

Sports and Security: Manchester United's Counter-Terrorism Chief

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It seemed an unnecessarily grand gesture, but the English Premier league discovered last week that Manchester United had appointed its own counterterrorism manager. The person is said to be a former inspector from Greater Manchester Police's specialist research unit. As with everything else in matters of security, such a move will stir and spark discussion: if they have one, why not us? Club boards are bound to be meeting over the subject.

This has happened despite the Football Association's keen confidence that the standards of security at English football venues are second to none. "Irrespective of league position, stadium size or attendance; the way in which the grounds of our football clubs are operated ensures that crowd safety, accessibility and enjoyment are world class as standard." [1]

The UK Government has its own Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds, which was commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In its fifth edition, it has come to be known as The Green Guide, the salient benchmark.

The Green Guide acknowledges the need for counter-terrorist approaches, including the necessity of searching "spectators more thoroughly prior to entry. This may require extra temporary arrangements and the deployment of additional resources on the approaches to the turnstiles or entry points, which in turn may reduce the rate at which spectators can enter." [2]

The authors of the report also note the *Counter Terrorism Protective Security Advice for Stadia and Arenas* produced by the National Counter Terrorism Security Office. With such an array of advising documents, the spectator can be either assured or irritated that appropriate measures are going to be in place against attack.

Despite supposedly exemplary state of stadium security, breaches do take place. Manchester United's appointment came in the wake of two incidents designated by *The Guardian* as blunders. May's Premier League match with Bournemouth was a disruptive affair: a questionable package had been discovered in a toilet. A moment of panic ensued, then evacuation.

As things transpired, the suspected item proved harmless enough. The package had been, of all things, actually placed there by a security firm, a costly oversight that meant the match had to be rescheduled.

The lavatories were again the site of another breach, this time featuring two United fans who wished to capitalise on their tour of Old Trafford by icing the cake. Their method proved childishly simple: conceal themselves in the good old water closet long enough to

sneak in to see the match against Arsenal. The ploy failed, and the police duly tidied up.

As with much in the world of counter-terrorism speak, inconsistencies reign. A counter-terrorism system can be lauded, yet breached in the twinkling of an eye. This can happen despite the fact that Old Trafford remains heavily policed. Turning up at a match entails searches of cars of owners wishing to avail themselves of the car park; spectators are searched at the turnstiles. A perfect detection system, should it ever exist, would be intolerably intrusive.

Sporting officials have every reason to fear vulnerability of their sports venues, though football's, at times pugilistic history, suggests that some of the greatest threats have been the fans themselves. As is the fashion these days, fearing the next Islamic State attack or inspired attack, governs discussion and deliberation.

However an attacker is inspired (the lone-wolf term remains all too convenient and problematic), the danger in any such attack remains inherent and genuine. As with everything else in the business of inflicting terror, theatrics and horror are ingredients to the pudding of mayhem. The problem, as ever, remains detection, an imperfect science at best.

Manchester United's appointment shines a light on the securitisation of the very pleasure of attending sporting venues, a process that has, in truth, been going on for some years. Baroness Ruth Henig has even insisted on law changes to make entertainment venues through the UK undergo counter-terror training.[3]

The clubs, it would seem, have decided to buy into the rhetoric of counter-terrorism paradoxically making football seem *less* safe. Counter-terrorist czars are being sought. Clubs, as always, wish to be seen to be doing something. But nothing will ever eliminate the element of chance.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.thefa.com/football-rules-governance/more/stadium-safety>

[2] <http://www.safetyatsportsgrounds.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/green-guide.pdf>

[3] <http://www.bbc.com/sport/football/38661302>

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