

English soccer fans

Mike Ticher
University of New South Wales

**Bill Buford, *Among The Thugs*, Mandarin, London, 1992.
 pp. 317;**

**Nick Hornby, *Fever Pitch -A Fan's Life*. Victor
 Gollancz, London, 1992. pp. 247.**

The so-called 'English Disease' of soccer hooliganism has been a constant source both of guilt and shame to soccer supporters, and of bewilderment to foreigners. Bill Buford, the American-born editor of the British literary magazine, *Granta*, is interested in violence and crowd behaviour, rather than in soccer. Over a period of six years he got to know English football hooligans from various clubs and followed their violent exploits at home and abroad. Buford sees his ignorance of English soccer as a positive asset, believing that 'unencumbered – by history or tradition or even the habits of a Saturday afternoon – I might see it in a clearer way than someone for whom it was a familiar feature of the culture'.

In fact its effect is the opposite, since it deprives Buford's undoubtedly keenly-observed narrative of any useful context. He is often vague or downright wrong about the significance of what he's watching on the pitch, when he discusses it at all. In the middle of a long account of the violence surrounding a European Cup-Winners Cup tie between Juventus and Manchester United in 1984, he notes merely that 'somehow the match started, was played, ended'.

There is no doubting Buford's evidence that a hooligan subculture exists and that at close quarters it is a terrifyingly ugly sight. But that is only one truth among many about English football supporters. Because Buford's explicit concern is the violence, and not its coexistence with a more general culture of football fans or with the game itself, he naturally goes looking for violence. And – surprise! – he finds it.

The period covered in the book (1984-90) neatly straddles the two disasters which have altered British football irrevocably in the past decade – Heysel (1985) and Hillsborough (1989). In that time the grounds have undergone massive renovation, allowing for less and less standing capacity and more seats, with the emphasis changing, belatedly, from ‘security’ to the safety and comfort of spectators.

Clubs have begun to introduce family areas, executive boxes and even creches in an attempt to change the atmosphere inside grounds. Although hooliganism has clearly not disappeared, there is a wide consensus that it has diminished markedly. A 1992 survey of fans by the Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research at Leicester University found that two-thirds of regular attenders had witnessed not a single incident of hooliganism in the previous season.¹

Yet astonishingly Buford makes no attempt to reflect on these changes. He jumps from 1984 to 1990 and back to 1988 as if nothing had happened in between. The unwashed, physically repulsive crowd is an unchanging and essential component of English football, which, if it does not cause violence, certainly creates the conditions under which it is accepted. The terms ‘football supporters’ and ‘hooligans’ are used interchangeably, as though the thousands of fans who despise the violence either did not exist or were somehow party to it. Buford could argue that, in a sense, they were – that simply by tolerating (or even perversely enjoying) shabby conditions and aggressive behaviour, fan culture nurtured the dedicated hooligans. But he prefers to think of them all simply as an indivisible thing – ‘the crowd’.

This leads him to the decidedly ahistorical conclusion that there was something inevitable about Hillsborough, something ‘relentlessly logical, even overdue’. In fact, Hillsborough was the result of specific decisions about crowd control and policing which stemmed largely from an official view (not unlike Buford’s own) of all fans as potential hooligans. This attitude was (and is) *both* a cause *and* effect of the way crowds actually

behaved. But to emphasise the fact that fan culture has changed over time, and that it can be influenced by mundane things like providing clean toilets and edible food would detract from Buford's sensational horror-story of English football played out against a squalid backdrop of endless viciousness and barbarity.

Nick Hornby doesn't neglect hooliganism in the justly-acclaimed *Fever Pitch*, his personal account of twenty-five years as an Arsenal fan. But he makes sense of it in a way that Buford can't, because his perspective is that of someone who loves football. Hornby knows the pleasure of being part of a football crowd, even while he agonises over the racism, misogyny and violence which are also part of it.

Yes, hooliganism and all sorts of other undesirable social ills belong to football, and football should worry about why it has been such an accessible arena for them. But Buford is never interested in explaining why watching football nevertheless remains so attractive to so many people. 'Those who do not find it brutal,' he states, 'are those so familiar with the traditions of attending an English football match, so certain in the knowledge of what is expected of them, that they are incapable of seeing how deviant their behaviour is.'

Hornby admits to a lot of things, but deviance isn't one of them. On the contrary, he characterises his obsession with Arsenal as typically male. Unlike Buford, he puts his experiences into context, teasing out what football has meant to him in relation to social background, family, popular culture, women, ambitions, politics. What's more, he does it with such wit and attention to detail that it strikes a chord of instant recognition with thousands of other fans (*Fever Pitch* was easily Britain's best-selling sports book of 1992).

While it may be possible intellectually to extract an abstract truth about football violence from Buford's book, if you can fill in the necessary background yourself, *Fever Pitch* simply rings true. While hooliganism makes depressingly frequent appearances, it is not fascinating to a genuine

fan as it is to Buford. It's just a cause of immense frustration, an irritant or, at worst, a nightmare.

Fever Pitch is quite simply the best book that has ever been written about what it means to support an English football team. Or, rather what it meant, because for the same reasons which Buford ignores, that experience has now been changed for ever. And this raises a tough question for thinking football fans. While breaking down the male culture of crowds is obviously desirable in many ways, the loss of the big standing areas and the atmosphere they generate (for all its crudity and even 'brutality') is also a loss of something elemental in the game's appeal. In the same Leicester University survey, 45 per cent of respondents stated that what they missed most about today's football was 'jam-packed terraces'.

Hornby puts his finger on the dilemma:

Part of the pleasure to be had in large football stadia is a mixture of the vicarious and the parasitical, because unless one stands on the North Bank, or the Kop, or the Stretford End, then one is relying on others to provide the atmosphere ... Who'll make the noise now? Will the suburban middle-class kids and their mums and dads still come if they have to generate it themselves?

Anyone who reads Buford alone (perhaps especially an American) would have trouble understanding why this could possibly matter. But then that's the difference between a book which has genuine insights into football's place in society, and one which trumpets its ignorance of the game while purporting to analyse it.

NOTE

1. Reported in *When Saturday Comes*, Sept. 1992, p.10.