

# TAKING A STAND

Noise levels at top flight grounds have been on the decline ever since all-seater stadia were introduced in 1994, and there are calls for standing to be brought back. *FFT* investigates the state of atmosphere in the English game and the reasons for its decline

Words Alan McGuinness

English football has changed irrevocably since the Hillsborough disaster 20 years ago. The Premier League began in 1992 and two years later all-seater stadia came into force as a result of the Taylor report into the disaster.

Now the Premier League is considered by many to be the best league in the world, with some of the game's top superstars plying their trade on these shores. Every weekend football fans are spoilt for choice, with a multitude of games being shown across a number of channels.

But has something been lost along the way? Is the atmosphere and camaraderie that characterised English football for so long a victim of the Premier League's ascent to the top?

Henry Winter, the Daily Telegraph's football correspondent, certainly thinks so. While going to football matches is much more civilised these days, he says it has 'taken the edge' off of things.

Malcolm Clarke, chair of the Football Supporters Federation (FSF), has been following Stoke City home and away for decades and has also seen a change.

Pat Nevin, who played for Chelsea and Everton in the 1980s and is now a pundit on Channel Five, remembers that back when he was playing the atmosphere would invariably be good. He points out that there are still grounds that are loud for certain matches. Nevin cites the example of Celtic Park while Winter points to Anfield on a European night as evidence of a 'special' atmosphere. However, grounds like this are the exception rather than the rule. Before all-seater stadia the opposite was true.

"I always thought at a place like Chelsea that if you then built a very tight stadium you

could then generate an amazing atmosphere. Much like with Celtic I think it only happens on certain occasions now. If it was the same people going you would have a phenomenal atmosphere but in fact it really only happens in the bigger places in the bigger games," Nevin says.

All three agree that there are a number of reasons for the decline in atmosphere.

The move to all-seater stadia has undoubtedly played a part. Fans who used to congregate on the terraces every week have been dispersed and this had a knock on effect on the noise made during games. "It a physical thing. It's not so easy to sing when you're sitting down as when you're standing up," says Clarke.

Now fans will turn up minutes before kick off. Winter says: "The issue with all-seater [stadia] is that I can be sitting in the press box 50 minutes before kick off thinking 'where is everyone'? If everyone has got tickets they can arrive at the last moment so you don't get the traditional thing of when we were growing up of everyone gathering in the ground early with their mates and singing, with things moving towards fever pitch by the time the players actually came out."

Nevin sums up it up succinctly when he says 'you could go to where the singing was whereas now you go to where your seat is'.

Working class fans, the very people who were most likely to be stood on the terraces all those years ago, are being priced out of the game. "The clubs at the top, the so-called Big Four, the prices [at those grounds] since the Premier League was formed in 1992, have risen way beyond the rate of inflation," says Clarke.

He adds: "If you look at the Taylor Report he actually says in there that £6 would not

be an unreasonable price to charge for sitting down in the top flight in an all-seater stadium. If you multiply that up by inflation that comes to I think something like £14 or £15, maybe even slightly less than that."

Nevin agrees and thinks that the idea of taking your kids along to football every week is 'unthinkable' due to the costs involved.

The spontaneity that characterised football in those times has been lost. No longer can you turn up on the day and buy a ticket. Now they have to purchase weeks in advance.

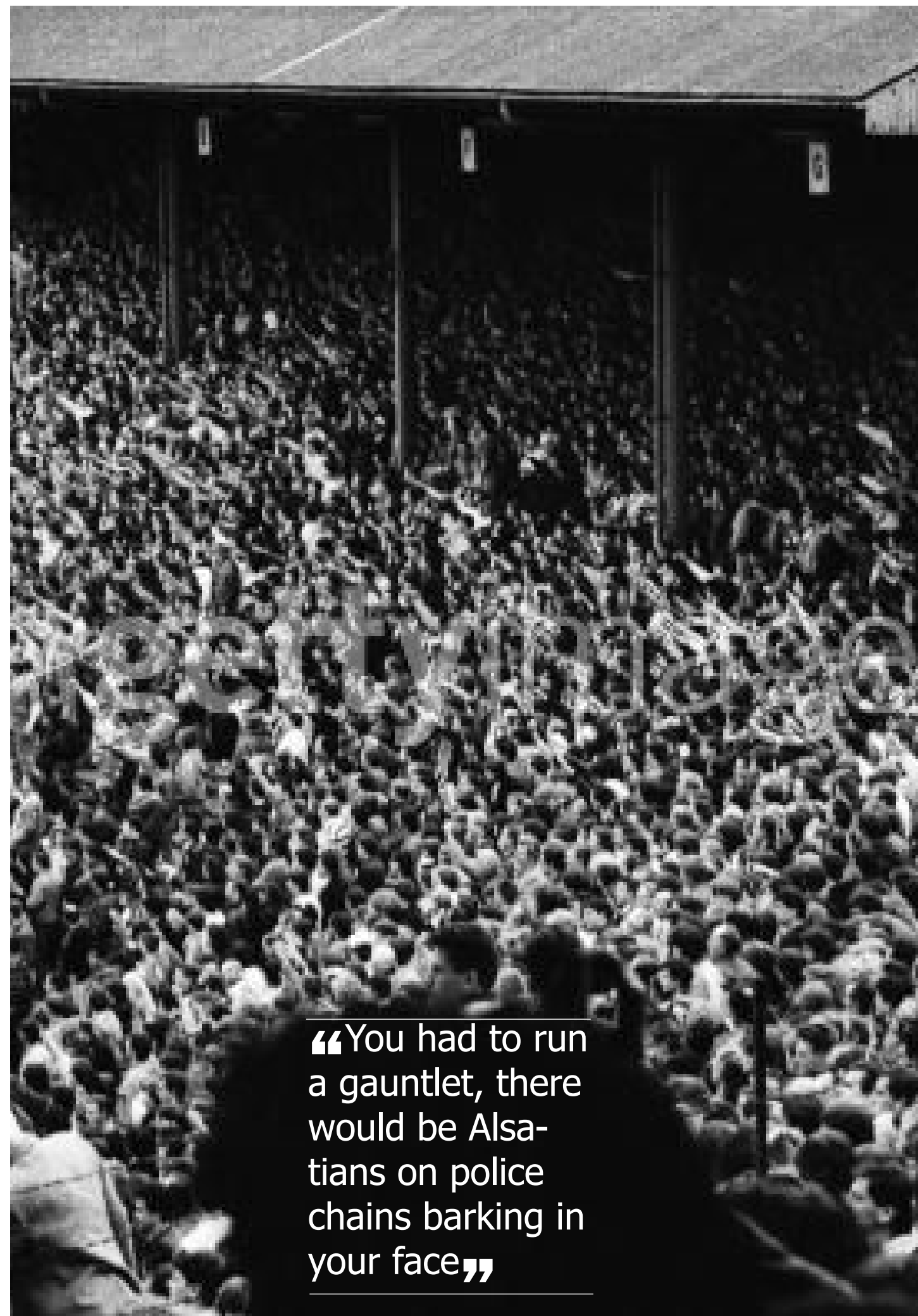
"When I was younger you would go and meet your mates at the same place on the terraces every week you didn't have to plan it. Now of course if you want to sit next to somebody you've got to plan it - the spontaneity of it has been lost to some extent," says Clarke.

The complacency that comes with success is also flagged up as a contributing factor. This can range from the Big Four clubs right down to the likes of Portsmouth and Stoke, who are beginning to establish themselves as Premier League sides.

"You talk to Portsmouth fans and they still say the first season they came up there was a fantastic atmosphere but over the years since then it has diminished," says Clarke.

At the Big Four clubs this leads to an expectation of success, and attracts fans who have very few links to the club. "I think there's an expectation that they go to watch Manchester United, some of the newer supporters of the big clubs, it's almost a kind of divine right that they'll go and watch their team win things," thinks Clarke.

Is this change for better or worse? There is no black or white answer. Atmosphere may have been lost and older heads may lament what the modern game has become, but go-



“You had to run a gauntlet, there would be Alsations on police chains barking in your face”

ing to a game is a much more pleasant experience than it was. Hooliganism is no longer rife. Nevin says: "The upside is you don't get the trouble anymore and that's great. You lose a part of the atmosphere but by doing that you actually get a better experience."

Winter remembers what it was like when he first went to matches: "I started going to matches in the 70s and 80s and it was awful. You had to run a gauntlet, there would be Alsatians on police chains barking in your face."

Clarke thinks there is now a balancing act between keeping what was good about both eras: "In some ways it's changed for the better, the standard of facilities at the top of the game tends to be a lot better - I've peed in some disgusting places in my time as an older football supporter. In that sense it's better. I can remember in those days you would see hordes of people racing down the street, clashing in the streets regularly."

"I think the challenge is to keep the good things that have improved and try to reclaim the things that have been lost like the atmosphere, like the accessibility of the game."

But there is still a large degree of nostalgia about those times. Indeed, many believe the reintroduction of standing would go some way towards arresting the decline in atmosphere that has characterised the runaway success of the Premier League.

According to Clarke 'some of us occasionally do have rose-tinted spectacles and forget the bad things and remember the good things'.

The FSF is actively campaigning for the introduction of 'safe standing' and issued a report in 2007 arguing its case. Clarke is confident that 'common sense will prevail' and standing will eventually be introduced. In fact, he thinks it has never truly gone away. "The strategy at the moment clearly isn't working in terms of trying to eliminate standing in seating areas. You've just got to watch any top game on the tele to see that. I think eventually we will win this argument, but I wouldn't like to put a time scale on it."

"Hillsborough happened to the Liverpool fans but you've only got to look at the Kop on any big game to see that Liverpool supporters are standing in the Kop end. It's not as if people don't stand at football matches, the issue then is it better to stand in a properly designed standing area or in a seated area?"

His organisation uses the German example as evidence that it can work. "Germany is a very regulated safety conscious country and they've demonstrated that there's various standing models that can work perfectly safely."

Clarke is preparing to relaunch the FSF's campaign after the next Gen-

eral Election: "We realise that with the General Election imminent, the government is very unlikely to do that before the general election so we'll wait and see who's in power and then relaunch a bigger campaign on it." However, Winter is adamant that standing will never come back.

"Standing will never happen, it will never come back. Because of Hillsborough, because of many legal reasons. No politician would ever do it because it would just be too controversial, the sensitivity over Hillsborough and all that."

"Everyone points to the German example at Dortmund which is successful but then they haven't gone through the stadia tragedies that the English and British have," he adds.

Nevin says: "Normally and morally I am a standing person, that's who I am. But after Hillsborough and Hysel, if it means you have to go without that atmosphere just so the chance of that never happening again...life's just too important to go back to that."

This decline in atmosphere is endemic of a much larger problem in English football - the alienation of the loyal fan. The Premier League appears to be in rude health in their absence, but this problem could come back to bite Scudamore & co.

Both Nevin and Clarke point out that the average age of the Premier League fan is increasing. Nevin even goes as far as describing the trend as 'scary'.

"If you look at the average age of football fans going 20 years ago and the average age of fans going now I think you've got a problem in 10, 15 years time because you've got a big group of people who used to be kids and teenagers who grew up to be the fans that stuck with it," he says.

Attendance figures are steady, but Clarke warns of a generation of young fans growing up having watched nearly all of their football in the pub, rather than at the ground.

He says: "You're getting particularly young, low income supporters being priced out of the top of the game and I suspect a lot of ones that would have gone in previous generations now would tend to go the pub with their mates where they don't have to pay to get in, they can drink, they can stand up and cheer. You've got a new generation of lower income people, lower income supporters who have become the pub-watching generation and that's not good for game. You've got to build for future generations."

Winter thinks the Premier League will ignore these fans at their peril. "If sport goes into a real crisis - say if hooliganism comes back and people are forced away, the real people who are going to stick to football are going to be the hardcore fans who have been there for years. Football would do well not to alienate them."



## "Standing will never happen, it will never come back"

**Top** The good old bad old days

**Above** Things have changed since then

So, if standing is unlikely to come back anytime soon, can much else be done to draw these disillusioned diehards back? Clubs, and even some proactive fans, think they can.

Chelsea considered introducing unrestricted seating in a section of the ground for a Carling Cup tie this season. Jerry Kendix, a season ticket holder who runs the Club Shed campaign, which aims to improve the atmosphere at Stamford Bridge, says the club were initially receptive to the



idea. "But then after they spoke to the other Premier League clubs they changed their mind which was a real knock back unfortunately," he says.

The campaign is also lobbying the club to introduce cheaper season tickets for 16-21 year olds and also to get 'hubs' of vocal fans to sit together.

Kendix says: "Younger lads are going to be a bit more vocal and if you put them all together you get that sense of camaraderie again that we had in the 80s. A more watered down version of that but it would be a great hub to get people engaged with it. We haven't got the club to say yes to that."

Manchester City have set up a 'singing area' at Eastlands. This is a covert way of allowing fans who want to stand to do so, according to

Clarke. "I think there's one or two clubs looking at things called singing areas which is a sensible compromise as it were to manage the situation sensibly."

An electric atmosphere is not dead, just rarer. There is no catch-all solution, no magic formula, to arrest this decline, but the problems it raises need to be addressed. "With most of these things it's life changes, sport changes, business changes, it's not just one thing that's the problem," says Nevin. With the Premier League perched at the top of football's greasy pole, fans are beginning to fight back and claim what was once theirs. As Clarke puts it: "We're just trying to reclaim the game from the money men, the corporate men and the television men." ●

**Top** The scars of Hillsborough remain

**Above** The Theatre of Dreams... no longer a theatre of noise?

## CLUB SHED

Jerry Kendix on the campaign to improve the atmosphere at Stamford Bridge

**What gave you the inspiration to do something about the noise levels?**

We played Newcastle on night and Newcastle had about 13 or 14 of their top players out. It was a poor game, a midweek game just before Christmas. The abiding memory I have of that evening was that the whole game - Newcastle only brought about 1,500 fans so they were pretty quiet - but the whole game was almost witnessed in silence. I sat there and thought 'This is just too much'.

**Aim of the campaign?**

Getting like-minded people to sit together because people had just been dispersed around the ground. Once you get a season ticket you're stuck there. If you're by people who by people who don't have to be particularly noisy but participate in the game, do what you can to do your bit. If that means just clapping or supporting the players then so be it, you don't have to be singing for 90 minutes. But what I thought there were, there were enough people dotted around the ground who could make a difference, who would make a difference, if they were sat in the same place.

**What specific problems are there at Stamford Bridge?**

The main problem for me is that people are still too far dispersed around the ground. What you need is hubs of people that would lead the other along. I've seen it in so many other grounds, especially if you go away in Europe and see that the grounds are really rocking. Primarily because there are 2 or 300 people in one particular section usually behind the goal who are really sort of cheerleading and leading the rest along. So what I wanted to do was get an area, and the best area we could find had to be in the Shed Upper and I wanted to make that an area where we could put in people who we knew would make a good racket and a good noise.

**And what about the future?**

We need the club to play ball, they make the right noises but we've made a lot cosmetic changes and visual things that are quite good but lots of flags don't help you sing or make noise when you are 1-0 down. You need the people in place to generate that noise and if you don't encourage the youth, if you don't make it easy for people to sit together who want to make a noise it's going to be hard. We keep banging away at the club, it's just a case of watching this space really.