

Riot culture that refuses to die

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The Observer (1901-2003); Feb 19, 1995;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian (1821-2003) and The Observer (1791-2003)

pg. 11

'We mustn't underestimate the fun factor. Most of those blokes enjoy it'. **David Harrison** drinks with the soccer yobs

Riot culture that refuses to die

FRIDAY night in Fulham. An ugly sight, an uglier sound. The 'Chelsea boys' are in the boozier, all polo shirts, strangled vowels and enough F-words to win the Booker Prize.

Five fans in their twenties and early thirties are drinking heavily, surly young men out on the town. They are still talking about Wednesday night in Dublin, when England 'supporters' brought a friendly football match to a premature and violent end.

Trevor, Tony and someone we had better call Friendly — 'print my name and I'll break your fucking neck' — had hurled abuse and metal seats just because Ireland scored the first goal at Lansdowne Road.

They brag relentlessly about their 'great night'. There is no remorse. Indeed, they can't wait to do it again. They bang on about loving football and their country, hating the Irish, the Asians, the blacks, the Jews. Their talk is macho, childishly competitive and utterly tedious.

The breed is not just the product of the football grounds, which merely provide them with their biggest stage and their brightest lights. They are the same people who fight in pubs and clubs; who get drunk in Benidorm and Rimini; whose calling card is violence and vomit.

Why do they do it? Trevor says he likes rucking with other gangs, especially foreign gangs. Tony says it's better than drugs. Friendly says he loves being in a gang. They do it for kicks.

None of the group says he is politically motivated. I ask them about the Irish problem and, through the lager-fuelled bravado, it is clear they haven't a clue. Republicanism? 'Dunno, mate.' The Framework Document? 'Is 'e takin' the piss?'

Yet of this they are sure: the IRA and, by illogical extension, all Irish people, are 'scum, 'cos they come over 'ere and bomb our people'. There is right-wing politics buried in there somewhere, but pretty deep.

Colin Ward, 38, author of *Steaming In*, a book based on his experiences as a football fan who travelled with hooligans, believes the political aspect of hooliganism is exaggerated by the police and the media. 'There is a bunch of hard-core racists,' he said, 'but we mustn't underestimate the fun factor. Most of those blokes enjoy it. It gets their adrenalin flowing.'

Ward does, however, draw a parallel between the hooligans' views and those of some right-wing MPs on issues such as immigration and Europe. The difference, he says, is 'politicians can verbalise it; the hooligans can't, so they express it the only way they can, especially after 10 pints of beer'.

Neo-fascist organisations have used football stadiums as recruiting grounds since the late Fifties. Police have identified Combat 18, a small group linked to the British National Party and Ulster Loyalist groups, as the protagonists in Dublin. They are not football fans. They wait until vast quantities of alcohol have been absorbed, incite the 'in-it-for-the-aggro' hooligans to violence and then make a swift exit.

'You don't see the ringleaders being caught by TV cameras,' said Tony Robson of the anti-fascist organisation Searchlight. 'They are well out of the ground before the police move in.'

Clubs have made progress in combating hooliganism and racism in their grounds. All-seater stadiums, closed-circuit TV, membership schemes and the police Football Intelligence Unit have made British grounds among the safest in the world. But the problem has just moved outside the grounds, where assaults, shoplifting and fights between rival fans are still rife.

The Commission for Racial Equality has enjoyed some success with its 'Kick Racism Out of Football' campaign this season. But racism has not disappeared — as the French footballer Eric Cantona discovered when he was abused by a Crystal Palace supporter last month.

Are the clubs doing enough? Most of the ground safety improvements have resulted from pressure from outside — the police, the football authorities, anti-racist groups. Andy Lyons, editor of the football magazine *When Saturday Comes*, says clubs should make players, who have a huge influence over fans, speak out and condemn the thugs.

The spokesmen would have to be chosen carefully. Sermons on good behaviour from 'Kung Fu' Cantona or Wimbledon's Vinnie Jones — biter of a reporter's nose in a Dublin hotel last week and star of a 'how-to-play-dirty' video — would risk ridicule.

Politicians and the media could help, too, according to Rogan Taylor of Liverpool University's Football Research Unit.

He believes the press has under-reported soccer hooliganism as it has slipped off the political agenda, just as it over-reported it in the past. 'A lot of people thought hooliganism had gone away. It hasn't.'

Others argue that hooligans should be starved of the publicity they crave. But that is not easy when riots break out during matches watched live by millions.

Some anti-fascist groups have resorted to 'direct action' to combat the neo-Nazi threat at football grounds. The Trotskyist **Red Action** and Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) combine the distribution of leaflets to fans outside stadiums with attacks on the racists.

Danny is the AFA's 'general', who runs gangs taking on 'the Fash'. His face is scarred from a decade of clashes. 'If you don't attack them they are free to organise politically,' he said in a north London pub last week. 'If you attack them they can't do that.'

But most observers agree that meeting violence with violence is not the answer. Some believe the police should be empowered to round up known hooligans or drunken fans on the way to any match and make them watch it on TV, as they do in the Nether-



Act of hate: Fascists such as those at the Lansdowne Road match last week tend to incite violence then make a swift exit. Photograph by Steve Morton.

lands. Known trouble-makers could be banned from grounds and made to report to a police station when matches are on.

Long-term eradication of the problem will be much more difficult. Colin Ward believes Britain needs to change the drinking cul-

ture that turns football fans into 'beer monsters'.

Rogan Taylor acknowledges that football violence is a problem in other European countries, but he believes hooliganism here springs from a peculiarly British trait, a 'poison that has coursed

through this country's body politic for centuries. You can't get to rule a third of the world without being pretty nasty.'

Professor Eric Dunning of Leicester University believes the campaign should start at school and in the ethos fostered by foot-

ball clubs. 'We must get young people to understand that sport is doomed unless it combines rivalry with friendliness.'

There have been no suggestions so far from the Sports Minister Ian Sproat. His spokesman told *The Observer*: 'The Minister

thinks what happened on Wednesday was terrible, but beyond that he has nothing to say. It's a matter for the Home Office.' The hooligans must be quaking in their bover boots. **Patrick Barclay and Gary Lineker, Sports tabloid**