

SO WHY CAN'T WE STAND UP?

Every week across the country fans are being ejected or even banned for simply standing up to support their team. Away allocations have been cut, parts of grounds are under threat of closure, and there is increasing conflict with stewards.

Stand Up Sit Down have met with clubs, local authorities, safety officers, football authorities and the FLA, but have found very few people who really consider this a safety issue. We are now left wondering just why such efforts are being made to prevent supporters standing.

Safety

The FLA say that the movements that standing spectators make to follow play could lead to them falling and causing a cascade effect, injuring those in front. SUSD consider that whilst there may be some risk of falls in steep upper tiers, we simply cannot envisage such an effect in areas of relatively low gradient, which are present in virtually every ground. This is not just the view of supporters, but also some clubs, safety officers and local authorities.

A senior council official, who is threatening his local club with closing part of their ground, told us that he can see no safety problems with standing in that area. However he has to be seen to be doing his job, and is under pressure from the FLA. At their conference last year a speech by the gentleman charged by the Core Cities Group of Local Authorities to deal with persistent standing, was not well received by football club safety officers. At a later conference he stated that a majority of Football Safety Officers Association members seem not to consider persistent standing as a safety issue. The FSOA National Administrator said that they are opposed to supporters being permitted to stand within football stadia during passage of play, and their policy is to support the FLA document 'Standing in Seated Areas at Football Grounds'. He noted however that there is a difference of view within the FSOA, but that a number of Safety Officers support the policy. It appears therefore that the majority don't.

It is accepted that the greatest danger from standing is at moments of excitement such as goal celebrations, so why are such efforts being made to stop passive standing during normal play – the time of least risk? Lord Taylor predicted that supporters would stand at moments of excitement, so knowing that this will occur, why did the FLA allow many new steep stands to be built?

The FLA say that standing supporters take up more room so spread into aisles, but our experience is that this is rare and easily prevented. We believe that there is less risk of injury when a goal celebration is started from the standing position, a view unanimously backed by comments from numerous SUSD members, but the FLA say the opposite.

The Government's standard reply to supporters writing in support of SUSD's proposals states that there are more injuries at grounds with standing than in all seater stadia. This is misleading as the relevant figures would be injuries from standing in seated areas compared to sitting, but the FLA say these are not available. We know of one major Premiership ground where the injury rate is the same whether supporters sit for a major fixture or stand for a lesser match. Even in grounds with terracing the average injury rate is only 1 in 20,000, and the FLA admit that 70% of these are illness or pre-existing injuries.

If safety really is a concern, why don't clubs minimise the risk wherever possible? Where away allocations have been cut, why are supporters packed into a smaller section, surrounded by empty seats, rather than taking the opportunity to reduce spectator density and hence the safety 'risk'.

Lord Taylor said that standing accommodation is not intrinsically unsafe. His report did not specifically cover the issue of standing in seated areas, but said that he expected that after a period of time supporters would get used to sitting. So how well did he understand us?

Every year in London alone an average of 70 passengers are seriously injured and two killed in accidents related to standing on buses. The Health & Safety Executive says that standing on trains is not a safety issue. Meanwhile the FLA are determined to stop standing in even lower tiers of football grounds. Is this objective safety assessment or convenience? It would cost billions to provide seats for all bus and train passengers, but football clubs had to pay to alter their grounds, and of course we know the Government don't want us to stand.

Inconsistencies

The most dangerous place for standing is steep upper tiers, so why are away fans often allocated these, whilst the safer lower tier is empty?

At QPR away supporters in the upper tier have to stand in order to see the part of the goal. SUSP suggested that the pitch is moved forward to improve sightlines, but QPR showed little interest. We wrote to Hammersmith & Fulham Council, who said they would 'observe the safety implications of standing in the School Upper', adding that 'any action however will need to be balanced against what is reasonably practical to achieve, given the stand is over 25 years old.' They didn't explain why the age of the stand is relevant to moving the pitch forward.

So in some grounds supporters are being ejected from gently sloping lower tiers, which are under threat of closure. In some standing is largely ignored, but in others the club choose not to take simple action to prevent standing in more dangerous upper tiers. Does safety not demand consistency?

We asked the FLA why spectators can stand at rock concerts held in football grounds. They said firstly that the action is in one place, so there is less chance of toppling over in straining to follow it, and secondly that those attending music events are a different 'profile' from football supporters. Do they really think rock fans stand quietly in front of their seats?

If safety is paramount, why did the FLA wait until last year to take serious action? What has prompted the recent clamp down on standing? We have seen no evidence to suggest that the safety risk has changed, so is there another reason?

The FLA

The FLA was charged to monitor local authorities' oversight of spectator safety at English and Welsh football grounds, and ensure through a licensing system that these grounds became all seated. In 1992 the Government decided to allow clubs in the lower two divisions to retain standing accommodation, however if a club is relegated back into a lower division, or if it builds a new ground, it cannot have standing areas. All seating by stealth?

The FLA now appears to have broadened its remit, to include comfort and security of supporters as well as safety. It seems that they have to resort to using every argument against standing, no matter how weak. Is it right that a body who don't even agree that a significant proportion of supporters want to stand should have such influence over the way we watch our game?

A recent report by 'The Efficiency in Government Unit' claimed that many quangos could be merged or abolished without anyone noticing a significant difference and included the FLA, along with such bodies as the Potato Council, in a list of the most useless quangos. Do we still need the FLA?

Crowd Control & Customer Care

How relevant is the argument that allowing supporters to stand will lead to crowd trouble? Any disorder will almost certainly occur at a time of controversy or excitement, when supporters would be expected to be standing. A ground regulation banning standing is hardly likely to stop anyone who is sufficiently agitated as to cause trouble from getting out of their seat.

Those who are unable or prefer not to stand, should not have their view blocked by others, however rather than a justification for making all supporters sit, this is a major reason for providing separate areas for everyone to watch the game as they wish.

Debate

There appears to be reluctance for many parties to participate in an open debate on standing. Despite devoting considerable time to SUSD, the FLA are clearly tired of what they consider are the same old arguments. Few clubs have been prepared to talk openly, and whilst several have publicly stated support for standing areas, others have told us that they support our aims but cannot allow this to be quoted. Premiership clubs discussed our letter at a meeting and decided not to reply. The Premier and Football Leagues did not want us to make public what was said when we met. One club made a public statement in support of our proposals, but then wrote to us with a far more guarded opinion. It is almost as if there is a conspiracy not to allow public debate, as this would highlight the weakness of the case against standing.

Summary

Stand Up Sit Down proposes the simple solution that in all seater stadia, at least one area of each ground is selected where supporters would be permitted to stand safely in front of their seats. It is clear that supporters will continue to stand, as they have since the Taylor Report, so by allocating only the most suitable areas, our proposals would actually improve safety.

The deeper we dig the more it seems that a total ban on standing cannot be justified on the grounds of safety, crowd control or customer care. Lessons have been learned from Hillsborough, and major steps taken to improve our safety, but a total ban on standing is simply not necessary or indeed workable. So why is there such reluctance even for an open debate on the issue? Is the issue safety or social engineering?

Is there a hidden agenda to move the game away from its working class roots and fill our grounds with middle class fans who will buy the merchandise, clap quietly in their seats, join in with the orchestrated singing over the PA, but disappear as soon as football stops being trendy?

Peter Caton

Stand Up Sit Down

Note – We do not wish to misrepresent the views of the FLA and full notes of our meeting stating the views of SUSD and the FLA can be read on our website www.standupsitdown.co.uk