

**A commentary on 'Little Hooliganz: The Inside Story of Glamorous Lads, Football Hooligans and Post-Subculturalism' by Professor Steve Redhead (2010 Entertainment and Sports Law Journal 8(2)).**

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Issue 8(2) of this Journal included the article, '*Little Hooliganz: The Inside Story of Glamorous Lads, Football Hooligans and Post-Subculturalism*' by Prof Steve Redhead. The author is professor of Sport and Media Cultures at the Chelsea School, Brighton University, and has been carrying out research on football fan sub-cultures, including but not limited to the issue of 'football hooliganism', for over 20 years. He describes his work on hooliganism as part of the 'cluster' of postmodern sub-cultural theory, which has been under-represented since extensive academic study on the issue of football crowd disorder began in the late 1970s. Redhead considers that the phenomenon of contemporary football crowd disorder has been diminishing significantly since the early 1990s (1993: 2) and he shares the views held by academics such as Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti that much of the attention given to the phenomenon, and indeed the actual social construction of it, is the result of a media-fuelled moral panic: '[football hooliganism] remains more or less an historical (and hysterical) mass media construction' (1993: 3). 1

Redhead's views on the diminishment of 'football hooliganism' in the 1990s were overstated. His charting of the 'disappearance of soccer hooliganism into popular media and fan culture' (1997: 102-3) was at odds with the ongoing serious disorder involving English fans, and rioting in Marseilles by hundreds of travelling supporters at the 1998 World Cup was as severe an 'outbreak' of so-called hooliganism involving English football fans as had been witnessed since the mid-1980s (if not earlier). Nevertheless, when we consider the nature, and reporting, of football-related violence in the *domestic* game, it is difficult to disagree with his contention that, 'discourses on soccer hooliganism seem to have proliferated at the very time that the phenomenon appeared to have disappeared from public (media) view' (1997: 98). Writing of the Brimson brothers, the turbo-publishing 'generals' of the hooligan memoir, Redhead comments that their books, 'maintain that hooliganism has not completely disappeared [but] struggle to convince their readers that their examples of rucks and riots are really from the 1990s rather than earlier eras' (1997: 10). Fighting talk from one of the top lads in the academic study of popular culture. 2

In line with the view that 'real' hooliganism has diminished at the same time that accounts, re-telling, and possibly mis-telling, hooligan encounters has flourished, Redhead (with the occasional help of a tidy little firm of graduate student researchers) has been conducting a research project monitoring the output of these hooligan memoirs, or 'hit and tell' stories, 'low sport journalism' (Redhead: 2010) or 'hoolie-porn'. These accounts of hooligan gang activities are typically the result of a joint-writing process between an alleged 'hooligan general' or 'top boy' and an established publisher or author with (in most cases) his or her finger on the sub-cultural pulse. The content of the memoirs are, in Redhead's words, 'who did what to whom, and when'. The appropriately named Chelsea School now has a library of over 91 hooligan memoirs and books written by other writers based upon the spoken accounts self-confessed hooligans. Most of these 'lads' claim that they are now 'former' or 'reformed' hooligans, although for some of them this is certainly not the case. Redhead's research has documented an impressive 396 hooligan gangs in these accounts since the 'watershed year of 1967-68'. In *Little Hooliganz*, he provides a fascinating account, based upon what must be hundreds of hours spent ploughing through the memoirs combined with a number of lengthy interviews with authors and publishers, of what the literature tells us about the history of British football hooligan subcultures. 3

However, what does his analysis of 'hit and tell' inform us about these accounts and the sub-culture they supposedly represent? Do they hold any value for those looking to understand the phenomenon of football crowd disorder and hooliganism, either historically or contemporarily? Professor Redhead summarises his view of their value by claiming: 4

What the hit and tell/low sport journalism genre provides, as has been seen in this essay, is a possible cultural criminology supplement for post-subcultural studies – in other words what I call a 'post-subcultural criminology'. Methodologically it allows

academics to add events, stories, language and colour to a history of youth culture which was already partly written at the time in the 1970s and 1980s.

At this point I should be clear about the methodology that I have adopted since the mid-1990s in my own research into crowd behaviour and legal/social control responses to so-called football hooliganism. My research into the behaviour of football crowds has been ethnographic in nature, conducted through the methodology of intensive participant observation, much of which was carried out covertly. The intention was to immerse myself within the field in order to gather undistorted data (as much as is ever possible) about how football fans and/or hooligans, behaved. 5

The reason for adopting such a methodology, despite severe practical and ethical difficulties (see Ferdinand et al. 2007; Pearson 2009) was that I had serious doubts about the reliability of other accounts of 'hooligan events', most notably newspaper reports, police and Home Office press releases, interviews with 'self-confessed' hooligans and, as we will see, hooligan memoirs. In particular, early attempts at conducting interviews to establish the truth of events during research conducted at Blackpool FC revealed a number of problems. Different interviewees were providing significantly different accounts of what happened at the same event. Numbers of participants in particular varied wildly, as did the reasons given for what sparked the disorder, the seriousness and duration of it, the injuries caused and the actual 'result'. For events I had not witnessed, this was obviously a severe problem in establishing any kind of objective truth. Furthermore, when I informally interviewed fans after incidents which I had witnessed, it also started to become clear that these inaccuracies were not merely confined to genuine mistakes. I quickly reached the conclusion that some fans would claim to have been involved in serious violence, when they had not, in order to 'impress' me. Conversely, other fans who I had seen involved in serious violence, or who had been identified by other research subjects as being 'hooligans', were denying or 'playing down' their activities. This was possibly because they feared I was an undercover police officer or investigative reporter ready to 'stitch them up'. 6

Newspaper reports of incidents, and occasionally official club or police press releases, also proved to be highly unreliable when uncovering the 'truth' behind what was actually occurring in football crowds. In *Football Hooliganism*, Clifford Stott and I highlighted the lies that permeated all the major newspapers concerning English fans 'rioting' in Sweden in 1989, most spectacularly the ludicrous and unfounded claims that hundreds of fans had looted a department store and overturned a double-decker bus. More recently, my own observations of disturbances at the 2009 Carling Cup tie between Barnsley and Manchester United also revealed the complete ignorance of many journalists about the issue of hooligan gangs. *The Independent's* report of the disorder appeared to be drawn entirely from a single post by an anonymous user on a United internet message-board: 7

Manchester United fans are blaming a dangerous new 'firm' of supporters associated with the club for the looting of a food kiosk during the Carling Cup fourth round game against Barnsley at Oakwell that will result in a Football Association investigation. The 30-strong group of teenagers thought to be aged between 16 and 18 years old style themselves as the 'Moston Rats' and come from the tough north Manchester district. They are thought to have been behind the raid on the kiosk which resulted in staff locking themselves in a stock cupboard as the till and food and drinks were stolen. The Moston Rats have become a source of concern for more experienced United fans who follow the club home and away. Even by the occasionally wayward standards of the club's fans in the 1970s and 1980s, this latest phenomenon are thought to be the worst yet (29/10/09).

The report drew anger and mirth in equal measure from the fans who had been present and was ridiculed as being both lazy and inaccurate journalism. It was common knowledge by those 'in-the-know' that the 'Moston Rats' were a group of around 20 teenagers from Moston in North Manchester who had been involved in incidents of disorder between 1997 and 2001, but who were now in their late 20s and on the whole no longer attended matches. There was no doubt that the teenagers who had been involved in the disorder in question were not the 'Rats' and were not even from Moston. 8

However, the report of the disorder also draws upon the idea that football crowd disorder such as this is best understood as being an outcome of organised hooligan gangs, preferably 9

with sinister-sounding names, who travel to matches with the intention of causing disorder. Such an explanation for the vast majority of disorder at matches has been challenged by a number of academic researchers from sociology, socio-legal studies and social-psychology, not least in *Football Hooliganism* (2007). However, the argument that a good proportion of football-related disorder is *not* the result of hooligan gangs travelling with the intention of fighting rival firms is in stark contrast to the impression given by the plethora of hooligan memoirs that focus on the importance of organised, and often named, hooligan gangs. Redhead's table of hooligan gangs reveals that many of the books are named after these gangs; but whilst the names give many of these gangs the feel of sinister underworld organisations, most of those I have spoken to in the field are of the view that names were not to be taken completely seriously and were in many cases imposed by outsiders upon fluid and ever-changing groupings of lads following particular teams (although this can be contrasted with Armstrong's account of the birth of the 'Blades Business Crew'; 1998: 62-63). Tony O'Neill, for example, comments that Manchester United's hooligans 'had always shunned the kind of gang names adopted by others, regarding them as childish' (2005: 149) and that the name 'Men in Black' started off as a joke nickname 'which we adopted for the crack (sic)' (2005: 152). Despite the name only being adopted two-thirds of the way through O'Neill's account, his book is titled simply *The Men in Black*. There should be no doubt that a name such as this helps create the impression that a group is more organised and exclusive than it may be, which in turn appears to appeal to the 'hit and tell' market.

Redhead rightly points out that 'hit and tell' accounts are often more accurate than 10  
journalistic reports of football hooliganism. However, although they have the potential to provide rich data in the form of a self-ethnography, in terms of their accounts of actual events they are only as reliable as their author. And there are many reasons why the authors are not likely to always portray an accurate account of events. The first is the inevitable risk of honest mistake and inaccuracy, although of course this also has the potential to affect trained ethnographers, to a greater or lesser extent. The second is that the nature of football violence is such that it is unlikely that the authors would have been present at all events; yet accounts of the activities of the gangs will not be expected to miss out key incidents, meaning there is sometimes a clear reliance on second-hand accounts. Third, accounts of events are often censored by the authors for fear of self-incrimination. In a recent interview with one of the authors of a gang confessional for example, I was informed that the most serious instances of violence and criminality were kept out of the book in question for fear of police and other reprisals. Fourth, many claims are obviously exaggerated. My experience of reading accounts of events I witnessed was that numbers involved were usually inflated, the duration of the disorder was often increased and the level of organisation was sometimes over-emphasised. Accounts of fans injuring fans of their own team by accident were usually ignored, when in reality these are commonplace, whereas the impact of punches upon rival 'hooligans' were frequently exaggerated. Furthermore, in many cases, writers of hooligan memoirs claim a 'result' that is often disputed by those on the other team (and sometimes by those from the same 'side'). Of course this is often because there is also little consensus of what a 'result' in hooligan terms actually is.

As was noted above, the problem of exaggeration is one of which I was aware when talking to 11  
fans about events I had witnessed during my observations. My suspicion was that this was probably the result of adrenaline at the time of the incident obscuring judgement and making threats to personal safety seem more serious, or simply bravado on the part of those involved. For the authors of hooligan memoirs there is of course another motivation to exaggerate disorder; that of selling books. The author and their publisher obviously want to sell as many copies as possible, whether to make money or to put forward a particular 'side' of the story, and a book which is not sensationalist is unlikely to sell as well as one that is. Speaking to numerous fans and self-confessed former 'hooligans' over the past 15-years, I was advised on numerous occasions that certain memoirs were misleading, self-serving, unreliable and on occasion delusional. This leads on to a fifth and final problem; there is little encouragement for authors to detail instances where it didn't 'go off', probably because it is assumed that this is not what the readers are interested in. However, in highlighting incidents of violence, and ignoring games where disorder did not occur, a highly distorted picture of the scale of football violence is being painted and yet to understand the phenomenon, and the causes of it, it is vital to highlight the games when serious disorder *does not* take place, which accounts for the vast majority of matches. This provides one of the most serious challenges to the value of 'hit and tell' in helping us understand the nature of the problem, and in this sense, the hooligan memoirs fail to provide a meaningful ethnographic account of the

phenomenon. At the end of *Little Hooliganz*, the publisher Pete Walsh admits that some of the accounts can be 'self-serving or 'narcissistic' but all of the accounts I have read have the tendency to highlight the violence of the culture whilst ignoring the vast majority of occasions where disorder does not occur. In this sense they can never represent the totality of the experience of the hooligan 'experience' in the manner of a classic ethnography (see Willis and Trondman, 2000).

So does this mean that the hooligan memoirs provide us with no meaningful data? Has Professor Redhead been wasting his time analysing what are completely unreliable sources, or in his paper does he miss the seemingly obvious conclusion that such accounts provide little reliable data about the issue of football crowd disorder? *Little Hooliganz* does of course acknowledge the occasionally questionable accuracy of the accounts, but it does not sufficiently emphasise the risks of dealing with such material. However, the real value of these accounts lies in the wider picture of the sub-culture of football hooliganism that is painted. Many of the accounts (and even as someone who has reached the issue of football crowd disorder for 15-years, I would not profess to have read anywhere near all of them) go far further than producing a possibly misleading account of who did what to whom, and when. They also tell us who wore what and when, who listened to what and when, and generally provide a taste of the cultural context in which these 'rucks' (whatever the exact details) took place in. 12

The best of the 'hit and tells' provide an enlightening insight into the sub-culture of those who consider themselves to be 'hooligans' or who operate in and around 'hooligan gangs'. They explain the motivations and sub-cultural interpretations and understandings of those individuals and groups, more so than any journalistic or completely 'external' account is ever likely to achieve. For those who have not spent time within this sub-culture, they actually explain *why* 'hooligans' would behave in the way they do, even if their actual behaviour is inaccurately reported in the text for whatever reason. There are of course also disputes about 'who wore what and when', but the fact that this is even an issue for debate shows an insight into the groups that was missed by many external commentators on football violence in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Moreover, within the sub-cultures of individual fan groups, the re-telling, however accurate, of the history of the hooligan gang often forms a framework on which the cultural understandings and, through this, the interpretations, motivations and subsequent behaviour of many fans, are hung. During my research, this has been particularly the case for younger supporters who were not present at the time, but wish to re-live this time through their own actions. 13

Whilst many journalists, politicians and police continue to refer to football violence as meaningless, and the proponents as 'mindless thugs', the 'hit and tell' memoirs reveal a world of identity, local pride, camaraderie and humour that forms the foundation for the activities of the 'hooligan' gangs, both past and present. It would be foolish to base a journalistic or academic analysis of the issue of football crowd disorder purely upon reading 'hit and tell', and the dangers of viewing all football violence as following the type of framework set out in many of the books can be seen from *The Independent's* report on the Moston Rats. However, as *Little Hooliganz* argues, taken as a whole, the genre can act as a 'supplement' for academic study into so-called 'hooliganism', even for those who intend to embark upon ethnographic participant observational research. And Professor Redhead's research itself continues to provide the social context for study into football crowd behaviour, a wake-up call to remind us that fans punching each other do not do so in a vacuum created only by some kind of loose-wiring in their heads. In this, he has adhered to his view expressed nearly 20 years ago that the serious study of football fandom should not just focus on 'football hooliganism and macho posturing' (1993: 5). If you are genuinely interested in 'who did what to whom and when', there is still no substitute for getting out there into the field and being a bit naughty. But immersing yourself in the history of the often exaggerated and clichéd history of the 'hooligan' sub-culture is also vital, as you can be sure that those around you will have their own sub-cultural 'reality' mediated by what they have been told happened in the good old days. 14

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