Stewarding for 2018 and beyond

*Violent protests at West Ham showed the ugly face of the beautiful game. John Newsham, Business Development Manager of the Football Safety Officers Association, says it’s now time systems are streamlined to support the stewards expected to cope with protests and much more.*

Chaotic scenes that marred West Ham’s 3-0 defeat by Burnley were an ugly reminder of how quickly a passionate crowd can spill dangerously out of control.

Captain Mark Noble grappled with one angry protester who had stormed on to the pitch, whilst another angry supporter ripped up a corner flag and attempted to slam it into the centre circle. Young supporters cowered in the visitors’ dug-out as a livid mob gathered under the directors’ box in protest against the board, resulting in club co-owner David Sullivan allegedly being hit by a coin.

There is possibly no other sport in the world that evokes passion quite like football does and these shameful scenes erupted as a result of a perfect storm of issues and toxic feelings, including anger over the move from the cherished Upton Park to the London Stadium - a stadium of almost double capacity which many consider devoid of atmosphere. Some fans have shown their dissatisfaction with directors by displaying banners that claim they have been ‘sold a dream, given a nightmare’.

The focus in the aftermath switched from the fans’ violent behaviour to the role played by stewards, including their response to the pitch invasions and how they were overwhelmed by the surge towards the directors’ box, which allegedly saw one female steward knocked to the ground. Attention has been thrust on to stadium operators LS185, which controls stewarding, with reports suggesting the club is keen to take over the stewarding budget and responsibility.

Investigations are ongoing into all of the day’s events but the issues that led to the incident - and the way they were dealt with - are far too complex to be simply wrapped up with a sweeping statement blaming stewards and their responses, especially with such politics and emotions at play in this case. It does, however, highlight a crucial aspect of stadium safety - stewarding - that urgently needs thrusting to the top of the agenda for every organisation, agency or sports club that deals with crowd control.

The role of the steward has changed beyond recognition over the past 25 years and now it is vital that agencies join together to re-evaluate how stewards are trained so they can do their jobs effectively and be retained to ensure the safest environment for all spectators at crowded events.

As recently as the early 1990s, stewards were no more than supporters in tabards. Their roles began and ended on match days, their duties were assigned in an ad-hoc fashion and there were no official policies or training packages in place. It was only after the tragedy at Hillsborough that the footballing world stood up and agreed that more needed to be done to ensure the safety of spectators and staff at grounds.

Developing the roles of safety officers and enhancing the role and responsibility of stewards was among the priorities outlined to achieve this goal. Aston Villa FC - with the support of then Villa Park Police Commander Jim Chalmers - was one of the first clubs to benefit, as it developed its first ever Steward Training Programme.It was the passionate belief of all involved with the organisation that stewards should be properly trained, equipped, managed and led to ensure their competence to play a vital role in every event safety management operation that drove this development.

During the years that have followed, football authorities have developed a number of training programmes - each one more complex and demanding than the previous versions - from the red book back in 1995 to the latest training package (On The Ball) in 2010, which was produced by the football authorities and which the FSOA and the SGSA, formally the FLA, contributed to. This training package provided an innovative and interactive resource that, at the time, satisfied the NVQ level 2 recommendation requirements for stewards - as introduced in 2009 - and represented a commitment to supporting the highest level of stewarding.

But what started in 1995 with the first Football Authorities Steward Training programme has now grown out of all proportion and needs to be radically reviewed, reduced and streamlined to meet the actual training needs of a steward. There is also a need to review whether the Level 2 NVQ is too time consuming, bureaucratic and costly to sustain as the only recommended training standard, mainly due to the requirement for external assessment validation. Despite all the best intentions to ensure stewards are properly trained to deal with all the eventualities they could face whilst keeping spectators safe, the steward training and qualification pendulum has swung too far from nothing to extreme. The time and cost involved for a steward to obtain a Level 2 NVQ can be far too onerous for many sports clubs when many of them have a high wastage rate of steward personnel. The issue was highlighted during the London Olympics when a number of stewards were trained to an acceptable standard but were unable to complete a full qualification within the strict timeframe and therefore are no longer working within the industry.

Despite the strict training that goes into the Level 2 NVQ, which is provided by OFQUAL, candidates are never then required to refresh their qualifications, leading to the possibility of some stewards working to outdated practices and in disciplines no longer relevant to the role in this ever-chancing industry.

To ensure all stewards are on the same page and are best trained to deal with the constantly developing challenges their roles present most efficiently, a suitable alternative qualification to the NVQ needs to be introduced. The FSOA, SGSA, EFL and Premier League have agreed to collectively look at this issue and are working together to identify the current issues with steward training whilst exploring options around an alternative training package and accreditation process. This would likely include the introduction of a refresher course every three years to ensure those working in the industry are up-to-date with the latest threats and stewarding techniques.

This alternative qualification would not depart significantly from the NVQ requirement - which was initially put in place in order to secure an exemption for in-house stewards employed directly by clubs from the requirement to be licensed by the SIA - but instead focus on developing the requirements of stewards’ training for the future of all events, not just at football matches.

As the status, authority and competency of the Safety Officer has now improved beyond all recognition over the past 25 years, we now also need to re-examine the option of reintroducing self-training and self-assessment and self-qualification, which clubs are currently not allowed to do. The time is now right to allow and trust Safety Officers to train, assess and qualify their own personnel by giving them a Certificate in Stewarding Competency as was evidenced in 1999.

In order for a successful overhaul of steward training and assessment processes, we must also take a look at exactly what we are now asking of our stewards - and how much they are paid. A selection of the vast guidance documents produced over the years to aid stewards gives some insight into just some of the additional challenges our stewards are now expected to face, including safely identifying and disposing of pyrotechnics. Many changes have also been made to the environments in which they work. Stadiums have had to become more diverse in their use and some stadiums have become more complex by design. Couple that with the way society has also changed and increasing threats of terrorism and the myriad demands that are placed on our stewards starts to become clearer. The fact that many are paid a fraction of what they could command having earned an NVQ in other industries goes some way to explaining why there are so few fully trained and qualified stewards currently available.The problem of recruitment and retention of stewards at both clubs and private agency companies has been increasing over the years, particularly since 2012, and unless something is done to attract more people to become stewards then the industry is going to suffer further to the detriment of spectator safety at events going forward.

The Sports Ground Safety Authority is currently compiling the 6th edition of its Green Guide, which will include the National Occupational Standard it recommends clubs should train its stewards to. This therefore provides the perfect opportunity for authorities and organisations within the sports and events industries to work together to streamline the system and ensure everyone is on the same page.

Only by demanding ALL stewards - irrespective of whether they are club stewards working at sports stadia or agency staff controlling crowds at music concerts - are qualified to the same National Occupational Standard can we be sure that they are best trained to deal with the vast challenges their jobs throw at them - such as the violence that erupted at West Ham.

In an official club statement released in the the aftermath of the violent scenes at the London Stadium, West Ham confirmed that the safety of all supporters was ‘always the club’s number one priority’. Stewarding is a crucial aspect in the highly-complex and ever-evolving landscape of spectator safety and it’s time every organisation involved in crowd control joins together to streamline the system so it truly supports all stewards for the benefit of every spectator hoping to enjoy a football match, concert or festival without fear.

\**John Newsham is a Risk Management Consultant with 30 years’ experience in stadium safety. He worked at Blackburn Rovers FC for 24 years, having started as a steward before building up to become the club’s Safety Officer.*