



# Fair Cop?

**Supporters' comments on policing and stewarding at the Sunderland AFC v. Newcastle United FC match at the Stadium of Light on Saturday 25 October 2008**

## **Background**

The Football Supporters' Federation (FSF) is the national supporters' organisation for all football fans, comprising over 142,000 individual supporters and members of local supporters' organisations from every club in the professional structure and many from the pyramid.

The FSF Northeast Division was formed during early 2008 in order to campaign on issues relevant to football supporters in the North East. Since its formation, football supporters in the North East have raised concerns over policing and stewarding at matches, particularly derby matches and matches which involved teams with a large away following. As an initial campaign, the newly formed FSF Northeast Division has worked closely with North East football clubs and Northumbria Police to discuss this issue, engender constructive feedback from supporters, and seek to identify possible solutions to the issues raised by supporters attending such matches.

The FSF Northeast Division chose to formalise the feedback process for supporters by developing the 'Fair Cop?' campaign and surveying supporters, via a flyer, beginning with the Sunderland v. Middlesbrough match (20 September 2008) and the Sunderland v Newcastle United match (25 October 2008), both at the Stadium of Light. These two matches were the first two North East derbies to appear on the fixture list for the 2008/09 season. Following consultation with the football club and Police, flyers were distributed asking supporters to text or e-mail their comments, both positive and negative, about policing and stewarding at those matches.

FSF members distributed thousands of flyers prior to the two 2007/08 season derby matches at the Stadium of Light match, both on the buses responsible for transporting visiting supporters to the Stadium of Light and in the pubs and clubs in the centre of Sunderland. The flyers were well received by supporters attending these matches, and supporters from both clubs felt that the opportunity to give feedback was innovative and a positive action.

After collating the responses we have sought to feed supporters' comments on the policing and stewarding of these matches to Sunderland AFC and representatives from Northumbria Police.

Following the Sunderland v. Newcastle United match, the FSF Northeast Division received twenty eight emails and fourteen text messages in response to the Fair Cop? campaign. Whilst this may only be a small sample of responses in terms of the total attendance at that match, it is important to note that those who gave feedback via email took significant time to provide detailed feedback and, in total, over 10,000 words of constructive feedback were received. Our summary findings are that supporters' experiences outside the ground on the day of the match were overall positive and several supporters remarked upon the positive police approach to the match. The feedback noted that the policing operation had been carried out by officers who had conducted themselves with due care and good nature towards supporters of both clubs.

## **Feedback from Supporters**

Perception of certain events differed depending on the supporters view point from the stands and team preference (such as the Joey Barton incident). However, the summary of comments below provides a combination of views from supporters of both clubs.

### **Segregation**

This was a key theme highlighted by both Sunderland and Newcastle supporters who felt that the segregation between the two sets of supporters was insufficient. Supporters felt that this led to increased tension. Feedback given to us by supporters also suggests a number of instances where items were thrown by a minority of individuals from both the Sunderland and Newcastle sections.

### **Pitch Invasions**

Both Newcastle and Sunderland supporters voiced their disappointment regarding the pitch invasions that took place. Many highlighted that this has been a regular occurrence at derby matches over the last few years and a particular issue at the Stadium of Light. Supporters' two main concerns over the pitch invasions were, firstly, the safety of players after two supporters were able to confront Shay Given following the winning goal and, secondly, supporters felt that the confrontations between opposing supporters which took place at the end of the match could have been avoided had supporters from both clubs not been able access the playing area so readily.

### **Police Presence**

Feedback from both Sunderland and Newcastle supporters suggested that a higher Police presence would have been more appropriate, within the stadium, at the end of the match. It was highlighted by Sunderland supporters that there appeared to be less Police in the stadium, particularly around the area that housed visiting supporters, than other matches during both the 2007/08 and 08/09 seasons at the Stadium of Light. However, it should be noted that there was little criticism of Police tactics from supporters, only that that supporters would have liked to have seen a higher Police presence at the conclusion of this particular match.

### **Procedure for Holding Back Supporters**

The feedback from Newcastle supporters that used the supporters' coaches was, on the whole, positive and supporters had been briefed that there would be a hold back at the end of the match. However, once in the stadium, supporters felt they would have benefitted from updates towards the end of the match, from the club or the Police, notifying them of arrangements for leaving the stadium. The key area that supporters suggest the club and Police revisit focussed on supporters' perceiving that they were not permitted entry to the concourse area to access toilet facilities. It was also pointed out that many of those visiting supporters travelling by coach had little or no access to refreshments until arriving back in Newcastle, over two hours after the end of the match.

### **Stewarding & Emptying the Stadium**

The stewards in the South West and South East Corners of the Stadium of Light appeared to some supporters to be behaving as supporters in luminous coats, as they were witnessed celebrating the result whilst fans invaded the pitch and the area surrounding the pitch at the

end of the match. Fans commented that the actions of the stewards in question did not instil confidence in terms of their ability to maintain the safety of the visiting supporters, as their actions were felt to be unprofessional and partial. Fans noted that, during the match, there were several incidents of projectiles being thrown but there appeared to be few efforts by stewards or Police to enter the sections of the stadium where those responsible were seated and apprehend those responsible. At the end of the match, the failure to clear the stadium promptly was commented upon by supporters as this led to further opportunities for supporters to become engaged in exchanges (verbal or otherwise) with opposition supporters in and around the enclosure housing the away supporters. It was also felt that an already tense situation was exacerbated by Sunderland 'anthems' being played over the tannoy system well after the end of the match which, it was felt, did nothing to calm the situation.

### Organised Coaches for Visiting Supporters

The main complaint from the supporters using the buses from Newcastle was the departure time from Newcastle. The buses left Newcastle around two and a half hours prior to kick off, and the early departure would appear to have impacted upon the time that visiting supporters started consuming alcohol, as there was some uncertainty amongst Newcastle supporters as to the availability of alcohol once they had reached their destination. It was felt that this uncertainty, combined with the early departure time encouraged, rather than prevented, alcohol consumption prior to the coaches leaving Newcastle. Once inside the ground fans reported that tickets had been issued for 'phantom seats' which did not exist. This caused some congestion in parts of the visiting supporters' area as some of these seats should have been located in central and access areas. Unfortunately the visiting stewards were unable to help in these matters as they seemed unfamiliar with the ticketing and seating arrangements.

### Disabled Section

Supporters identified that the location of some of the areas for disabled supporters inside the Stadium of Light is questionable as they are near to the corner of the ground which borders the away supporters and the South West Corner where crowd problems have occurred on several occasions in the past. The most vulnerable supporters seemed to have been put into a highly vulnerable location. Due to the missile throwing incidents around the South West Corner which occurred whilst the Newcastle substitutes were warming up during the match, several projectiles were seen to fall short of their intended target, and this resulted in the disabled supporters and their carers being subjected to being struck by a variety of projectiles. Upon the final whistle the disabled supporters from both sides were seen to be caught up in the melee that followed the pitch invasion from the South East Corner and visiting supporters' area.

## **Recommendations**

- Stewards should be appropriately recruited, trained, briefed and made identifiable through a numbering or badging system that could make positive and negative feedback possible. This is something the FSF would like to see introduced for stewards at all football matches.
- The use of a central pool of stewards, used by both clubs, could improve effectiveness and competence of stewards. In the long term, it could save both clubs resources as steward retention rates could improve, there would be less stewards to train and it could minimise the risk of allegations of partiality at local derby matches.
- Although segregation should be dealt with on a match by match basis, depending on the circumstances surrounding each individual match, derby matches should warrant an increased area of segregation between home and away supporters.
- Any throwing of projectiles should be responded to with an appropriately firm and communicative approach.
- If supporters are to be detained after the match, adequate facilities should be made available to them, with the minimum being toilet facilities. Information about this should be communicated clearly to supporters.
- Updates should be broadcast to supporters before, during, and after the match, highlighting the arrangements for emptying the stadium and any changes to publicised arrangements.
- Stewards or Police should be positioned around the pitch as a preventative measure prior to the end of the match. Stewards or Police should be in positions that make them visible, although not necessarily in oppressive numbers, and ready to intervene promptly, should any incidents occur e.g. pitch invasions.
- The organised supporters' coaches for visiting supporters need to depart for the match at a more appropriate time to encourage supporters to use them. Similar arrangements should apply for the return journey, after the match.