

EDITORIAL

On 29 May 1985, as witnessed by millions on live television, there occurred the worst hooliganism-related tragedy in European football history. The reaction of the football authorities to the events of that awful night in Brussels was also, in its own way, tragic. The three main organisations concerned – the English FA, UEFA and FIFA – demonstrated an alarming inability to deal sensibly with the matter and as a result the myth that hooliganism is the 'British disease' was reinforced and perpetuated. In fact, the events of that night should have buried it for ever.

In the aftermath of any such major calamity, the first and proper thing to do is to hold an inquiry. Indeed, UEFA set one up, but rather than waiting for the results of the inquiry, they handed down a punishment on English clubs immediately. This unseemly haste to pass a sentence before a conviction had been obtained was surpassed only by the English FA's voluntary withdrawal of English clubs from European competition for season 1985-86. Perhaps UEFA took this as a plea of 'guilty' and decided not to wait for the inquiry's findings to be published, or perhaps they made up their minds long ago that English supporters were undesirable, and were looking for an excuse to ban them. Either way, the ban does not deal with the problem, for when it is eventually lifted the same louts will still be there causing the same problems.

There is no point in punishing clubs, along with the vast majority of well-behaved people who pay to watch them, for the crimes of a tiny proportion of the spectators. It is the hooligans who should be taken out of circulation, not the clubs, and in this respect the courts, both here and on the mainland of Europe, have been far too lenient for far too long. The usual punishment in the UK is a fine, whereas courts on the Continent tend to deport rather than detain. Either way, the people who are causing the problem remain free to continue their destructive habits.

Although nothing can excuse the behaviour of the hooligans, it seems that, particularly in the case of the incidents at Heysel Stadium, equally serious charges can be made against the authorities – especially UEFA and the Belgian police. Important mistakes were made for which there can be no excuse, and admissions made since the tragedy by those two bodies seem to confirm this.

First, the stadium itself was clearly not of a sufficiently high standard for such a major event as the European Cup final. Within days of 29 May UEFA announced that no further major games under their auspices would be staged at Heysel for a period of 10 years. This announcement was quite astonishing, because one is left wondering why the stadium was chosen in the first place. Crumbling terraces provided ammunition which was used – mostly by Italians – against a frightened and cowardly police force. The hour-long spectacle of a small group of Juventus supporters hurling rocks, sticks and other missiles at a line of policemen who did nothing but cower behind riot shields was sickening, and it should be noted that while British fans have a bad reputation, it was an Italian (a fact since confirmed by Turin police) who was seen with a firearm. It may have been a starting pistol, but did the policemen who had to face it know that at the time?

Crumbling terraces apart, the main problem with the physical condition of the stadium was that the fencing intended to segregate groups of rival supporters was totally inadequate. Segregation is a tried and tested method of crowd control, and had the fencing been strong enough and high enough, the 'invasion' by some Liverpool supporters which seemed to cause the panic which led to 38 deaths could not have taken place. Once it had happened, the Belgians added insult to injury by sending in riot police rather than medics, who didn't arrive for a further 30 minutes. At the time of writing, nobody knows what sort of provocation the Liverpool supporters were subjected to, but even if severe provocation cannot be used in their defence, any sensible stadium authority would have ensured that such invasions were not possible, and there is a strong possibility that the whole incident would have been confined to a shouting match.

Even if the fencing is adequate, it might just as well be taken down altogether if there is not the strictest control over the sale of tickets, and the Belgians stand condemned here as well. Selling tickets on the day of the match to anyone who turns up at the ticket office with ready cash is, to say the least, wildly irresponsible. The resultant mixture of rival fans is a recipe for trouble, and it has been suggested that acts of violence by Italians against outnumbered Liverpool supporters in the same section may have been the trigger which started the invasion. If so, and we will have to wait for the inquiry's findings before we can be sure, UEFA will have to take such steps as are necessary to ensure that no such sale ever takes place again. Prevention is better than cure, and a little applied common sense in these administrative matters is essential.

English clubs have the best record of success of any European country in the three main UEFA club competitions, and their absence, while doing nothing to combat hooliganism, will devalue all three tournaments. In one respect, the British government have reacted more constructively than the football authorities by taking steps to ban alcohol in English stadia. This has been done in Scotland with marked results in improvement in crowd behaviour, but the English Football League and FA were clearly not about to follow that example of their own volition. True, they are concerned with financial considerations, but as alcohol seems to be a contributory factor to hooliganism, the ban is to be applauded – with one proviso. If the vast majority of innocent paying spectators – who keep the game alive – are to be deprived of the pleasure of a quiet drink, then the ban must be extended to include the whole stadium, with no exceptions for executive boxes or boardrooms.

England's reputation in the world of football is now at its lowest ebb, but tides always turn. At the time of writing FIFA had already relented and lifted the world-wide ban which they imposed on English clubs. This did them no real credit, for they originally said that the ban was provisional pending the outcome of the inquiry, and then they lifted it without waiting for those results. Curious behaviour, but perhaps UEFA will follow their example and realise that banning clubs is not the answer. There is no single, simple answer, or it would have been found years ago, but sensible administration, properly-equipped stadia and an appropriately strong response when the real villains of the piece – the hooligans themselves – are convicted will go a long way towards re-establishing the reputation of the game itself, particularly here in the country which gave football to the world and now finds itself cast into the wilderness.

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