

IT'S SAFE, BUT IS IT FOOTBALL?

One of the very first professional football matches I ever attended was the Second Division fixture between Brighton & Hove Albion (my home town team) and Fulham on 27 December, 1958. The date is easy to remember or, to be more honest, easy to look up in *Rothmans*, because the crowd that day was 36,747 and it still stands as Brighton's record attendance.

I was 11 years old, and my parents had recently decided that I was now old enough to go across town to the Goldstone Ground by myself. My own son will be that age soon and, of course, I wouldn't dream of it.

The journey involved taking a bus from our house to Brighton railway station and then the train to Hove. From there, it was a few hundred yards' walk to the East Terrace entrance. It cost a shilling to stand on that uncovered terracing, and on match day mornings I used to pray it wouldn't rain because the extra sixpence that it cost to stand under cover behind the north goal would mean that I would have to walk to and from the station instead of taking the bus, to save that extra tanner.

After passing through the turnstile, I had to walk up an embankment to reach the top of the terracing, and I can clearly remember the thrill of reaching the top and seeing the pitch laid out below me. I attended my very first game at the Goldstone Ground at the beginning of that 1958-59 season, when the grass was an even, lush green, and I remember thinking, 'So this is where *real* footballers play!'

On the day of the Fulham game, a rather different sight awaited me as I walked up that embankment. This time, I couldn't see the pitch because the stadium was packed. All I could see were the backs of huge grown-ups, heavily wrapped against the mid-winter cold, and I wondered how I was going to be able to see the game at all.

Of course, I needn't have worried. Everybody was in a friendly, Christmassy mood, and I was shepherded through the crowds until I reached the front of the terracing. The first few steps down there at the front were populated by children like me. It was a sort of unwritten rule in those days that the youngsters went to the front, where they would be able to see, and the grown-ups stood behind.

The size of the crowd that day was partly due to the fact that many Fulham supporters had made the trip from London, and groups of them, with their black and white scarves and woolly hats, were dotted around all over the place. Throughout the match, as with every other match in those days, a constant good-natured banter was kept up between rival supporters, and goal-mouth incidents at either end were greeted with huge cheers. I didn't learn any bad language until much later in life, and there was no violence.

In the First Division that year, Luton had made a good start, and were top of the League after eight games. Then manager Dally Duncan left to join Blackburn Rovers and a slump set in. Carrying on without a manager, they sank into the relegation zone, but eventually survived to finish in 17th place. All those problems were overshadowed, though, by the fact that Luton went to Wembley for the FA Cup Final.

They were beaten 2-1 by Nottingham Forest, and would almost certainly have lost by a greater margin had not the scorer of the first Forest goal, Roy Dwight, suffered a broken leg in the thirty-third minute. By then, Forest were 2-0 up, but no substitutes were allowed in those days, and with only ten men the game was more of a contest.

Like my full house at Brighton, the full house at Wembley was well behaved. Indeed, nobody would have expected anything else. The spectre of football hooliganism had not yet laid its chilling hand on our national sport, and the sixties, such a vibrant, happy decade for English football and for society in general, were just around the corner.

Commentators of the time were more concerned with the behaviour of the players than the fans. There was no *Rothmans Football Yearbook* then, but in the 1959-60 edition of the *Playfair Football Annual*, editor J. T. Bolton noted:

'The hope is that during the new season the game will benefit from the efforts made by those in authority to reduce the number of unfortunate scenes on our football pitches . . . The petty events which annoy, and the more serious untoward happenings which lead to contests taking the wrong turning, are so familiar to all concerned that they need not be set out in detail. From the point of view of the people, we want more football, fewer stoppages, and greater concern for urgency: for what the man on the terraces describes as the need to get on with it.'

'Take just one phase which illustrates the point - the tendency of the goalkeepers of these days to regard the saving of time as a matter of little importance. For many of

them, dodging hither and thither in the penalty area before parting with the ball has become a habit.

'Add to that the modern tendency on goal-kick occasions. The ball goes out of play wide of the posts. The goalkeeper retrieves it, without any suggestion of haste, places it on the six yards line, retreats and then advances once more to take the goal-kick. Quite frequently that goal-kick merely sends the ball to a colleague just outside the penalty area, who forthwith returns it to the goalkeeper. At long last he either boots it or throws it in the direction of the other goalkeeper. A lot of time spent on doing very little.'

Well, those in authority did make an effort, and eventually the four-step rule was introduced. It was simple, really. A problem - in this case time-wasting by goalkeepers - had been identified, and a sensible change in the laws of the game was made to deal with it. Nowadays we have other, more serious problems to deal with, and the measures taken by those losing Cup finalists of 1959 have hit the headlines nearly thirty years on.

At the end of the 1986-87 season, Luton Town's executive director J. R. Smith kindly sent me a report on the club's 'home supporters only' policy. In his covering letter, he said, 'So far as defeating hooliganism is concerned, I think you will agree it has been an outstanding success.'

That is certainly a very difficult conclusion to argue with and the statistics are impressive. Last season, 24 League and FA Cup matches were played at Kenilworth Road under the scheme, and there was not one single arrest or incident worthy of note either inside or outside the ground. In March 1985 the infamous Luton v Millwall cup-tie was marred by a riot in which 47 people, including 33 police officers, were injured and £70,000 of damage was done. That season, 190 arrests were made at Luton, followed by 102 in 1985-86.

During 1985-86, the St John Ambulance brigade at Luton attended 96 casualties, including many victims of violence. Last season there were only 16, and all were either accidental or due to illness. Home support has increased by 5 percent, and 26 percent of those attending matches are either children or pensioners. Local shopkeepers and other business people are delighted. The town's major shopping centre, the Arndale, has reported a 40 percent upturn in trade on match days, and a nearby secretarial college which had previously cancelled its Saturday courses because the young girl students were frightened and harassed, has now re-opened.

As part of the report, Chief Superintendent Glyn Spalding of the Bedfordshire Police tells us that the police presence at Kenilworth Road has been reduced to about a quarter of its previous level, not only saving the club approximately £70,000 per year in policing charges, but more importantly releasing officers for other valuable work in the community, most notably the drive against domestic burglaries.

Well, it's safe, but is it football? On Tuesday, 5 May 1987, Oxford United visited Luton for a vital First Division fixture. Luton were already in a healthy position in the League table, but Oxford were in desperate trouble. A win would see them avoid the dreaded play-offs and ensure their survival. Win they did, by 3-2, but what an unnatural sight it was when the winning goal went in, to see the Oxford players jumping for joy on the Luton plastic, watched by nearly nine thousand totally silent spectators!

Of course, Luton are to be admired for adopting a radical approach to the problem of hooliganism, and for sticking to their guns when faced with expulsion from the League Cup as a result. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the local community are pleased and relieved by the new atmosphere on match days.

But in those days in the late 1950s I always used to think it was terribly unfair when teachers, just to take the easy way out, used to punish the whole class for the misdeeds of one or two villains. Agreed, the system worked in the sense that the teachers were employing peer group pressure to keep the miscreants in line, but I thought it was the teachers' job to do that, and never could accept that I was liable to be punished for the wrongdoing of others.

Now it seems that Luton Town Football Club, with the full backing of the Bedfordshire Police, the Borough of Luton, the St John Ambulance and the local business community, are employing the same tactics. In order to remove the hooligans, they have removed the spectators en masse, and I can't help feeling that it's a cop-out.

A Bedfordshire Police press handout says: 'It has been acknowledged throughout with genuine regret that hundreds of well-behaved away supporters are being penalised by this scheme and from the outset it was hoped that eventually away fans could be reintroduced starting in a carefully controlled manner.'

Let's hope so. The hooligans should be rounded up and put away, especially those who carry offensive weapons. Nobody wants them in or around our football stadiums, but we do need genuine supporters of both teams to give the game its essential atmosphere.

PETER DUNK