

Something every football fan knows, it only takes five fingers to form a fist.

- Billy Bragg, The Home Front.

“We’re British and we’re hard!” Liam Gallagher once growled at a Vancouver audience who had felt compelled to pelt members of Oasis with a variety of coins, lighters and other small projectiles. I think, therefore I am. We’re British and we’re hard. As the words echo in my mind, I can’t help but picture a tattoo’s for warmth beer swilling Brit, hurling a patio chair across a picturesque Copenhagen courtyard at a gaggle of Turkish supporters. We’re British and we’re hard could easily serve as the calling card for England’s most successful export: Football Hooligans.

Hooligans, particularly for the North American audience, represent a key facet of modern football. Very rarely does a news outlet such as the CBC carry the latest English Premier League high lights, but you can be quite sure that if an incident of violence has accompanied a match, Peter Mansbridge will be mincing more than a few words. The hooligan has become such an integral part of the modern game’s image, that books written by former thugs and films documenting and glorifying their exploits are widely available. But what of the thug? From where did this hooligan element surface.

Many would argue that hooliganism has always existed. The inception of rival football clubs simply allowed young men of opposing social standing to further differentiate one another. “He supports who?” It would be very difficult to try and pick a point in time when the hooligan emerged. Trouble between opposing fans has been documented throughout the last 100 years. However, there was a time when suddenly the violence that manifested itself at matches became calculated. Soon individuals were planning trouble and actively seeking one another out. This was 1980’s Britain, the high point of hooliganism thus far: A period when the English thugs were by far the most ‘productive’ in Europe.

It is of course important to note that hooligan should by no means be considered as synonymous with British. Hooligan elements exist throughout Europe and probably the world. You have ‘ultras’ in Spain, the ‘fiasoto’ in Italy and ‘fanaty’ in Russia. However, beyond all efforts to deny it, because of the 1980’s, the English are certainly the most notorious. Travelling English fans left a wake of destruction across Europe and did little for their own country on any given Saturday. Opposing fans, innocent bystanders, restaurant windows and ‘bobbies’ were all favorite targets as groups of young men made a mad rush to get the ‘aggro.’ It seems absurd that what amounted to such a small section of supporters could cause so much harm not only to life and limb, but also to the sport’s eternal image. The damage of the eighties will forever be a black mark on the sport and the draconian measures adopted to eradicate violence from the game will serve as a constant reminder of the depths people once sank.

Some twenty years ago, a match at an English ground was far less than enjoyable for a family or any mild mannered supporter. For anyone who has watched recent games, the beautiful full seating, open stands where merely an idea lost somewhere in More’s Utopia. Instead fans found themselves caged in like ferocious animals and they did much to warrant this fencing. Stadiums consisted mainly of terracing; no seats, simply general admission, standing room only. The ‘terraces’ became piss-ridden garbage heaps, as drunken

skinheads, mods and generic footy fans crammed themselves in to catch the action. Like taking the tube in London, a fan had little control over where he was to go next. The movement of the crowd decided everything for you. But you'd better be ready for the mad rush if your team managed a goal. A push to the front fences, as a wave of supporters lost control, falling over one another and trampling flailing limbs. Among the least appealing aspects for any level headed onlooker was the overt racism. Black players from either team were subjected to a torrent of abuse from both sets of supporters. Fans grunted like gorillas as the likes of John Barnes and John Fashanu outwitted defenders with their silky skills and it wasn't below many to hurl bananas onto the field to drive home their point.

As the game would come to an end, the real fun would begin. A gauntlet would be run between coppers and the brashest of opposing supporters. Supporters would fight running battles with each other, as the visiting fans did as much damage as possible, with locals trying to defend their turf. Back in the 80's Leeds and Chelsea were known for having fierce 'firms'. Chelsea was notorious for its link to the National Front; an underground neo-nazi group who has waged an endless war against immigrants and others who threaten the British way. Liverpool and Manchester United were also well known for their jaunts into European territory with Liverpool thugs perhaps immortalizing themselves at the Heysel disaster (The 1985 European Cup final played between Liverpool and Juventus). Before the match had started, sets of rival fans had fought with one another in the stands. During the melee, 39 people were killed and over four hundred were injured. The then Liverpool manager Joe Fagan had pleaded with the supporters: "Get back to your seats and be sensible. This is a football match." But Joe was wrong. This wasn't a football match. This was war. It was the English way of life against everything else. It was about Britain, the queen mother and Monty Python.

Many have tired to explain the social phenomena of the hooligan. A working class kid who has become bored and fed up with unemployment and tenement housing and only has Saturday afternoon to look forward to. But what about today? The hooligan element still exists in a time of increasing economic prosperity. This fact makes me shudder when I hear cries for a return to terracing to ensure that the so-called 'real' supporters can afford to return to games. People fear that the increased commercialism of the sport has taken away the intense atmosphere of the past. It worries me that people can be so naïve. We still hear of incidences these days and a return to terracing is sure to result in another Heysel. Lower division clubs still deal with trouble, as they don't have the financial clout of your Manchester Uniteds or Arsenals to fight back. Fans of Millwal and Cambridge United insist on reveling in the exploits of their predecessors and strive to step out of their shadows. The English press has made known hooligans like Paul Dodd (www.pauldodd.com) pin up boys. Groups such as Combat 18 still target foreign players, threatening their lives if they remain in the country. In Scotland, the sectarian hatred of the Old Firm is always at boiling point. It seems that a moment of complacency will be disastrous. The reason tournaments like France 98 and Euro 2000 passed with minimal trouble is because of the joint efforts of police forces across Europe. The thugs haven't grown up or disappeared. People simply decided enough is enough. Today professional workers, who earn a healthy salary, like barristers and accountants are among those organizing firms. Hooliganism is a lifestyle. Any one who likes to drink, abuse drugs and get a rush from the 'aggro' is waiting for the Saturday's of old to return. So the generals are fighting their wars with their young 'nutter' armies. But what for? For Fun? It seems that's the case and so I think if we return to the days of old I'll settle for my couch or at most the local on Saturday afternoon.

Cheers,

BAZ