

The hillsborough stadium disaster essay



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There have been several horrific stadium disasters over the years in the United Kingdom caused by inadequate security and crowd control, poor ground design, rioting and administrative incompetence by the authorities. This work will recount the Hillsborough stadium disaster in an endeavour to simultaneously depict the factors leading to the incident, the legal relationship among the parties involved and the measures taken in order to avert the recurrence of similar calamity.

The physical face of British-but especially English football changed more fundamentally and more quickly in the 1980s and 1990s than at any comparable period in its history. As Walvin (1994) indicates the metamorphosis was due primarily to a series of tragedies at football grounds which killed so many people, which appalled millions who saw the tragedies unfold on TV, at home and abroad, and forced the government and footballing authorities to address the game's most pressing problems.

Undoubtedly, the events at the Hillsborough football stadium, in Sheffield on 15 April 1989 resulted in one of the Britain's worst sporting disaster.

The occasion that hosted the disaster was a football match-the 1989 FA Cup semi final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest-which was held at a neutral stadium in Sheffield. Lea et al. (1998) underline that Hillsborough, the home of Sheffield Wednesday Football Club was recognized as one of the premier soccer stadiums in the country, and had been chosen to host the corresponding fixture twelve months earlier, ironically between the same two teams, when no major crowd problems had been reported. Simultaneously, the fixture itself is recognized as being one of the most prestigious in the

domestic football calendar and as such was transmitted live on TV sets in countries around the world.

Before examining the factors which were conducive to the tragedy, it is worth making an overview of the incident itself. Lea et al. (1998), describing in their work these last hours, relate that due to several circumstances many Liverpool supporters were delayed and arrived at last minute. Therefore the existence of anxiety about getting into the game on time and an associated impatience was apparent. The situation was exacerbated by a refusal to delay the kick off, while in the queue spectators, particularly women and children, were beginning to faint and suffer distress.

With this in mind, the police, in order to prevent a crush at the turnstiles outside the stadium, opened the exit gate C and at this point, within five minutes, around 2000 people with or without tickets flowed directly into the stadium, and particularly towards pens 3 and 4 which were already full beyond capacity. Cox et al. (2002) add that exit gates below were locked because of fears of trouble and the police were slow to realize that people were dying inside the crush against the fence. On the contrary, as Scraton (1999, p. 61) indicates-and portrayed in Appendix 1-:

“...the reality of the central pens was mistaken for crowd violence or a pitch invasion”.

The outcome of this resulted in 96 fatalities [only 14 of the 96 who died made it to hospital (Scraton, 1999, p. 178)] which were due in the main to crush asphyxia and over 600 other people were injured. Undoubtedly, the above outcome is due also to the fact that emergency planning in Sheffield

was not well developed at that stage and the initiative as far as the injured is concerned, remained only with the social services (Riley and Meadows, 1997).

At this point, it is worth referring to the work of Sime (1999) who states that despite the existence of closed-circuit TV (CCTV) cameras and a police control room, which overlooked the pens, it is clear that there were serious communication problems. Paraphrasing Canter et al. (1989) it is worth mentioning that the processes of communication between the people responsible for the management and the communication to the crowd as a whole, is absolutely critical to safe evacuation under normal circumstances. They (ibid.) add that it is this communication that is often the difference between life and death in emergency situations. Therefore, Sime (1999, p316) suggests that:

“ An electronic visual display message above the tunnel entrance and a clear emergency public address message could have informed the visiting football supporters that pens 3 and 4 were dangerously full, and provided people with directions to the adjacent pens”.

It primarily seems that the aforementioned disaster was caused by the police officer's mismanagement who authorized the opening of the gate at the Leppings Lane Stand in order to obviate a crushing outside. Nonetheless, Frosdick and Walley (1997, p. 89) support that it was not a single root error alone which caused the incident. They (ibid.) underline that:

“ There is a complex interaction of organizational and human factors along with a range of environmental conditions in which the event is contextualized”.

According to them (op. cit.) some of the following are highlighted such as contributory factors leading to the incident:

- * The design of the ground and the effect of the tunnel in speeding up the flow of people into the Leppings Lane end
- * The use of fences to contain potential hooligans and prevent pitch invasion
- * The dominant culture of the police which seemed to assume (in the absence of effective communication) that the crowd movement was an attempted pitch invasion
- * The culture of the crowd that resulted in the late surge to enter the ground, following a period of time spent in local public houses around the ground
- * The imbalance in ticket allocations to the clubs involved
- * The failures of the police contingency plan to cope with the event, along with failures in both command and control and communication
- * The reluctance of many football clubs to invest in ground improvements and the lack of seating position
- * And the poor provision of facilities for the police control base at the ground.

It is common knowledge that the prime duty of any government is to ensure the safety of its citizens and as Adams (1994, p. 15) adds:

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“...the British government is necessarily involved in making sure football grounds are safe from accidents like fire and overcrowding, and in dealing with the public order problems of hooliganism”.

Notwithstanding the abundant inquiries, reports and legislation which followed disasters at British football grounds or involving British fans before Hillsborough stadium disaster, on 15 April 1989 in Sheffield, nothing of the above seemed to contrive to prevent the tragedy. It is characteristic, as Giulianotti et al. (1994) indicate, that nine official reports have been published since the Shortt Report of 1924. These reports have described the official view of the causes of the disasters and offered many recommendations for the improvement of safety and better crowd control strategies in English football stadia.

Frosdick and Walley (1997, p. 69) state that after the Heysel disaster (just four years before Hillsborough) the Football Spectators Act 1989 created the Football Licencing Authority (FLA) who was given the following functions (ibid.):

- * Licencing league and international football grounds;
- * Advising the government on making grounds all-seated;
- * Ensuring that any remaining standing accommodation meets the necessary safety standards; and
- * Keeping under review the discharge by local authorities of their safety certification functions under the safety of Sports Grounds Act, 1975.

Thus, it is obvious that FLA was not a “ child” of Hillsborough, on the contrary, was already playing a protagonist role as Governments involvement in the affairs of the sport.

Taking into consideration the above functions Frosdick and Walley (1997, p. 70) add that:

“ The local authority is responsible for determining how many spectators may be admitted to the ground taking into account not merely the physical structure of the ground, but also the club’s safety systems and procedures. The local authority’s mechanism is the safety certificate”.

According to them (ibid.) the safety certificate will normally cover, inter alia:

- * Responsibility for safety
- * Spectator entry and exit
- * Stewarding and policing
- * Structures, fabric and fittings
- * Fire safety
- * Medical and first aid facilities and
- * Record keeping.

The question is whether the Football Association (FA), who selected Hillsborough as the most suitable venue and was responsible for the

allocation of tickets and places to each team (Lea et al., 1998), had followed any legislative process related to the safety certificate of FLA.

At this point, it seems prominent to be mentioned another important element as far as the role of the governing bodies is concerned in Hillsborough's disaster. Paraphrasing Scraton's words (1999) it has to be mentioned that although the police were not expecting any problems from either set of fans and neither were the fans themselves, policing Hillsborough was a massive and complex operation. According to him (ibid.) there were 1122 officers on duty that day, approximately 38 per cent of the entire South Yorkshire force. While senior officers were prepared in advance (notwithstanding that Duckenfield, the match commander had no experience of policing football, in a ground with which was unfamiliar) many of those on duty on the day were volunteers; well paid, but volunteers all the same.

The latter contradicts the view of Frosdick and Walley (1997, p. 58) who support the argument that:

“ It is essential that police officers are properly trained to take on the task managing the policing of a football match. Not only do they need to realize the normal policing issues of deployment, briefing and the relevant law; they also need to know about spectatoe safety, dynamics and policing tactics (sometimes intractable or drunk) crowds. Policing tactics cannot be learned quickly and attendance at many football matches is necessary to gain experience”.

Hillsborough stadium tragedy is also salient because of the legal actions that followed it. Cox et al. (2002) state that the aftermath of Hillsborough was

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marked by anger and demands for criminal prosecutions. Just one week after the disaster, Grayson (1989), in his work regarding the legal aspects, had prophesied arguable claims against not only the South Yorkshire Police Authority for apparent lack of crowd control, but also against the Sheffield Wednesday Club and the Football Association for at least lack of adequate medical facilities, ticket distributions and stewarding, apart from co-operation and co-ordination with the police.

Furthermore, as Cox et al. (2002) present that a controversial inquest verdict of accidental death ensured that the possibility for criminal prosecutions was unlikely, forcing, therefore, bereaved families to undertake private prosecutions against the senior police officers on duty that day. South Yorkshire Police attempted to deny liability in negligence for what happened, arguing that there was no duty of care owed to the dead or the injured (Scruton, 1999, p. 126). As a result, Hillsborough led to a number of important legal test cases that determined which classes of relatives were entitled to compensation (Cox et al., 2002).

The history of football disasters in Britain illustrates how the safety of fans has not been treated seriously enough by clubs, football authorities or the State. After the Hillsborough disaster, according to Greenfield and Osborn (2001), it was increasingly obvious that football would no longer be able to rely on self-regulation, and that the responsibility for dealing with the game would be taken on by the government. The 1989 and 1990 reports produced by Lord Justice Taylor's Inquiry into the disaster proved to be the catalyst for radical change in the stadia industry. The Final Report made some 76 recommendations-which could not only help avoid a repetition of an incident

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such as Hillsborough's, but also deal with hooliganism- under the following headings (Greenfield and Osborn, 2001, p. 15):

- * All-seated accommodation
- * Advisory design council
- * National inspectorate and review body
- * Maximum capacities for terraces
- * Filling and monitoring terraces
- * Gangways
- * Fences and gates
- * Crush barriers
- * Safety certificates
- * Football club duties
- * Police planning
- * Communication
- * Co-ordination of emergency services
- * First aid
- * Offences and penalties
- * Green guide

In addition, Taylor (1990) in his Final Report found that hooliganism played no part in the Hillsborough disaster. Yet, he (ibid.) underlined that the fear of hooliganism led to an undue influence on the strategy of the police. He (op. cit.) concludes saying that the real cause of the disaster was overcrowding but the main reason was the failure of police control.

All things considered, it seems manifest that Hillsborough disaster was the springboard for numerous changes in English football. New styles, systems and comforts were needed to take the place of those outdated-and in many cases dangerous -buildings (i. e. Appendix 2, Hillsborough stadium year 2002-2003). Moreover, the author corroborates the Walvin's view (1994, p. 187) who assumes that:

“ with the exception of a few notable clubs, it is difficult to believe that these major changes would have been implemented (indeed, would not have been considered) without those terrible incidents”.

Certainly, the argument for renovation of the grounds implied a transformation of the relationship between fans and clubs. Therefore,

“ Whereas the fans in the past had been treated poorly, fans in the improved grounds of the future had to be treated as customers (King, 2002, p. 92).

In conclusion, nowadays, football is a business with a moral duty to care for the safety of its consumers. Unfortunately, it took the horror of the Hillsborough disaster before football and government fully reassessed their commitment to the safety of supporters.