

The terrifying phenomenon of football hooliganism

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AS the new soccer season gets under way, the Berne-based Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) has issued its annual appeal for "a spirit of sportsmanship" on and off the field. And the general secretary of UEFA – Hans Bangerter of Switzerland – has urged the authorities in Britain and other countries to combat "terrorist-like activities of wild and usually intoxicated crowds". The following article by Hans Bangerter is taken from the UEFA Bulletin.

The terrifying phenomenon of football hooliganism

Extremist elements have always used violence as a means of expressing themselves. Negative examples of such violence used to be rare exceptions at football matches, but since the mid-1960s they have been on the increase, even if their growth has been spasmodic rather than continuous.

Now, in some countries, violence in the football stadium has become almost the rule rather than the exception. The current situation is such that probably only the fear of severe punishment can ensure respect for sporting and moral rules and standards.

We are convinced that the despicable antics and the incomprehensible behaviour of a small minority of football spectators is attributable to a basically hostile attitude towards society and its laws and habits.

In other words, the problem is essentially a sociological one. The disturbances caused by predominantly young people certainly have their roots to a large extent in the sociological changes in our modern society, which are beyond the control of the football authorities but which unfortunately manifest themselves in our football stadia.

This rowdy behaviour has meanwhile gone far beyond a mere matter of "letting off steam" in the anonymity of the football crowd.

Serious problem in England

The phenomenon of violence in the stadium first appeared in its present form in Britain in the 1960s. It was noticeable that the problem never really existed in the smaller associations but only in large centres of population, which goes to substantiate our belief that this is essentially a problem of a social or sociological nature.

It is, however, difficult to judge to what extent the wide-scale youth unemployment in these densely populated areas is a contributory factor to 'football hooliganism'. But the fact is that these hooligans are practically all youngsters.

The problem has taken on serious dimensions especially in England, although it has recently also become evident in certain large cities in other countries of Europe. It seems as if the British have exported not only their own fascinating game of football during the last century, but also the terrifying phenomenon of football hooliganism.

It is hardly any wonder that these so-called "fans" from England are now sometimes faced with similar gangs when they travel abroad – but there is no doubt that the root of the evil was in the soil on the British side of the Channel.

Even if there are not incidents at every match, it is still an intolerable imposition on organisers to have to arrange for hundreds of policemen, including those of the special forces, to be mobilised for certain games.

It really should not be necessary to transform our stadia into some kind of terror-zones just because of a small criminal element.

There is, moreover, no doubt that the hooligans are largely responsible for the alarming drop in the number of people going to watch football in England. A decrease of over three million in three years is more than even the strongest league in the world can endure.

Clubs must take responsibility

In the 1960s, after our appeals for maintenance of law and order in stadiums had failed to bear fruit, UEFA felt constrained to react to the growing lack of discipline and the mounting spectator disturbances at European matches.

Penalties for infringements were made tougher, so that now the catalogue of sanctions ranges from warnings and fines to the annulling of matches, the loss of points won, forfeit defeats, the closure of grounds, orders for games to be played with no spectators or on neutral ground, or even expulsion from the competition.

The instructions, meanwhile, include ways of controlling ticket sales in cooperation with the clubs or national associations involved.

Tickets should be distributed according to the judgement of the clubs or associations; the supporters of the participating teams should be split into separate groups, and, if possible, should not be placed in sectors of the ground immediately next to the playing area itself; contacts between rival supporters should be avoided, while tickets should not be sold in blocks at the match venue itself but rather in smaller allotments.

These instructions also include a ban on the sale of alcoholic drinks in stadiums, as well as on the sale of any drinks in bottles or cans, and also encourage the transmission of messages to the public over the stadium loudspeakers and try to achieve good cooperation with the police and other security forces.

The basic principle upon which the UEFA disciplinary system is founded is that the clubs and associations must take full responsibility for their fans and supporters, as someone has to be responsible to the organisers, otherwise there is bound to be complete anarchy.

Wire fences v. weapons

In 1966, we expressed the hope that it would never be necessary to build moats and wire-fences in European football stadiums, as had for years been the case in South America; but now we must resign ourselves to admitting that such measures, which have since had to be introduced here in Europe as well, are no longer sufficient to put an end to the problem, as most of the trouble occurs outside the football stadium.

The whole situation has developed so seriously that now, in the 1980s, football fans have to be searched for offensive weapons as they enter the stadium in certain countries.

Such searches have revealed a veritable arsenal of weapons including knives, daggers,



Hans Bangerter of Switzerland, UEFA general secretary

chains, knuckle-dusters, axes, sprays, tear-gas and so on.

The UEFA authorities are now forced to give the disciplinary bodies greater power in order to impose punishments in future also in cases in which serious incidents occur outside the stadium itself. Penalties will certainly be as severe as each case warrants.

It must no longer happen that so-called "fans" can create a reign of terror among the population of a foreign country, otherwise we shall soon have to close the stadium doors altogether.

As for the situation on the field of play itself, we can say with some satisfaction that the trend has generally been a positive one, thanks to the consistent line adopted by the UEFA disciplinary authorities.

Ban on English fans?

Not only UEFA itself, however, but also the

national associations and clubs – especially those in England – have made great efforts to improve the situation; experience has shown, sadly, that even these have not been enough to solve the problem.

We made it clear that the situation could no longer be tolerated and indicated that it might be necessary to exclude English teams from the European competitions as a most dramatic counter-measure.

As the football authorities cannot apparently control the way things are developing, our appeal was aimed at governmental bodies to help in preventing terrorist-like activities of wild and usually intoxicated crowds.

When other people's property is damaged or even totally destroyed as a direct result of a football match and fellow spectators or even innocent passers-by in the streets are no longer sure of their personal safety, then the

situation has deteriorated beyond all tolerance.

As a potentially effective means of tackling the problem, we proposed to the British Government that English football fans be prevented from travelling abroad and that offenders should be punished more severely by the courts.

It was the first time we had sought the active support of the government, because without a ban on travel abroad the criminal element can never be brought under control. At the same time we suggested that matches should be transmitted by close-circuit television onto giant screens in the football stadium back in the home country.

Trail of destruction

Although our explicit words of warning produced a wide and positive reaction in the British press, the responsible governmental authorities at first quoted principles of democracy as a reason for rejecting these proposals.

It is strange that, after all the bad experiences of incidents occurring on British public transport services (especially on the cross-Channel ferries), there is still no ban or restriction on alcohol sales, even though it is a well-known fact that the young people fall victim to alcohol once they leave home and this is a major reason for their uncontrollable behaviour.

Fights in bars, a trail of destruction along the roads to the stadium and in railway trains, looting in shops, overturning cars in the streets, the destruction of private and public property and various forms of physical aggression all go to prove that these terrorists are merely using the football match itself as a pretext for going on the rampage.

If we are going to fulfil our own obligations and ensure that the UEFA competitions always go ahead as planned, and if we are also to observe our first and foremost duty of securing a healthy future for the game of football, then we have no choice but to take drastic measures against those whose supporters – genuine or otherwise – refuse to obey the rules.

In order to avoid such drastic action, football must have the total and effective support of the governments whose subjects (or at least a small minority of them) behave as uncivilised mobs and thus also bring disgrace upon their own country's image and reputation.

We also need the continuing support of the media, but on no account should the offenders be given the sort of publicity which they have enjoyed from time to time on television in some countries.