

Football must not forget its inclusive responsibilities in the rush to get fans back into stadiums

Abstract

It is imperative English Premier League and Football League clubs consider disabled supporters when planning for the return of fans in stadiums. While it is understandable English football clubs are eager to welcome fans back as soon as possible, I argue this must not be at the expense of disabled supporters. Utilising the theory of ableism, I highlight the inequitable matchday experiences of disabled football fans at English Premier League and Football League clubs pre-COVID-19, a situation I argue cannot be exacerbated by neglecting disabled fans as part of the return of fans to stadiums. This commentary emphasises the importance of English football clubs grasping the opportunity to positively change how disabled football fans are treated. The piece concludes by calling for sustained lobbying for inclusion, and the need for future research to focus and explicate the experiences of disabled football fans.

Keywords: disabled people; football clubs; stadium accessibility; COVID-19; inclusion.

Introduction

COVID-19 is one of the greatest current challenges facing the world today, causing significant disruption to the normal functioning of societies world-wide. At the time of writing (27th October 2020), there have been over 43 million registered cases of COVID-19 and over 1.1 million deaths across the globe (Johns Hopkins University, 2020), while the global economy is forecast to contract by 5.2 percent (The World Bank, 2020). The risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, with those aged 80+ particularly at risk from the virus (Spiegelhalter, 2020). Age is not the only risk factor, however, with individuals living with chronic health conditions facing increased risk of fatality from COVID-19 (WHO,

2020). Evidence suggests disabled people are more likely to die from COVID-19 than non-disabled people (Pring, 2020; Webster, 2020). Indeed, in the United Kingdom (UK), statistics suggest disabled people aged between 9 and 64 were more likely to die from COVID-19 than non-disabled people in the same age group (Pring, 2020). Social distancing is a vital tactic in the fight against the spread of the disease (Lewnard & Lo, 2020), but the need to maintain a safe distance between people has caused fractures to the operations of service organisations. Sport has not been immune to the dislocation between consumer and product (Parnell et al., 2020). In the UK, the vast majority of professional sport currently occurs behind closed-doors: supporters are locked-out because of COVID-19 (Mohr et al., 2020). A number of academic commentaries have focused on the impact of COVID-19 on football (e.g. Ludvigsen & Hayton, 2020; Manoli, 2020; Mohr et al., 2020; Moore, 2020; Parnell et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020), but relatively few have specifically paid attention to the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people in sport (Fitzgerald, Stride & Drury, 2020). This commentary focuses on the importance of English Premier League and Football League clubs considering disabled supporters when fans are allowed back into stadiums. Adopting an ableism lens to this short analysis, I argue a number of football clubs were failing in their duty to disabled supporters before the pandemic, and that clubs need to ensure this is not exacerbated or worsened when fans return to stadiums. To situate this piece, I first describe the impact the absence of fans is having on football clubs. Using the theory of ableism, the matchday experience of disabled supporters before COVID-19 is then briefly explored, followed by a consideration of the impact of COVID-19 on disabled supporters. Finally, I argue for clubs to be inclusive in their plans for welcoming fans back into stadiums.

Football matches behind closed doors

Since the fourth goal in Leicester City's 4-0 win over Aston Villa at the King Power Stadium on 9th March 2020, 250 Premier League goals were scored without fans to cheer them

(Harris, 2020). The on-field statistics suggest ‘business as usual’ in terms of goals per game (BBC Sport, 2020), but the lack of fans has led some to argue the football spectacle is poorer and more sanitised (Holt, 2020). Football fans help to create the vibrancy and passion that makes football such an attractive proposition to sponsors, broadcasters, and sports fans. The diluted atmosphere at grounds has not only had an impact on the enjoyment of football for some viewers but has caused very real and significant financial implications for clubs across the footballing pyramid. Indeed, the lack of fans and atmosphere was one of the principle reasons for broadcasters seeking a financial rebate from clubs (Jackson & MacInnes, 2020). The absence of fans at live football matches poses a serious risk to the financial viability of many football clubs, big and small. The chief executive of the Premier League, Richard Masters, claims it is “absolutely critical” for fans to be back in stadiums, with clubs footing an estimated bill of £700m if the ban on fans attending matches is continued throughout the 2020/21 Premier League season (Roan, 2020a). Moreover, there are fears as to how many lower-league clubs will survive without the income generated on matchday (Aloia & Law, 2020).

The prospect of full capacities at football grounds in the near future were dealt a blow when, on the 22nd September 2020, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport suggested supporters may not be able to attend live sporting events until March 2021 at the earliest (Roan, 2020b). With commentators and scientists warning of a difficult winter ahead because of COVID-19, the prospect of stadiums being at capacity before March 2021 are remote. Instead, football clubs are hopeful a maximum of 30% capacity, where social distancing allows, will be permitted when fans are able to attend matches (Slater & Waugh, 2020). Discussions focused on how and when fans are able to attend games has largely been held without disabled supporters being mentioned. Due consideration for how disabled fans will be welcomed back to football stadiums has been conspicuous by its absence.

Ableism and the experiences of disabled football supporters pre-COVID-19

Ableism can be defined as the privileging of individuals and ideals conforming to a perceived body aesthetic and social ‘norm’ (Campbell, 2009). Simplified, ableism can be viewed as a form of discrimination and internalised oppression for individuals who do not meet supposed normative standards. Campbell (2001) discussed the term ableism in 2001 when focusing on how people distinguish between those that are ‘able’ and those that are ‘disabled’. Ableism, therefore, prioritises non-disabled perspectives as ‘normal’ while ‘othering’ disabled people who do not meet these norms and viewing disabled people as diminished compared to non-disabled people (Campbell, 2009). Ableism focuses on societal-wide oppression, while disablism focuses mainly on discrimination stemming from disability (Bogart & Dunn, 2019). It has been argued ableism can constrain some disabled people’s sport participation because of limitations in individuals generating sufficient reserves of social, economic, and cultural capitals and the ability to self-determine (Brittain et al., 2020). Moreover, some sporting organisations have been accused of adopting direct or indirect ableist practices in the provision and management of sport participation, constraining efforts to increase disabled people’s sport participation (Brown & Pappous, 2018; Christiaens, 2018; Johnson, 2019).

From a football perspective, I argue an ableist culture within some English Premier League and English Football League clubs has had an impact on disabled peoples’ experience of attending live football matches. A culture of ableism may be overt or discrete within the football club, but its manifestation results in divergent experiences for some disabled fans. Indeed, the experience of attending live football matches as a disabled supporter can largely depend on the team the fan supports and the stadium the game is played at. Not all disabled fans are treated equally. Disability is a diverse and multi-faceted population group which lacks a common disability identity due to different individual experiences of impairment (Watson, 2002). Despite this, most football clubs narrowly focus their attention on the

physical accessibility of stadia, such as wheelchair spaces, but even then, adequate provision is patchy among clubs (Garcia et al., 2017). In 2017, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) claimed 13 of the 20 Premier League clubs did not provide the minimum number of wheelchair spaces (BBC Sport, 2017). Indicative of an ableist mentality among some professional English football clubs, the EHRC found a number of clubs to be deficient in providing accessible toilets and accessible information for disabled supporters. Even where wheelchair spaces are provided, the sightlines for some wheelchair users can prohibit viewing the match enjoyably and without blocked or obscured views (Gornall, 2014). In addition, it is not uncommon for disabled supporters of the away team to be placed with home supporters due to a shortage of accessible seating in the away end (Gornall, 2014). It is inconceivable non-disabled football supporters of the opposing team would be willingly placed with home supporters, yet this happens with some disabled fans. Unfortunately, some clubs fail to consider the requirements of disabled fans, as demonstrated by football's continued disregard of the needs of individuals with colour blindness (Cronin, 2020). For example, the kits worn by Norwich City and Everton in their Premier League match last season was largely indistinguishable for people with colour blindness (Cronin, 2020). It is important to point out there are a number of clubs who operate good practice in being inclusive and accessible. For some disabled supporters, there may be no issues for them when they attend the match. However, due to the presence of ableism within some English professional clubs, the experiences of disabled fans vary within the club and from club to club, leaving plenty of room for improvement.

Impact of COVID-19 on disabled football fans

For many, football offers a release from the stresses and pressures of life, and a chance to be part of a community of like-minded fans. For disabled supporters, the ban on fans attending matches has hit many hard. A report from the campaigning and advisory charity, Level

Playing Field, revealed 43% of disabled fans experienced significant impact on their mental health due to the absence of football (Level Playing Field, 2020). Level Playing Field's (2020) research found half of respondents had concerns about returning to stadia to watch live matches when fans are able to return. In addition, some, but not all, disabled fans may be shielding due to health reasons and therefore may find it more difficult to return to football matches while the pandemic continues. It is vital football, in the rush to get fans back into grounds, do not neglect or forget disabled fans as part of the planned return for spectators. As outlined earlier, disabled football fans have historically faced challenges following their club, therefore it is imperative clubs ensure their preparations for fans returning are as inclusive as possible. Failing to do so may risk further inequality in access and experiences of attending live football matches for disabled fans.

Disabled supporters and the return of fans

Football clubs will understandably be eager for fans to return as quickly as it is safe to do so, but this should not be at the expense of due consideration of its inclusive responsibilities. It is important English Premier League and Football League clubs address ableist tendencies and work towards a culture of inclusivity. It is likely most English Premier League and Football League clubs adopt unintentional, rather than deliberate, ableist practices, perhaps stemming from a lack of knowledge of disability and/or an insular or narrow focus on an 'idealised' customer. Football clubs should work with disabled people's organisations and disabled supporters associations to understand the challenges in getting disabled fans back into stadiums and the provision and support required to do so. This commentary is not arguing for disabled fans to be given preferential treatment: rather, football needs to be mindful of its responsibilities and obligations to being inclusive. Being inclusive does not automatically produce more costs than benefits for businesses: a lucrative market is available if exploited in the right way (Paramio Salcines, Grady & Downs, 2014). Now is the opportunity for clubs to

reset their relationship with inclusion, to commit wholeheartedly to meaningful change as we rebuild society during and post-COVID-19. Time will tell whether this opportunity is fully grasped.

Conclusion

Football should be enjoyed without unnecessary hurdles, but sadly this is not the case for some disabled fans. This commentary has argued ableist practices within the culture of some English Premier League and Football League clubs have prevented some disabled football fans from enjoying fair and equitable matchday experiences. With reduced capacities in stadiums likely to persist for months to come, it is vital for clubs to consider how fans can be brought back in an inclusive and safe manner. To achieve this goal, we all have a part to play. Academics, the media, disability rights groups, football authorities, and many others. It is up to individuals and organisations to ensure inclusion is on the agenda of clubs and the footballing community, to lobby for equitable access to watching the game loved by non-disabled and disabled fans. As academics, it is up to us to conduct more research to present the case to clubs for the need to be accessible and inclusive. Arguing for inclusion on the basis of morality will not be enough to change the status quo: along with highlighting discriminatory practices, a business case for the importance of inclusion can help to shift cultures within clubs. As academics, we can build the business case for inclusion by undertaking research into disabled consumers and their purchasing power. In addition, conducting research with disabled people as to why they do not attend live football matches will help football clubs to understand how they can increase their customer base in the future. It is also important to canvas and explore the matchday experiences, both positive and negative, of disabled football fans who attend live matches, in order to build the evidence and knowledge-base in this under-researched area of inquiry. It is by highlighting good practice, and challenging bad practice, change can start to be achieved and implemented.

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