minutes to hell, the story of the Bradford City fire. The Parrs Wood Press, Manchester.


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2. Paul is 21 years old and has recently graduated with a degree in Sports Studies and Information Technology. He has a life-long interest in football and hopes to gain employment in the football industry in the future. He also has the desire to continue studying sport at a postgraduate level.

3. Dear reader, if this research has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this issue we can be contacted on: Paul Finnegan: 05006519@hope.ac.uk and Joel Rookwood: rookwoj@hope.ac.uk.