

Danish Ultras

– Beyond risk/non-risk



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Danish Ultras – Beyond risk/non-risk

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Foreword

When a lot of people gather for an event, they are often regarded as a homogenous mass. Research on mass psychology suggests however, that this view may be problematic and in some situations possibly contribute to the onset of disorder. It is therefore the task of relevant authorities to be well-informed about the factions they will be handling on the day to avoid excessive demonstrations of power and authority towards groups who basically have no intention of using violence or breaking the law by other means.

The Danish police are presently implementing a dialogue-based management concept, which among other things was developed for the supervision of high risk football matches and demonstrations, and grounded in the positive results that the East Jutland Police experienced establishing event policing. The authors of this booklet were involved in the institution and development of the event policing concept and contributed considerably to the preparatory training of event staff for dealing with conflict aversion. One of the most significant components of the training is

to provide the officers with an understanding of fan culture and its diversities. A diversity that has difficulty fitting in to the risk/non-risk EU terminology, which is approved method for the classification of football fans.

This booklet is an example of how a close scrutiny of specific segments of fan culture can disclose nuances to an often simplified view of football fan culture. These nuances contribute strongly to giving a differentiated view of football fans. The views expressed in the booklet have been integrated into both event policing training and the national training course on Dialogue-based Policing.

The EVINN project studies event organisation and good hosting, and has published booklets entitled *Danish Event Policing – Dialogue-Based Policing of Football Crowds* and *DSB football guides – a Danish solution to an international problem?*. The booklets can be downloaded at www.evinn.org.

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Introduction*

It is well documented that knowledge of supporter culture is crucial when assessing the risk of disorder at football matches and thereby ensuring a balanced approach by police and stewards.¹ Until just a few years ago, police in most of Europe utilised three categories to describe the risk constituted by football supporters. Peaceful supporters who do not represent a source of disorder were regarded as Category A supporters. Category A supporters remained within the law and followed instructions from police and stewards. Category B supporters, who the present article concerns, were characterised as representing a potential risk, in part due to their use of pyrotechnics and in part because of their occasional involvement in disorder. Category C supporters, on the other hand, were those who created disorder and actively sought confrontation with stewards, police officers, and/or like-minded supporters from rival clubs. Category C supporters were

* This text is a revised version of the article: "Danish Ultras: Risk or Non-Risk?" *Sport & EU Review*, Vol. 4, Nr. 1, 05.2012, pp. 5-17.

thus synonymous with 'hooligans'. Although these categories already represent a simplification of the reality, they have at EU level been further simplified with their replacement by a risk/non-risk supporter dichotomy in which supporters previously placed in Categories B and C are all regarded as outright 'risk supporters'.² Both within Denmark and internationally, there is a weak understanding of risk supporters, often resulting in inappropriate assessments on the part of the police. This has led to conflicts that presumably could have been avoided had the police possessed a deeper awareness of supporter culture.³

Supporter culture in Denmark has developed significantly, parallel to experiences in other European countries. The past 15 to 20 years have seen the establishment of organised supporter clubs in collaboration with the football clubs themselves. The first official support club was AaB Support Club, founded in 1990. Brøndby IF, whose supporters offer the empirical basis for this article, followed the trend with the creation of Brøndby Support in 1993. Simultaneously, a large number of unofficial supporter groups

arose, often in opposition to the official supporter clubs, which they feel lack intensity and commitment.⁴ Some of these groups are termed ‘ultras’ in the research literature.⁵

This small booklet is the result of a qualitative study of the self-declared nonviolent segment of the Danish risk supporters, i.e. the ultra culture. The study’s empirical data stems from qualitative interviews and participant observation primarily focusing at matches involving the Danish club Brøndby IF, the club supported by the interviewees.

The booklet aims to create knowledge concerning ultra supporter culture with the purpose of gaining the information necessary for building differentiated and balanced action on the part of the police and security services – in line with the “good hosting”-strategy formulated by the Danish National Police.

Passionate Relationship to the Club

Brøndby IF’s motto is *Supra Societatem Nemo* – *No one is above the club*. In a way, the motto frames the interviewees’ relationship with the club. They

are all fervent and loyal supporters. At the same time they refuse to be “reduced” to consumers as they don’t buy the official merchandise. Consumer fans often wear several items of official club merchandise but ultra supporters reject this style. Instead they produce their own products (without infringing the club’s copyrights for their brand) and spent the profit on tifos which is an important part of their contribution to a match. Contrary to the consumer fans the ultras disapprove the transformation of the ground, the club and the ‘degradation’ of football into mere entertainment and therefor the means of consuming football. They are willing to do almost everything to support the club. Family parties and birthdays are deprioritised in relation to matches. One of our interviewees notes, among other things, that he went to the stadium the same day he became a father.

For most, entrance to the ultra scene was preceded by years of attending matches with their parents or friends when they were young. At the stadium, they were immediately attracted to and fascinated by Brøndby’s grandstand,

'Faxetribunen' (now called 'Sydsiden', meaning 'Southside' referring to the grandstand's position), which is the main meeting point for active supporters at Brøndby Stadium. It is at 'Faxetribunen' that the feeling of fellowship and love for the club gains its expression. The supporters celebrate the club through tifos, songs, rhythmic clapping, and sometimes the use of pyrotechnic and other audiovisual effects, which supporters may spend many weeks preparing. Unlike the official supporters, who work closely with the club, these fans are willing to be critical of the club and its players, coaches, and management if they are unhappy about something. The relationship with the club is characterised by ambivalence. If someone is unfairly banned, the relationship can further deteriorate, expanding the gap between the supporters and the club. The elevation of the club to something more than 'just' football is a fundamental characteristic among supporters, and this feeling is underlined by the extensive expenditure of time and money that often accompanies their intense commitment. As noted above, many hours are spent preparing tifos, and

to these could be added the hours used on debate forums, chats, and away match trips. The latter of these can cost in the order of DKK 500 (approx. 67 Euro) to DKK 1000 (approx. 134 EURO) per match when one includes purchase of ticket, beer, transport, etc. All of this is part of the celebration of the club – In other words, the club is much greater than just the players, coaches, and management: *‘So it’s not the players or the club employees. It’s (...) the club’s own values, the club’s history, all of the memories you accumulate, the pride in feeling you’re a part of something’*. The motto ‘No one above the club’ certainly applies to the feeling of fellowship held by supporters in relation to the club, but there is scepticism when the club uses the motto itself. The motto has frequently been used as a counter-argument against criticism of the club by supporters.

Limits of Acceptable Behaviour

Just because Danish supporter culture includes a significant degree of activism and testing of limits, this does not mean that the interviewees set no limits of acceptable behaviour. To the

contrary, there are a number of unambiguous limits that they are not prepared to cross. Our interviewees regard themselves as nonviolent. Prearranged fights against other groups are not part of their game, as they express it:

“Prearranged fights is where I draw the line. I have nothing against people doing it, but I don’t want any part in it (...). You have the right to defend yourself, but not be the aggressive part.”

However, if they are attacked by other groups or otherwise feel that their limits are being encroached upon, they will react. The interviews underline the importance of a nuanced understanding of the supporters’ limits of acceptable behaviour in relation to preventing football disorder and avoiding the branding of supporters on the basis of isolated incidents. It has been well documented that confrontations between police and this type of supporter often involve a lack of knowledge on the part of the police, which Clifford Stott and Geoff Pearson have pointed out in a number of instances. For

example, there were only around 30 known hooligans among the 965 or so people arrested during the disorder in the Belgian town of Charleroi during EURO 2000 in the Netherlands/Belgium.⁶

Pyrotechnics: A Calculated Risk

Characteristic of this type of supporter is the idea that the use of pyrotechnics is a natural part of attending football matches. According to the supporters, it makes life more dynamic in the grandstand and enables them to express their support for the club. Support that they feel assists the players in performing better during the match. This is despite the supporters' awareness of the risks involved in using pyrotechnics: There is the risk of fines and bans, condemnation from others, and ruined clothing for the pyrotechnics user and fellow supporters.

In order to avoid detection, supporters often cut off the safety shaft from flares, this makes them smaller and easier to smuggle into the stadium. The downside is that the user needs to get rid of the flare quickly otherwise it would

become too hot to hold. The supporters set a limit though and do not throw flares. The extent to which this behavioural limit is widespread is evident from the 2010 joint statement from the seven largest unofficial Brøndby groups (including hooligan groups) in which they condemned the throwing of pyrotechnics. This followed an incident in which violent disorder resulted in the throwing of pyrotechnics and other objects.

Despite examples of the misuse of pyrotechnics, all interviewees felt positively about the use of pyrotechnics in general. However, not all of them used pyrotechnics themselves. For some, the personal risk assessment was weighted toward the negatives. Others use pyrotechnics only occasionally:

I (...) use pyrotechnics but not so often anymore since I also have a personal life and a job, so I don't need to be exhibited as a hooligan. So you need to think twice about it when you do it.

As this quote highlights, the risk is not just of a fine or a ban: It also needs to be assessed on the basis of the Danish media's and public authority's association of pyrotechnics with hooliganism. It should be noted that use of pyrotechnics was legal in Denmark until 1999, and most supporters emphasise their desire for a critical and constructive dialogue concerning the use of pyrotechnics rather than the media's frequently unnuanced depiction of the issue. At the European Council 'International Conference on Ultras – Good practices in dealing with new developments in supporters' behaviour' (February 2010, Vienna, Austria), part of the conference was set aside for a serious discussion of this issue with the aim of working toward a mutual solution. After many years' of being banned in various places in Europe, the use of pyrotechnics remains common practice in European clubs. The debate concerning their use despite sanctions is thus a relevant one.

Relationship between the groups in Brøndby

Even though the supporter scene at Brøndby IF and especially in the Sydsiden (formerly Faxetribunen) ranges from official and peaceful supporters to some of the country's most infamous hooligans, our interviewees say that there is mutual respect among the different groups. Besides the sense of intimate fellowship with members of one's own group, there also exists solidarity among Brøndby supporters as a whole. This is evident, for example, in prearranged marches – in which all types of supporters participate – from the town centre to the stadium at away matches. Communication takes place between the leaders of the various groups, for the sake of determining routes, etc. Other Danish clubs exhibit a greater degree of differentiation among the various groups, with individuals distancing themselves, for example, from the known hooligan groups.

The relationship between the groups also illustrates the existence of close collaboration and personal friendships across the groups. It is not unusual for declared violent supporters to help

out when it comes to large tifos at an important match, thereby strengthening solidarity between the groups. These relationships are further strengthened by joint trips within Denmark and abroad.

However, even though the similarities between the support groups are substantial and mutual respect is viewed as vital, both our observation and interviews confirmed a desire to differentiate between the groups based on the declared differences in limits of acceptable behaviour. If a member of an ultra group participates in a fight, he will be excluded from the ultra group. This maintains differentiation and one's own group identity.

Supporters' Relationship with the Police

Conflict situations often occur between this category of supporter and the police. The supporters exhibit general distrust of the police's judgement inasmuch as they feel that the police often misevaluate the actual risk. This feeling is also documented in international research.⁷

Since July 2008, the Danish police have sought a uniform policy in Denmark, with a national strategy focusing on dialogue, openness, and dynamic risk assessment. However, some police forces have attempted to implement the dialogue-based strategy aimed at dynamic risk assessment, yet others have made no changes to their practice and continue to operate on the basis of a mobile action strategy, which does little to promote dialogue. It is thus no surprise that supporters report experiencing significant geographical differences in the police's management of football matches in Denmark. The supporters also feel that such gaps have widened following the introduction of the national strategy.

In light of the new national strategy, it is interesting that the supporters themselves express a desire for better dialogue with the police. They would like to see far more cooperation than currently exists. Cooperation can concern agreements about bars and marching routes to and from stadia, which often spark conflicts both large and small as a result of insufficient dialogue between the parties

involved. The supporters would like to remove the misunderstandings at the root of these conflicts. At the same time though, they have had poor experiences with the police, and they have limited trust in the police's ability to manage football appropriately. They feel that the police have decided in advance that when Brøndby supporters visit, it is a high-risk match regardless of their actual behaviour. They feel that they have been judged in advance.

Despite their negative experiences with the police, supporters are open to dialogue, which is in fact a relatively new phenomenon. Just a few years ago, a supporter who had contact with the police would have been considered an informant, yet it is now acceptable to openly have contact with the police with the aim of achieving better conditions for supporters.

Conclusion

The relationship between groups and especially between ultras and hooligans places great demands on the police in terms of handling supporters. As has been shown, the

undifferentiated handling of supporters, in which everyone is regarded as a hooligan (and hooligans are regarded as people who *always* seek conflict) can have a negative influence on the police's ability to maintain order.⁸ A differentiated view of football supporters requires prior knowledge of a sort that can be difficult to obtain from a club like Brøndby where, despite their differences regarding acceptable behaviour, solidarity among groups is very strong.

We recognise the limitations of this relatively small empirical data. But it does point to the problematic issue and the risk in using a too simplistic supporter categorisation tool. A tool, that itself is limited in taking into account the complexities and nuances of the supporter culture. When one categorises supporter groups as either risk or non-risk without clarifying what the risk consists of, there is the danger of regarding declared hooligans and declared nonviolent supporters as a homogenous group. One consequence may be the relinquishing of the ability to facilitate nonviolent supporters in their desire to maintain differentiation between

themselves and the hooligans. This may be an unintended consequence of an undifferentiated and confrontational approach to what the police regard as a homogenous group. Social psychology has documented how otherwise-peaceful supporters seek aid from declared hooligans in situations in which they see the police's actions as illegitimate.⁹

As far as future strategies for preventing football disorder are concerned, it is essential that the police maintain a differentiated view of supporters. Yet the risk/non-risk dichotomy might not be a tool that makes this possible. To the contrary, in fact. The optimisation of police action requires more nuanced consideration.

Notes

¹ Stott & Pearson 2007

² EU Council 2010

³ Stott & Pearson 2007; Rasmussen, Havelund & Tranegaard Andersen 2009

⁴ Joern 2006

⁵ Pilz and Wölki-Schumacher 2009

⁶ Stott & Pearson 2007

⁷ Stott and Adang 2009

⁸ Stott & Pearson 2007

⁹ Reicher et al 2004

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