

FSF / SUSD JOINT INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELATIVE SAFETY OF ALL-SEATER STADIA AND FOOTBALL GROUNDS WITH STANDING AREAS

The Football Supporters' Federation has sent us an advance copy of the report of this investigation which it proposes to issue shortly. This note analyses the FSF's arguments and statistics in support of its case and then presents our conclusions.

Background

The report is very narrowly focused on injury rates. It argues that Lord Justice Taylor's recommendation in favour of all-seated grounds "was based on a belief that all-seated grounds were safer than grounds containing standing accommodation". It ignores the other factors identified in paragraphs 61 – 65 of the Hillsborough Final Report, in particular the statement that "There is no panacea which will achieve total safety and cure all problems of crowd control. But I am satisfied that seating does more to achieve those objectives than any other single measure." The Taylor Report also focuses on the greater comfort of seating.

Paragraph 1.3 of the FSF document states that it is not campaigning to bring back terracing but to allow supporters of top clubs the same choice afforded to those at lower league and rugby clubs – which have terracing. This is effectively a plea to be allowed to stand in seated areas.

Scope of the FLA data

The data is drawn from the 94 Premier and Football League grounds in England and Wales, i.e. those that we licence and from whom we have the power to obtain information (see paragraph 2.1).

We have always excluded non-competitive matches such as pre-season friendlies (see paragraph 3.1). Likewise, we have never included matches played outside England and Wales (see paragraphs 3.3 and 3.4).

Attendance figures

When we prepared the injury figures for the 2005/06 season, a computing error produced inaccurate attendance figures. This affected both the club by club lists and the aggregate (albeit in slightly different ways). When this was drawn to our attention, the figures were checked and corrected. All the figures for the previous years were reviewed and found to be correct. Those for subsequent years have been double checked by someone other than the compiler. The injury figures were unaffected so the error only related to the ratio of injuries to attendance.

The figures quoted in the FSF report are the original uncorrected figures. The author appears to have overlooked the corrected ones with which we supplied the FSF. These are 3,004,124 (paragraph 4.2), 109,865 (paragraph 4.3), 77,818 (paragraph 4.4) and 2,563 – as before (paragraph 4.8).

In our experience, club websites are not consistent in their presentation of attendance figures. We have therefore always relied upon external sources to which

the clubs have reported their attendances. We recognise that these are often different from the figures on clubs' websites but we have greater confidence in their consistency. We no longer take the figures from the print media but from the BBC or Sporting Life websites.

Club returns

What we ask for and obtain is the number of spectators treated for injuries. We are aware (and say so) that this does not necessarily equate to the number sustaining injuries.

The individual club returns for 2005/06 and 2006/07 have gone missing. We can only conclude that, contrary to FLA policy, they were destroyed. The figures from the returns had, however, already been copied onto a database.

The allegation in paragraph 5.5 is based on an extrapolation of the FSF's conclusions relating to 2005/06, which for the reasons given above are unfounded. The same applies to the allegation in paragraph 5.7.

The injury figures for the Premier League for 2001/02 have been rechecked and are correct. They differ from those put forward by the FSF in two respects: they exclude injuries sustained outside the ground (i.e. pre-existing injuries) and they include the injuries reported from the Millennium Stadium.

Conclusion

This section does not recognise the difficulty of getting coherent statistics of any kind out of the clubs. Paragraph 8.3 provides evidence of this.

Paragraph 6.4 alleges that we accept "the age of the stadium" as a factor affecting injury levels. The correct quotation is, "the two lower divisions ... still suffer from higher injury rates – though the absolute numbers are low. Among the factors at play are likely to be the lesser quality of the accommodation (including the retention of standing terraces) and fewer resources to devote to safety". The point relates therefore to the quality not the age of the grounds and to the two lower divisions and not to grounds with standing terraces per se.

The argument in paragraph 6.6 is somewhat facile. It compares figures of scalds for all 94 grounds with those for injuries in the 24 or so mostly small grounds that retain standing accommodation.

Paragraph 6.7 demonstrates why it is no longer reasonable or practicable to compare injury rates for all-seated grounds with those that retain standing terraces. We have dropped this comparison from the latest returns for 2007/08. This fits with the FSF's recommendation in paragraph 6.10. It is interesting that the FSF's response (in paragraphs 8.2 and 8.4) is to criticise the FLA for a lack of objectivity.

Paragraph 6.9 summarises the FSF's allegations about our statistics. For the reasons given above, all three allegations: matches overseas, errors in attendances and the failure to copy clubs' returns, are incorrect and do not support the FSF case.

Way forward

In paragraph 7.2 the FSF argues for the introduction of German-type accommodation with barriers in front of each row of seats. It is significant that this is described as “a new form of standing accommodation”.

Appendix

Paragraph 8.1 describes the FLA as heaping praise on themselves for the drop in injury rates in earlier years. This is not an accurate reflection of our reports for those years.

Paragraph 8.3 criticises two statements from our 2007/08 report, both of which happen to be true. Despite our best efforts, two large Midlands clubs failed to distinguish injuries from illnesses. We failed in our attempts to resolve this with them. The change in recording practice occurred at Manchester United which, for obvious reasons, reported the largest number of injuries. This totally skewed the breakdown between different categories.

Overall FLA conclusions

The FSF report correctly identifies that the injury statistics we produce do not provide firm statistical evidence that standing is less safe than seating. We can only suggest possible patterns. We have always acknowledged that ourselves. Despite our best efforts, we have been unable to improve the evidence. To do so would require a higher level of co-operation from the football clubs than has been forthcoming to date. We await with interest the results of the research commissioned by the Premier League.

However, the FSF has sought to rest its detailed case on a mixture of unsupported allegation and inaccurate evidence. This leads it to a two-line conclusion that argues for the introduction of the German-style system. This is not the place for a detailed paper on that matter.

Football Licensing Authority
Secretariat