

Spectator violence makes it difficult to enjoy sports

A few years ago, a drunken fan at a Minnesota Vikings football game threw a whiskey bottle that conked an official. In an outburst of horror, sports columnists across the nation predicted this was the beginning of the dark ages in American sports, with fans turning into rabid beasts.

But it hasn't happened. Though many Americans might be inclined to bash, knife and and shoot each other on streets, in subways and schoolyards, they are remarkably well behaved at sporting events.

Oh, there are the usual fights and the pouring of beer from the upper deck. And in the neighborhood around Wrigley Field, home of the Chicago Cubs, there is the terrible dread among yuppies that fans will wee-wee on their grass.

In general, though, American sports fans are nonviolent, probably because most of them are couch potatoes. The injury rate is far greater among the athletes.

Then we have England, where the situation is the exact opposite.

Although the crime rate there has been going up, it is still well below ours. Random crazies and organized gangs aren't blasting away with burp guns. The criminal population hasn't overwhelmed the capacity of prisons.

But as the latest soccer mayhem shows, one of the riskiest things you can do in England is go out and cheer for your favorite team.

When I heard the first news reports that dozens of fans had been crushed and stomped to death at one game—the latest figure is 94—I found it hard to believe.

I knew from past maulings that English soccer fans, especially those from Liverpool, are prone to violence.

But in this case, it wasn't even a fight. The 94 who died had their lives

Mike Royko
Columnist

squeezed, squashed and trampled out of them.

That seemed incredible until I read what the soccer promoters, the stadium officials, the fans and the law enforcement people had to say about it.

What it seems to boil down to is one insane fact: This is the way the fans want it.

Obviously, none of those who died wanted to die. But the soccer establishment, including the fans, prefers the conditions that can lead to people being killed.

Those who died were jammed into a cheap, standing-room only section at the end of the field. It's sort of like a giant cage. They are behind a large fence that is tilted toward them.

The fence is there to prevent them from rushing out on the field and rioting, which soccer fans worldwide enjoy doing.

At the same time, there were other fans outside the stadium, demanding to get in. And they were pushing at the outer gates.

So the cops outside had a problem. If they didn't open the gates, people out there would be crushed and stomped to death.

To resolve that problem, they opened the gates, and a great herd of fans galloped into the standing-room-only pen, which was already filled.

Those who were jammed against the fence had nowhere to go. They just got squashed. Some just turned blue and died on the spot.

Out of respect for the dead and injured, the game was postponed. Surprisingly, the surviving fans didn't riot

in protest. The legendary English restraint, I suppose.

Now English authorities are trying to figure out how to prevent future mass slaughters.

An obvious solution would be to tear down those fences and do away with the cheap standing-room-only section. Everyone would be in a seat. If you don't have a ticket for a seat, you stay home and watch it on the telly, as the English say.

An obvious solution? No. One soccer official said: "The public in England demands the right to stand. It is a very traditional thing."

The official noted that when one stadium did away with the giant standing-room-only cage, the fans were very angry.

"People wound up standing on the seats."

Another solution would be to keep the low-cost standing-room-only section, but remove the high fences against which the dead were squashed.

But that would put them back to square one. They used to be without fences. So when the standing-room-only fans became drunk and angry enough about something, they rushed the field and held riots. And that's why the fences were erected.

So, with fans insisting on the traditional right to stand, the choice seems to be between riots on the field or fence squashings.

The English are known for their respect for tradition, but even tradition can be carried too far. What do they put on those 94 tombstones: "Squashed for the English Soccer Fans' Right to Stand"?

And this is something for the Wrigley Field neighbors to think about. So far, there is no record of any of you being wee-wee'd to death.

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Do we have room for the president?

I know everyone is excited about George Bush coming to speak at graduation, but you know me — always gotta rain on the parade.



Becky Weisenfels
Editor

The news was sent down from on high last week that the president of the United States has confirmed that he will speak at the 2 p.m. graduation on May 12 — the graduation for the colleges of liberal arts, sciences and geosciences, as well as master's and doctoral candidates. Swell.

But I am concerned about how A&M is going to handle crowd problems, such as whether officials are going to limit the number of people each graduate can invite.

Actually, before I heard Bush was coming to speak, I was dreading going to my graduation. I was trying to decide how many packs of cards I should take and how I could smuggle a game of Trivial Pursuit into the ceremony.

I begged my parents not to come because then I wouldn't have to go to the ceremony. It would be so much easier to just pick my diploma up at a later date instead of waiting hours and hours to get the piece of paper (and remember, my last name is Weisenfels — a back row name if I ever heard one.)

Everyone seems excited about the ceremony and about hearing Bush speak — the only question is, will there be room?

I think it's great that Texas A&M is able to have Bush speak at a graduation ceremony. It is a shame that a college with the reputation to attract the president to speak cannot find room to house the large crowd that will obviously want to hear him. But hindsight is 20/20 and there's nothing we can do about that now.

A&M has two choices: limit admission or move the ceremony.

As it stands, G. Rollie White Coliseum holds 8,000 people, and that includes people on the floor. The registrar's office, as of Wednesday, had 1,270 down as graduating during that ceremony.

Simple math: 8,000 seats minus 1,270 seats for graduates equals 6,730 seats.

Remember that this is George Bush, and some seats are going to be reserved for important school and community officials who want to hear him speak — take out another 100 seats (and I think that is a very modest figure).

That means 6,630 seats left. Divide that among 1,270 graduates and that means each person can invite at most 5.22 people (let's round that off to five). That number does not allow for other students or administrators.

I personally have many relatives who have been planning for months to drive to A&M so they could see me graduate. They were planning to show up even if Jojo the Wonder Pig gave my commencement address.

It's exciting that Bush will be there, but they just really want to see me walk across the stage (aawwwwww, isn't that nice). Actually, if they don't see me walk across the stage, they probably will never believe I graduated.

I know a lot of other people who are graduating and are in the same predicament with their relatives. If A&M was going to limit admission, we should have known sooner.

There are going to be lots of disappointed relatives if they can't come, and what will that do to help me get those gifts they are buying me?

Then you have to consider the students at A&M. Having the president come to speak on your campus is a big deal, and many of them would like to see him. Unfortunately, there probably won't be room in G. Rollie White Coliseum for them. I guess they can always sit outside with my relatives, eat Cheetos and play Monopoly.

Someone mentioned that A&M may have to sell tickets to the graduation ceremony. Right. My parents paid for me to go to A&M for four years, and now they would have to pay more money to see me get out. I hope not.

The other option A&M might have to consider is moving the graduation ceremony, but there is not another building on campus big enough to hold the graduation ceremony.

Maybe the ceremony could be moved outside to Kyle Field or somewhere, but then we run into the problem of unpredictable weather, among other things. But right now, I think that would be the best bet.

I don't know what the solution is going to be. However, if it came down to a choice between having my family or George Bush at the ceremony, I would have to choose my family.

Becky Weisenfels is a senior journalism major and editor of The Battalion.

Mail Call

Shame on you, Ags!

EDITOR:

First of all, I would like to congratulate the A&M baseball team for beating the University of Texas' team this past weekend. Our team showed character, poise, and a never-say-die attitude that represents the school well.

However, the joy of the two victories was overshadowed by the behavior of a large majority of the fans in attendance.

It is one thing to support the team and cheer them on. But one does not need to stoop to such depths as displayed by some fans in attendance this weekend. Why not keep it good, clean and wholesome.

I think I know Coach Johnson well enough to say that he would rather have the boisterous and supportive crowd of 200 or 300 from the previous years. These large crowds should clean up their act and not embarrass the baseball program with their language. Leave that to other schools.

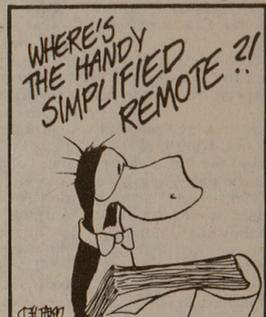
In the seventh and eighth inning of the first game, it was scary just how quiet 5,000 people could be. The team can sense this and it affects them.

All I ask is that you at least think about what I have said and consider how your actions reflect on this school.

George Lengel
Graduate student

BLOOM COUNTY

by Berke Breathed



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