

Safe standing?

Steve Frosdick investigates recent developments in the debate about fans who want to watch football standing up.



The 25,000 capacity South Stand at Borussia Dortmund's Signal Iduna Park is the largest standing terrace in Europe.

Over the last fifteen years, spectators have had to get used to all-seated stadia. But a sizeable minority have never liked sitting – and frequently ignore the regulations. This poses problems for the authorities. Short of draconian measures, it is impossible to make a large crowd sit down. There has thus been an ongoing debate about 'safe standing'.

There are two aspects to the debate. First is whether the authorities should 'tolerate' persistent standing in seated areas. You can stand up on entry, at times of excitement, at half-time and on egress. So what, supporters ask, is the problem with standing during open play? The fans' case is set out in detail on the 'Stand Up Sit Down' website at www.standupsitdown.co.uk.

I've previously written about persistent standing (see S&AM June 2003) and won't

cover the same ground here. Suffice it to say that fans stand up week after week, often with the tacit approval of the safety authorities, who have to develop plans to manage the standing safely.

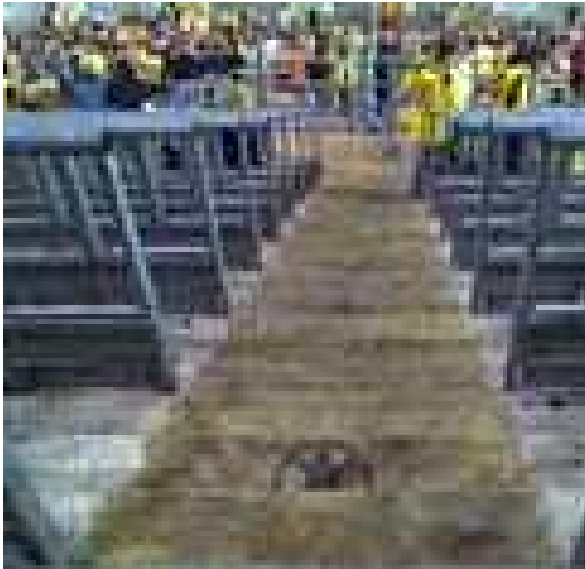
The second issue is whether standing terraces might return to grounds. Properly designed and managed, standing is not inherently dangerous and there are English lower division grounds with 'safe standing' approved by the authorities.

There are many reasons why clubs cannot convert most seated stands into terraces. The fans understand and accept this. But a recent campaign by the Football Supporters Federation (FSF) has proposed a 21st century 'safe standing' solution to re-ignite the debate. The FSF report can be downloaded from www.fsf.org.uk/media/pdfs/safe-standing-report-web.pdf.

Dr Malcolm Clarke (FSF Chair) was invited to present the report to the UK Football Safety Officers' Association (FSOA) Autumn conference on 16 October 2007. Clarke began by emphasising what the fans were not asking for. Safety was paramount, thus they were not asking for a return to massive Kops. Nor should anyone be obliged to stand. The FSF estimated that about 10-20% of capacity would meet the demand. Clarke was not in favour of permitting standing in seated areas – the choice to stand would strengthen the case for expecting other people to sit down. Finally, the FSF did not want to compel clubs to introduce standing. This was a commercial and policy decision to be debated between clubs, regulators and fans at the local level. For example, the opportunity might arise if a club was considering filling-in the corners of the stadium.

Inconsistent regulation

The FSF case is that the current regulatory prohibition is illogical, not in line with the government's view of risk and regulation and prevents choice. It is absurd to say it is safe for fans to stand when the club is in a lower division but not safe to stand on the same terrace in the third season after the club has been promoted. It is illogical that standing is allowed at other sports grounds or at other events in a football ground, e.g. pop concerts. Nothing is 100% safe anyway. The (then) Prime Minister Tony Blair had stated that the balance between risk and regulation had gone awry because of unintended consequences. The FSF



The lower tier fans arrive earlier than the upper tier fans.



The configuration of the upper tier is very different from the lower tier.



The view down the lower tier of the South Stand.



Even with 90 minutes to kick-off, the lower tier is already filling up.

argument was that the all-seating introduced after the Hillsborough disaster had had unintended consequences – particularly the loss of atmosphere – and so needed reviewing in the light of changes and circumstances.

Clarke's presentation drew a mixed response from safety officers. Some acknowledged the persuasiveness of the arguments, but there were doubts whether the football industry would support bringing back terraces.

Speaking on Sky Sports News, FSOA Chair John Beattie of Arsenal FC commented that: "Clubs have spent a fortune making the facilities better for fans, making them all-seater. It's not a simple matter of pulling the seats out and being able to stand. It would result in the clubs having to spend more millions of pounds to revert to something that everyone seems to

think is a backwards step, apart from the supporters".

The FSF campaign won strong support from members of the UK parliament and a debate was held on 24 October 2007. Summarising the views in favour, Roger Godsiff said: "Football supporters do not want to watch football in unsafe grounds; they do not want to see a return to the mass terraces of old; they do not want to stop people sitting if they want to; and they do not want to force clubs to have safe standing areas, if the clubs do not want them. What I and other football supporters want is to be allowed the choice of safe standing; I want clubs to have the option, if they choose, and if there is a demand from the fans, to put in a safe standing area."

Unfortunately for the FSF, both opposition spokesmen lined up with the government to

oppose any changes. Liberal Democrat Don Foster concluded that: "nothing I have heard in this debate, or read in the [FSF] report, persuades me that there is a strong enough case to call for a change." Conservative Hugh Robertson promised that a future Conservative government would reconsider the matter with all the evidence to hand. If the authorities remained opposed, however, he concluded: "It would be an extraordinarily brave and, many would say, foolish Minister who, with the Hillsborough issue sitting on their shoulder, overturned the current situation".

Labour Minister for Sport Gerry Sutcliffe reviewed the history of the policy debate at length. He noted his huge responsibility to ensure spectator safety and concluded, "I have considered the matter carefully, and I have not heard anything to make me change my mind".

The only encouragement for the FSF was that the Minister also commented that he was “not shutting the door” to future discussion.

The FSF case relies partly on the German Bundesliga. Remember that Germany successfully staged the 2006 World Cup in grounds with all seated stands which had been temporarily converted from standing. But the shadow of Hillsborough is a major factor in explaining the different UK and German perceptions of the ‘safe standing’ risk. UK politicians and regulators simply cannot chance another Hillsborough, however negligible the risk. Germany is also a highly regulated country, but has an unblemished stadium safety record. The German authorities also emphasise the

social importance of allowing young football fans to express their collective identity and generate atmosphere. Without the dread of a disaster, Germany has thus retained standing in all but one of its major football grounds.

Bundesliga experience

To find out more, I visited Signal Iduna Park, home of Borussia Dortmund’s 25,000 capacity Südtribune, the largest standing terrace in Europe. Borussia’s Head of Administration, Dr Christian Hockenjos, explained why the club constructed the Südtribune. There was tradition – Germany had always had standing places and the UEFA and FIFA requirements were only

recent. There was value for the fans who pay only 12 euros a ticket. Most important, however, was the question of atmosphere.

Crushing through overcrowding is the greatest risk to be managed on standing terraces. There are three key issues here: access control, crowd behaviour and structural design.

Hockenjos explained that the Südtribune is divided into 11 self-contained blocks each with a capacity between 1,500 and 2,500. Each block has its own entrances and has radial and lateral fences to prevent people changing blocks. Following problems with crowd migration towards the central blocks, which had become overcrowded, the radial and lateral fences had been heightened to stop people climbing. Access control by stewards should ensure only ticket holders for that block were admitted. The crowd was monitored by CCTV and there were stewards at each gate in the pitch perimeter fence.

Hockenjos invited me to put the club’s three-stage access control system to the test. The gates opened a full two and a half hours before kick-off. Compared with the UK, I was surprised at how many fans arrived so early to get a good position and begin their noisy and colourful rituals. Stewards searched fans at the approaches to the turnstiles and any prohibited articles were binned. Tickets were checked by a barcode reader at the turnstile – I used my ‘print at home’ ticket purchased via the Internet. Finally, tickets were checked again by a steward at the entrance to the block. It was this third check where I found the system had some problems.

For League matches, the Südtribune is all season ticket holders. I visited a Cup match for which about 7,000 of the places had been sold by ‘print at home’ tickets, which the Südtribune stewards are not used to. Even though Borussia Dortmund instructs its stewards to check every ticket, I was able to access most of the blocks by showing my Block 13 ‘print at home’ ticket. Stewards checked I had a ticket but only two stewards also checked my block number. Hockenjos recognises the problem with ‘print at home tickets’ and extra controls will be introduced for the next Cup match.

This was an unusual situation, but the risk is that, if lots of fans access the favoured blocks behind the goal with the wrong tickets, then overcrowding could result. That this has not happened is because the Germans tend to be more compliant than the English; and because the crowd densities in the lower tier blocks were fairly low. Even when my Block 13 (the most popular) was full, fans could still just about get in and out to buy beer or visit the toilet.

Hockenjos echoed the German authorities’ view that the standing crowd’s behaviour was



Even in the middle of a ‘full’ centre block, fans had room and were not uncomfortable.



The gap in the fence allowed fans to move from Block 15 into Block 14.

self-policing. The Borussia fans thought of the Südtribüne as their 'living room' and so intervention by stewards or police was rarely needed. Some illness and injury was normal in an 80,000 crowd, but there was no greater rate of injuries in standing than in seating. Nor was there any greater rate of arrests or ejections. Tellingly, there was no problem with persistent standing in any of the seated areas.

The design of the upper and lower tiers is very different. The upper tier features continuous crush barriers with 4,500 tip-up seats. 9,000 standing places are sold in this tier and the fans distribute themselves at will. Even so, the crowd density is very low. There are also radial stairways which are kept clear during the match.

The lower tier by contrast has staggered crush barriers, no radial gangways at all and only a single lateral gangway towards the front. I was not comfortable with the design when the stadium was empty because I could not see how people would move when it was full. A further issue was a gap in the radial fence between Blocks 14 and 15 which allowed uncontrolled crowd migration. However I saw that these design issues were mitigated during the match because the low crowd density permitted some radial and lateral movement even when the blocks were at full capacity.

The fold down seats mean no changes are needed to the upper tier for all-seated e.g. UEFA matches. In the lower tier, temporary seating reduces the capacity of the whole Südtribüne from 25,000 to 11,500. Hockenjos explained that the club charges the same 12 euros as for standing and that the fans all stand up anyway – especially towards the centre – making a complete nonsense of the all-seating rules.

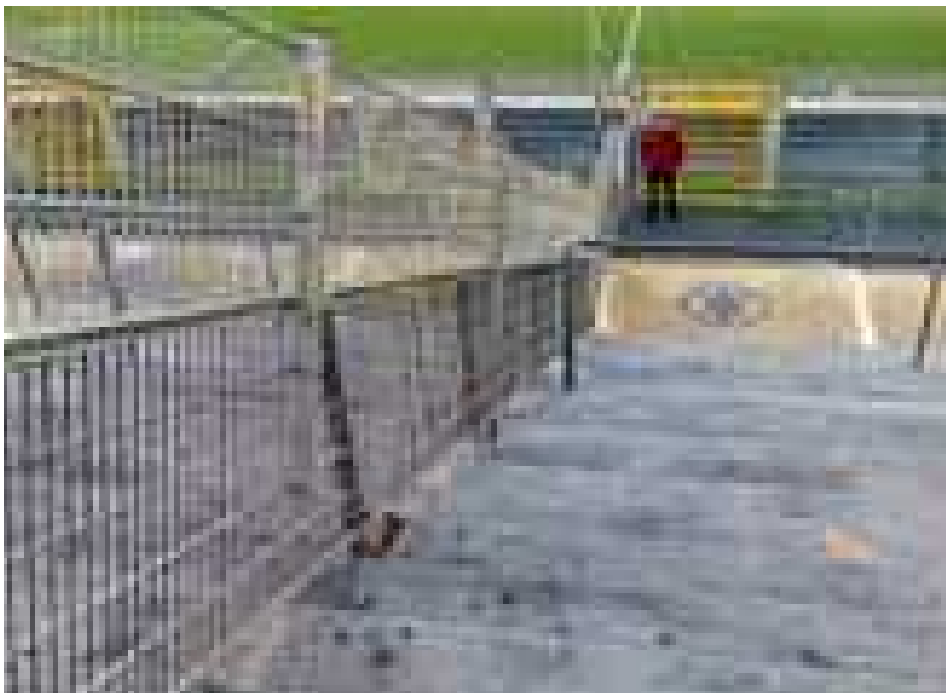
The front of the lower tier had a high pitch perimeter fence. The key issue with such fences is emergency egress. Although the Südtribüne is designed to be evacuated in eight minutes without using the pitch, nevertheless additional exit gates onto the pitch are also provided. There is electronic advertising all around the pitch perimeter but this moves if the exit gates are opened. The fans had been allowed to tie



In all-seated areas, fans often stand up anyway – sometimes on the seats, as here in a french stadium.



25,000 standing fans generate a great atmosphere.



The radial fences between blocks have been raised to prevent crowd migration.

banners along the fence and gates, but these banners had been cut into sections so as not to cause any obstruction to the exit gates.

Whilst I had reservations about some aspects of the Südtribüne's design and management, I cannot deny the benefits for atmosphere. Here in Dortmund, happy fans were guzzling beer, smoking, chanting, singing, waving flags and generally having a lovely time – active participants in the spectacle. I loved it – and had paid less than £10. The following Saturday I sat miserably in my seat at an English ground, banned from smoking (although I don't); banned from drinking beer; passively consuming another mediocre

performance in a largely silent crowd. I had wasted my afternoon – and paid £28 for the privilege.

These contrasts help explain the FSF's persistence. Clarke told me: "The campaign continues. We welcome the Minister's statement that the door is not closed and will continue the dialogue. We remain confident that logic and an evidence-based approach to risk analysis will win the argument".

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