

“JUST ANOTHER FOOTBALL ACCIDENT”

A comparative perspective on the fatal intersection of soccer fans, sports stadia, and official neglect

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The business of American moviemaking is not exactly a hotbed of irony or introspection. The Hollywood version of *Fever Pitch*, Nick Hornby's landmark diary of his lifelong devotion to the Arsenal football club, may be the apogee of the film industry's unerring knack for transmogrifying nuance into glossy mass-marketed tripe. It was bad enough the film was an awkward translation of obsessive fandom for one of England's leading soccer teams into a screwball comedy about a single-minded Red Sox fan's adventures in romance (and it was much worse that the film's stars, Jimmy Fallon and Drew Barrymore, were allowed to invade the field during the Red Sox' actual victory celebration at the end of the 2004 World Series).

What made *Fever Pitch* the film so intolerable to anyone who had read *Fever Pitch* the book was the way in which the film completely eviscerated the distinctions between the American sports fan experience and the experience of sports fans in other nations. While these are not distinctions Hornby intended to draw – indeed, it is likely these distinctions would be missed by Hornby's British audience and even by Hornby himself, and only noticed by American readers – the distinctions are nevertheless deeply meaningful.

One distinction in particular is downright chilling: Hornby's account of the Hillsborough tragedy.

Like most English stadia at the time, the behind-goal sections of Sheffield's Hillsborough stadium were standing-room-only terraces, fronted by wire fencing to prevent rowdy fans from invading the field. On April 15, 1989, at the start of an F.A. Cup semifinal match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, a series of crowd control blunders resulted in hundreds of overflow Liverpool supporters being erroneously shunted down a single tunnel towards the terraces at the Leppings Lane end of the stadium. With the fans already in the terrace fenced in, the steady stream of excess fans pouring down

the tunnel into the terraces led to a fatal crush in which victims were suffocated.

Readers familiar with Hillsborough brace themselves as Hornby's diary advances through the 1980s, knowing what is to come when Hornby arrives at April of 1989. As expected, Hornby's reaction to the disaster, relayed from his vantage point at the other F.A. Cup semifinal hundreds of miles away, is unsparing in its horror. Yet American readers are jarred in a unique way, especially by Hornby's opening words:

There were rumours emanating from those with radios, but we didn't really know anything about it until halftime, when there was no score given for the Liverpool-Forest semifinal, and even then nobody had any real idea of the sickening scale of it all. By the end of our game, a dull, distracted 1-0 win, everyone knew there had been deaths. And a few people, those who had been to Hillsborough for the big occasions, were able to guess whereabouts in the ground the tragedy had occurred; but then, nobody who runs the game has ever been interested in the forebodings of fans.

By the time we got home it was clear that this wasn't just another football accident, the sort that happens once every few years, kills one or two unlucky people, and is generally and casually regarded by all the relevant authorities as one of the hazards of our chosen diversion. The numbers of dead rose by the minute – seven, then a score, then fifty-something and eventually ninety-five – and you realized that if anybody had even a shred of common sense left available to them, nothing would ever been the same again. (Hornby 1992, at 217)

Even casual sports fans are marginally aware of how American sports differ from their foreign counterparts. Some differences are simply a question of alternative busi-

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ness models, such as the absence of shirt advertising on the uniforms in the “big four” American pro sports leagues, as opposed to the billboarding of soccer and rugby players in Europe, Asia, and South America. Some differences are competitive, such as the concept of relegation from the top division, a prospect which haunts soccer teams in other nations, but which is not adopted stateside (thus sparing teams like the Pittsburgh Pirates and Kansas City Royals from dropping into the minors).

But what Hornsby describes is a distinction from another dimension. To American ears, the notion of “just another accident” that “once every few years kills one or two unlucky people,” is a comprehensively unfamiliar, even unfathomable concept. American spectator sports do not have semiannual fatal accidents, and no American fan can even conceive of such things being a customary risk of their fanhood.

Compared to its counterparts across the globe, the American sports landscape has been relatively unscathed by death. To an extent this is nothing more than good fortune. There is no rational explanation why countries such as Italy and England have seen their leading professional soccer clubs wiped out in plane crashes, but no major professional team in American has suffered the same tragic fate. American college teams (Marshall University football, 1970; University of Evansville basketball, 1977) and Olympic teams (figure skating, 1961; boxing, 1980) have lost their lives in aviation accidents. But the crashes that claimed Torino in 1949 and Manchester United in 1958 – each team their country’s reigning league champions, featuring several key players for the national World Cup squad – could only be approximated in the United States by disasters claiming the New York Yankees or Los Angeles Lakers. American professional sports have so far avoided such tragedies by virtue of sheer luck alone.

Placed in the context of other similar catastrophes, however, the Hillsborough disaster is altogether more sinister. These are failures ascribable to not just human error, but also to institutional neglect. American sports venues simply have not failed like this – not on this scale, not this many times, and not for these reasons.

Hillsborough was the fourth major stadium disaster in less than a half-century in British soccer. Crowd stampedes on terraced stands killed thirty-three people in Bolton’s Burnden Park in 1946, and then killed sixty-six people at Glasgow’s Ibrox park in 1971. A fire during a match at Bradford’s Valley Parade killed fifty-six people in 1985.

Nor is the British experience unique. Indeed, less than three weeks after the Bradford fire, a crowd control problem at the European Cup Final—the Super Bowl of European soccer—collapsed a retaining wall at Brussels’ Heysel Stadium, killing thirty-nine. And in 1982, in a disaster concealed for years by Soviet authorities, a stampede at Moscow’s Luzhniki Stadium resulted in over 300 fatalities.

~~The only comparable American disaster comes from beyond the sports world – the dash for “festival seating”~~

There are only two comparable American disasters. In 1903, at Philadelphia’s National League Park, a commotion on the street outside the ballpark attracted hundreds of fans to a balcony walkway in the left field bleachers. The walkway was not designed to support the weight of so many people, and it gave way, hurling fans thirty feet down onto the street, and killing 12. (Warrington, 2008).

The other American disaster comes from beyond the sports world ...

at a Who concert at Cincinnati’s Riverfront Coliseum that killed eleven concertgoers in December 1979. Even here, though, the comparison is instructive.

The casualties at the Who concert were the result of a misguided, but widely-used, ticketing policy that eschewed assigned seats in favor of a rush-for-the-best-seats approach that meant it was only a question of when and where something like the chaos in Cincinnati would happen. The Cincinnati disaster does thus parallel Hillsborough, in that both were triggered by incompetent official decisionmaking vis-à-vis where to send patrons and when to open the venue’s doors.

However, the fatalities at the Who concert could not be ascribed to the design flaws or neglectful maintenance of Riverfront Coliseum. Conversely, the depth of the Hillsborough tragedy was extended by the appalling condition of the stadium itself, from the ramshackle terracing that carried fans forward on an undulating wave, to the installation of fencing that signaled to fans they were nothing more than caged animals.

In this regard, Hillsborough is a grimly common story. Heysel Stadium was notoriously run-down, made of concrete that had deteriorated so badly it could not withstand the pressure of rambunctious Liverpool fans, who pinned Juventus supporters against a wall that quickly gave way. Most shocking of all is the Bradford fire, which was started when a discarded cigarette fell beneath the seats and ignited a stockpile of garbage that, investigators later determined, had been accumulating underneath the grandstand for decades (Nawrat and Hutchings, 1997). Within minutes of initial ignition, the roaring blaze had consumed the entire grandstand, running the full length of the sideline. The video of the fire, available on YouTube, is simply terrifying.

Making matters worse is many of these tragedies were eminently foreseeable and preventable. The 1971 Ibrox disaster had been presaged by a nearly identical accident at Ibrox in 1961 which killed two people ... and also by a *third* major accident at Ibrox, back in 1902, when a collapsing spectators’ stand killed 25 and injured over 500.

Even where preventative measures were taken, football clubs simply circumvented regulations, and football’s governing bodies ignored the clubs’ malfeasance. Following the 1971 Ibrox disaster, all British football stadia were required to have updated safety certificates that would be dispensed following regular inspections. Hillsborough’s original certificate, however, was not issued until 1979, and in the decade leading to the disaster, it was never updated, despite the installation of the fencing and creation of virtual holding pens in the already overcrowded Leppings Lane goal end, where the 1989 tragedy occurred (Conn 2004, at 82).

These are nightmares without American analog. Not all American sports venues are gleaming palaces, but none are allowed to negligently fall into such a state of disrepair that large-scale fatalities ensue. Perhaps an American version of the Bradford fire occurred at Boston’s South

End Grounds in 1894, when a crowd enraged by a hard slide by Baltimore infielder John McGraw accidentally set fire to the wood-bleached South End Grounds; the resultant conflagration not only consumed the ballpark, but 170 neighborhood buildings as well.

Then again, the fire at the South End Grounds differs from the Bradford fire in several ways, not least of which was the nonexistent death toll in Boston. Building technology in 1894 was not expected to provide a safe haven from fire the way building technology in 1985 was supposed to provide. If anything, the South End Grounds fire may have accelerated the move in America away from combustible wood ballparks, in favor of concrete and later steel buildings that would guarantee fans could attend games without risking their lives. Where in America a near-tragedy produced a safety-embracing counterreaction; in Europe an actual tragedy in 1985 was merely a prelude to others in the weeks and years ahead.

The picture that emerges is one of managerial callousness that club owners felt for their facilities, and by extension for their fans. The flames of Bradford represented criminal neglect that persisted for immeasurable years. The perimeter fences of Hillsborough represented the "disdain of the football and political elites who had come to view football supporters as pack animals and wild dogs" (Goldblatt 2006, at 601).

This is not to completely absolve the fans of blame. American ears have certainly been seared by callous insults hurled by fans at opposing fans or players. The most notorious incident might be when students at Arizona State University taunted Arizona University point guard Steve Kerr with chants of "P-L-O! P-L-O!" in reference to the 1984 assassination of his father, Malcolm Kerr, who was president of the American University of Beirut. But fan culture in international soccer cultivates hatred and violence to a degree unseen in this country.

It is not insignificant that both the 1961 and 1971 accidents at Ibrox occurred during "Old Firm" matches between Rangers and Celtic; the rivalry between these Glaswegian neighbors is a hothouse for religious conflict, with Protestants favoring Rangers and Catholics supporting Celtic. The Heysel disaster was caused by drunken English fans charging Italian fans who were unprepared for such aggressive behavior, the byproduct of an emergent culture of "hooliganism" that saw football matches become less a setting for entertainment than a forum for violence, either ritualistically tribal or coldheartedly banal (Buford 1990).

Hooligan fan culture has become so ingrained and perverse, according to Franklin Foer, that supporters of Tottenham Hotspur – a leading London club known for having a significant Jewish presence in its fan base – are taunted by a notorious fan of rival club Chelsea who hurls vicious anti-Semitic invective at them ... notwithstanding the fact the Chelsea hooligan is Jewish himself (Foer 2004, at 89). Finally, the worst disaster in soccer history occurred not because of a deteriorating stadium, but

because of fan misbehavior; Peruvian fans rioted following a disputed award of a penalty kick to Argentina in a 1964 Olympic qualifying match killing 350 and injuring more than 500.

So what do we learn from this?

In the cynical twenty-first century, it is a common refrain American professional sports teams mistreat their fans, at least from an economic perspective. Teams like the NFL's Cleveland Browns in 1995 abandon their home cities, often with decades of tradition, even though fan support is strong; decamping for a more favorable stadium or television deal elsewhere. Cities are held hostage for new stadia, with teams extorting hundreds of millions of public dollars for construction costs, with the concomitant threat to pick up stakes and moving away (by the time this article appears, the NBA's Seattle Super Sonics may have already carried this threat out). In addition to footing the bill for these subsidies, tax-paying fans are often socked with the double-whammy of personal seat licenses – a fee that they have to pay merely for the opportunity to then spend thousands of dollars on season tickets in the new building.

For all of these financial shenanigans, however, American professional sports teams have never treated their fans with the depth of contempt that has been visited upon fans beyond our borders. American fans have been exploited for their money, but they have not been endangered like fans abroad. American sports owners have relentlessly and remorselessly reached into their customers' wallets, but their regard for their customers' physical well-being has far outstripped that of their foreign counterparts, whose orientation seemed to be to "shut the gates, tell everyone to squash up, and then pray, very hard" (Hornby 1992, at 218).

Why this comparative dissonance? Is it just the specific games we attend? Much has been written about how soccer's lack of popularity in America is a reflection of American cultural distinctiveness (Markovits and Hellerman 2001), or alternatively how soccer is a reflecting pool for international cultural and political attitudes (Foer 2004). For most of the countries in this article, soccer is the dominant sport – all other spectator sports lag well behind it in terms of interest, coverage, revenue, and primacy. The American spectator sports menu has exponentially more offerings, and thus more targets for fans' energies. Perhaps world soccer generates such large-scale tragedies because it is such a large-scale source for fans' emotional investment.

Is the explanation larger, more broadly sociopolitical? World soccer is tied to notions of national pride and religious identity in a way American sport is not. Unlike the soccer-playing nations of the rest of the world, the American political tradition lacks either decade-long wars with border neighbors or murderous sectarian purges, real-world phenomena which appear to have been seamlessly ported into European recreational enterprises. Might the foregoing observations be the flip of Karl von Clausewitz's

aphorism that “war is politics by other means?” Might the passions generated by international soccer demonstrate that soccer is war by other means?

(Then again, considering that El Salvador followed a 1969 World Cup qualifying victory over Honduras by invading that country, perhaps soccer and war intertwined in a Clausewitzian way after all.)

Or is the explanation in fact smaller? American professional sports teams have invariably been business enterprises, first, last, and always. Whether family-owned or corporate-owned, American pro franchises have been just that: bottom-line single-entity franchisee profit generators for their proprietors. Consequently, those proprietors have an interest in ensuring their facilities are up to industry standards – good stadia mean happy customers, and that means repeat business. In contrast, most world soccer teams were founded as athletic clubs; the team that calls Hillsborough home, Sheffield Wednesday, was founded in 1820 by cricket players who named their team after the day they met for matches. Many soccer teams exist contemporaneously with other sport teams under their club’s umbrella, such as Spanish giant Real Madrid, which operates both the nine-time European Cup winners along with a professional basketball team, Real Madrid Baloncesto. These athletic clubs were historically much more insular than American sports franchises, less concerned about mass-marketing to attract new fans than about keeping the club’s affairs in-house. In the absence of a corporatist profit motive to generate customers from outside their narrow base, many clubs simply let their facilities decay.

Whatever the explanation, the fact remains the American sports fan experience bears only a passing resemblance to the fan experience in other nations. We are all in the arena, but we are watching different games while being buffeted by different pressures. Troubled though American fans are at the corporate welfare represented by taxpayer-funded stadia, even at their most profligate they are no match for the dilapidated coffins-in-waiting that international stadia embodied in the not-too-distant past. Unnerved though American fans are by the coarseness of contemporary crowds, their behavior is no match for the fanhood-as-proxy for larger battles manifested abroad.

Journalists often refer to sports as their outlet’s “toy department.” In a comparative sense, perhaps our games – and more profoundly, the games played globally – are more serious business than we realize.

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