**To stand or not to stand?**

**By The FSOA**

Football fans of a certain vintage will probably tell you that standing is the only way to watch a match. Tens of thousands of Borussia Dortmund fans would agree. As would the few hundred loyal supporters of Hereford United FC.

Whilst British football is famed for passion, both on and off the pitch, some would say that the high-octane atmosphere created in those bouncing British terraces from years ago cannot be replicated whilst fans feel like they are shackled to their seats. Standing terraces remain an important feature of football in other countries across the world, especially in Germany, and a glimpse of the Dortmund Yellow Wall is the perfect example of how breathtakingly impressive a football crowd can look when standing in unison.

But the debate about whether standing should be reintroduced to the UK’s top two flights is a well-rehearsed one that cannot simply be drawn back to nostalgia.

When seating in stadia became compulsory in England and Wales back in the 90s, few in the football world argued. Appalled by the horrors of Hillsborough, there was little fight when the government responded to the tragedy by ordering major clubs to develop all-seater stadiums.

People were so shocked by the poor quality of some grounds that the opinion formed that standing could just not be done safely. A wave of hooliganism in the 1980s highlighted by incidents of fans storming terraces had also played a part in national calls for football crowds to be more tightly controlled.

Keeping fans in their seats was safer and easier to police, it was agreed.

And even when the ban was reduced to just the top two divisions in England and Wales, higher league clubs were happy to leave the lower leagues to it and keep memories of those passion-filled standing terraces in the past - whatever the desire of fans - content with the ability to fill their grounds as a matter of course. Despite the passing years, memories of football tragedies, such as the devastating events at Hillsborough, have remained all too fresh in the minds of clubs whose number one priority is to keep all fans safe and comfortable. And a sitting crowd is easier to control and keep safe, after all.

But the argument for all-seater stadia is not as simple as that. Any football fan attending an emotionally-charged match will testify that when the ball hits the back of the net, the temptation to stand proves too much. It is the same story for fans at every club up and down the country.

It is widely recognised that spectators stand persistently at grounds for a number of reasons, perhaps to get a better view, because they see others standing or just because that’s what they prefer - whatever the rules say. Ironically, then, it is the status quo that is potentially more dangerous as thousands of fans choose to stand - or spend the game being told not to - at Premier League and Championship grounds every weekend.

Fans standing in seated areas causes a number of headaches for a Safety Officer. Seated areas do not contain any of the design and safety features required to accommodate a standing crowd, leading to a number of potential hazards. Fans who choose to stand are not protected by any crush barriers or railings preventing them from falling forward onto the people in front, creating the potential for a cascading effect along with the gradient of the seating deck. There have been incidents of physical injuries, such as cuts and bruises, and while at some grounds there has been a natural evolvement whereby standing is tolerated in some areas, recent issues at West Ham’s new ground show how heated exchanges can occur if exact rules are not made perfectly clear.

Survey after survey has found that the majority of fans would like to be given the option to stand and the mood amongst clubs has now started to shift. So, is there a way of giving fans what they want whilst at the same time ensuring their safety?

Arguments made by a small group of campaigners over the years that the most logical way to keep fans safe - whilst giving in to their desires to stand at matches - by introducing safe standing terraces have slowly become mainstream. Following years of outright dismissal to entertain the idea of any reintroduction of standing in any form, the issue of safe standing is now one that is getting serious consideration at every Premier League club.

The tide is turning thanks to Celtic FC, which has blazed the trail for other clubs by introducing rail seating for 2,975 fans. The rail seating is impressive in the simplicity and inescapable logic of its design - effectively replacing each existing seat with a standing spot and flip-up seat, with 900mm railings in front and behind each row.

The result has been years in the making and, quite rightly, Celtic has been challenged on the policies, procedures and structure at every turn before being given the go ahead. It’s been a costly and exhausting process and the introduction of rail seating has done nothing to increase the stadium’s capacity. But the fact that season ticket sales this year have exceeded the level of previous years by around 10,000 due to the buzz about what the development will do for match day atmosphere speaks volumes about what fans want. Even those top-flight English clubs previously content to follow the naturally conservative instincts of the Premier League have had their interests piqued are now seriously looking into whether the system could become a reality for them too.

The horrors of Hillsborough will haunt the football world forever. But maybe Celtic has found the solution to keep fans, Safe and clubs - and safety officers - happy?

Reintroducing standing terraces has become the focus of the football world. Fans want it, Celtic already has it and other clubs are now asking if there really is such a thing as safe standing. John Newsham, Business Development Manager at the Football Safety Officers Association, looks at both sides of the argument concerning the issue that’s got everyone talking.