

Football and Beer – a marriage made in heaven? By Stuart Fuller

One of the joys of watching football at The Dripping Pan in Lewes is to grab a pint of the local Harveys beer and stand on the terrace and watch the game unfold in front of you. The match may sometimes not be the best in the world, but the top beer helps ease the pain as does the sparkling company. But on a couple of occasions each season this avenue of pleasure is closed. The reason? Well the fun police at the Football Association invoked rule xiv) in their competition Rules and Regulations, which state:-

"No alcohol is to be consumed in the ground or premises during the period of any match, except as may be governed by the terms of the club licence with regard to its own members, but, not withstanding such, no alcohol is to be taken or consumed outside the licensed club house or any other authorised area during such match period or brought into the ground."

So basically you cannot have a drink whilst watching the game. Sod the fact that the crowd was nearly 50% less than it has been on other occasions this season where alcohol was freely available. Sod the fact that there have been approximately zero arrests in or around the Dripping Pan for any public order offences for years. Sod the fact that clubs like Lewes rely on the revenues from the bar for their very survival. Sod the fact that the world has moved on from those dark days of the 1980's. And sod the fact that the competition is sponsored by a brand of beer!

What the FA are saying here (and interestingly enough at FA Vase games where the average attendances excluding the semi final and final is just over 100) is that fans cannot be trusted to behave themselves in the excitement of cup games if alcohol is freely available. Excuse me for adding in any element of doubt here, but that is simply rubbish.

Boxing Day, New Years Day and Easter Monday are the three biggest days in the Non League calendar, the dates reserved for the biggest games of the season. This season on Boxing Day in the Ryman Premier League you can head off to Maidstone United v Margate, Hampton & Richmond Borough v Kingstonian and Bognor Regis Town v Lewes. Crowds for these games will be double or even treble what they normally are. Is this a problem? No, of course not. So what difference is a cup competition? AFC Hornchurch v Billericay Town in the league in front of 600 or AFC Hornchurch v Barkingside in the FA Trophy in front of 100. Which one is likely to cause the most problems? Here is a clue - it's not the cup game where there are 5 or 6 away fans. Yet alcohol is banned from the terraces in one of them...

We now live with a sanitized football product. You cannot enjoy yourself at Premier League or Football League games anymore. Want to stand up and cheer a goal? Sure, but at your own risk as you will be breaching a number of ground rules and regulations and could be ejected from the ground. Last season I was "warned" by a steward at Chesterfield that I was using my camera on my iPhone "excessively" and that I risked having it confiscated. Apparently, it is against Football League rules or some crap. Indeed I remember a conversation with those lovely chaps at Dataco, who act as judge and jury on who can and cannot have a press pass every year. Part of their agreement is that

you are not able to use ANY images taken from within the stadium unless you have signed permission from them. Let me rephrase that. Unless you ask them nicely you cannot take a picture and use it for your website despite the fact numerous "famous" reporters frequently tweet pictures every match day.

Stadiums are safer environments than they were ten, fifteen or even twenty years ago but hasn't it now gone a bit too far? Banning fans from having a beer during the game is not going to solve anything. You can drink right up until kick off outside the ground so what are they trying to stop? You can hardly throw a thin plastic cup more than a few yards so that is not an issue either.

Let's take the Premier League (or Football League for that matter). Alcohol cannot be sold, served and more importantly drunk within sight of the pitch, unless you are in a corporate hospitality box where you can drink in sight of said pitch but not after 15 minutes prior to the game, half time or 15 minutes post game. In such facilities a curtain is normally pulled across the window to stop this happening.

It gets worse. At the Reebok stadium for instance, there are a number of hotel rooms (The Millennium Hotel is part of the ground) which have a view of the pitch. The windows in the room cannot be opened, and unless the crowd are especially noisy you cannot hear a thing from the outside. Want to have a relaxing glass of wine in your room on a Saturday afternoon? Sure, no problems but not between 2.45pm and 5.15pm (approx) if Wanderers are playing. Irrespective if you are watching the game or not, it is still illegal to drink within sight of the pitch as you may be deemed to be "inciting" the crowd outside by tempting them with your glass of Pinot Grigio. I speak with experience here and I now admitting I have broken the law.

Back in the late 1990's prior to the joys of children, CMF and myself used to essentially be away every weekend. When West Ham played away at The Reebok one chilly February Saturday we booked one of these rooms.

When we checked in we were told very clearly we could not drink any alcohol when the games was on and that CCTV cameras would be monitoring our room AND that stewards had the right to enter our room to double check our abstinence without permission. It was too much of a temptation, and with West Ham putting up their annual pathetic performance at Bolton on the hour mark we succumb. So I crawled across the floor to the mini bar, opened a couple of Stella's and poured them into coffee cups. Haha we beat the system! Still at least we didn't go as far as the numerous couples who have been caught having sex in the rooms of the SkyDome Hotel overlooking the baseball pitch.

Wembley Stadium. The jewel in the crown of the FA. Probably the finest stadium built anywhere in the world in the past twenty years. It even has a number of bars dotted around the wide concourses to try and entice fans in early from the nearby pubs. Except for a number of games it is irrelevant as they are "dry" games. Games where no alcohol can be sold does not necessary mean that everyone has to go without. Get invited into one of the 160 Corporate boxes or one of the executive lounges

and the free alcohol will be flowing courtesy of your host. Can you imagine how few clients would be interested in the experience if there was no booze on offer?

Now here is a strange situation. Football is a 90 minute game plus the 15 minute interlude where you have to queue for the loo/bland food or overpriced soft drinks. Cricket is often an 8 hour festival of sport (well sometimes). Do you think that at England v Australia drinking is banned? It is in certain parts of certain grounds such as the Western Terrace at Headingley, but on the whole it is accepted, if not encouraged. Head off to a game at the Oval and as long as you buy your alcohol inside the ground, and do not try and buy more than 4 pints at a time (including pints of Pimms by the way) you can simply drink all day.

Does chaos and mayhem ensue? Do the police have to constantly wade into the crowd and eject people for anti-social behaviour or fighting? Of course not. And the reason? "Because cricket is a different crowd than football". What absolute rubbish. I would suggest that 75% of people who go to cricket also go to football when in season too. So does their behaviour change depending on the game? No of course not. Rugby Union? Been to a game at Twickenham? Exactly - same story. In fact every sport known to man allows you to buy and consume alcohol in sight of the action, apart from games regulated by the FA.

But wait....Let's look at this "alcohol leads to crowd trouble and is thus not allowed" argument again. Germany has the highest average top level crowds in Europe. The Bundesliga has better stadiums, cheaper tickets and a more relaxed policy on stewarding. As a result crowds flock into games each and every week. And guess what, you can buy beer to your hearts content. You do not even have to move from the terrace or your seat. They come round to you and even let you pour your own.

Holland? Some of the most volatile fans in Europe? Surely beer is banned carte blanche there? Nope. At Utrecht v PSV Eindhoven a few seasons ago we sat merrily drinking Amstel if you please watching the game. Slovakia? Now Spartak Trnava are the best supported team, but also like a little mini riot once in a while, causing significant damage to seats in recent years. Have the authorities banned alcohol at their games? Absolutely not. Ditto the situation in Hungary, Austria, Poland and Belgium.

In Copenhagen the most recent derbies between FCK and Brøndby was marred by violence in the lead up to kick off around the city centre. Once in the stadium, guess what? Alcohol was available and events actually calmed down.

So in Europe it is acceptable right? For certain competitions, for example the UEFA Champions League, there is a complete blanket ban on any alcohol consumption inside any ground hosting a UEFA Champions League match or an Europa League game. Same situation at the European Championships. It still doesn't stop Heineken (and their Amstel brand) from being plastered across all advertising and marketing material. And this is the reason why certain games at Wembley are "dry" for the paying public. I still find it strange that Budweiser (FA Cup), Carlsberg (FA Vase and Trophy) and Carling (League Cup) have all been title sponsors for our domestic competitions in recent years, despite the fact when you watch one of those games you cannot enjoy the product.

But here is the strange fact. If the game was a FIFA game - such as a World Cup qualifier, then alcohol is allowed. How different is the crowd between a World Cup qualifier against say Croatia, and one against Bulgaria in a UEFA European Championship qualifier? There is absolutely no difference, but in one you can buy a beer (although still not enjoy it watching the game of course) and one you can buy an overpriced flat lemonade.

The situation gets stranger when you look at the World Cup Finals. There, you have been able to not only buy beer, but also drink it in your seats in the past three tournaments at least. Granted it has been mainly Budweiser, as main FIFA partner who have paid upwards of £30 million for the privilege, but it makes a whole mockery of the situation. So if we by some miracle get the World Cup in 2018 what will happen? Will beer be banned or not? Well based on recent announcements from Brazil who are hosting the 2014 event I would suggest it will be outlawed.

Next year in Brazil it is set to be the first alcohol-free World Cup after organisers confirmed sales will be banned at games under anti-hooligan laws. None of the 12 stadia which will host matches will be allowed to sell drinks because of a long history of violence in the ground in the past decade.

So back to the original topic. I contacted the FA to ask them about their reasoning behind banning beer on the terrace for Trophy and Vase games two years ago. Their response? Well, not surprisingly I am still waiting. And I guess I will still be waiting for some logic this time, next week, next month and next year.