

THE MANAGEMENT OF PERSISTENT STANDING – PART TWO

Given the popularity of the ESSMA good practice presentation published in June 2012, Steve Frosdick has now written up the presentation as a text suggesting new policies for managing persistent standing in all-seated stadia.

Week after week, stadium managers face problems from large groups of fans who persistently stand in seated areas. Such spectators block the gangways, obstruct the view and are difficult to steward. In some grounds, the fans even stand on the seats.

Persistent standing commands widespread attention from various stakeholders, including politicians, governing bodies, law enforcement and fan organisations. There is also debate about the separate but related issue of ‘safe standing’. This stems from campaigns to allow the installation of ‘rail seating’ in all-seated grounds.

More than twenty years after the widespread introduction of all-seating, the reality is that some fan groups have not adapted. They continue to stand for reasons of tradition and culture. They argue that standing improves the atmosphere, particularly for a big match. Sometimes the people in front are standing up, forcing everyone behind them to do so. Quite often, fans choose to stand in protest against the regulations.

The Legalities of Standing

Various countries have laws that stadia must provide all-seated stands. Some governing bodies also require all-seating for their matches. There is thus a clear expectation that fans will sit down, but no legal requirement they must do so.

Standing up is often forbidden by the ground regulations. This is a civil matter. Standing up can be a breach of the contract, but it is not a crime. Nobody can be arrested just for standing up and the police have no role in asking fans to sit down – this is the job of the stewards.

Is Persistent Standing Unsafe?

The regulatory authorities see the spectators standing up and express concerns about it. They say that the seat backs are too low to restrain falls, which could lead to a progressive crowd collapse. They also worry about gangways being obstructed and fans falling off their seats. The authorities then put pressure on stadium and safety managers to ‘Do something about it!’ and ‘Make them sit down!’

But is such standing inherently unsafe? How real is the risk of a crowd collapse? The answers to these questions are not as straightforward as the authorities might wish. It all depends on when the standing takes place. It also depends on the angle of rake in the seating deck.

A (then) Football Licensing Authority report in 2002 referred to the risks and found that,

“The risk of such falls and the likelihood of a cascading effect increase along with the gradient of the seating deck. The majority of upper tiers and many single and lower tiers have gradients above the 25° that the *Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds* (the *Green Guide*) considers safe for any standing accommodation, even where this is equipped with crush barriers to the highest standard. Indeed many seating decks, particularly on upper tiers, have gradients close to the recommended safety maximum for seating of 34°. Standing in a seated area with such a gradient must by definition be treated as unsafe.”

In the same year, WS Atkins prepared a report for Trafford Borough Council. This looked at persistent standing Manchester United's Old Trafford stadium. The report concluded that the most dangerous time for fans to be standing was at moments of excitement, such as when a goal is scored. The next most dangerous time was on egress when fans were leaving the stadium. The least dangerous time was passive standing during normal play.

Ten years later, the evidence still supports this assessment. The two most serious known accidents involving fans in seated accommodation in England in 2011 both occurred at times of high excitement. Both involved away fans falling from height in matches at Millwall and Scunthorpe after goals were scored.

Three Policy Propositions

Given the argument so far, it seems reasonable to suggest three initial policy propositions. The first is that persistent standing in seated stands with angles of rake above 34° must be inherently unsafe. Spectator groups whose risk assessment shows they are likely to persistently stand must not be accommodated in such areas.

The second is that persistent standing in seated stands with angles of rake between 26° and 34° may be inherently unsafe. Spectator groups whose risk assessment shows they are likely to persistently stand should only be accommodated in such areas on a balance of risks basis, for example when it is essential to use an upper tier to keep high risk fan groups segregated from one another.

The third and perhaps more controversial proposition is that persistent standing in seated stands with angles of rake below 26° is NOT inherently unsafe. It is less dangerous than standing at times of high excitement and standing during egress. It follows that it is poor practice to seek to require spectators to sit down at all times. This spoils people's enjoyment and brings stewards into unnecessary conflict with supporters. Notwithstanding the ground regulations, persistent standing in seated stands with angles of rake below 26° may be tolerated, providing that the associated safety, security and service risks are properly managed.

The Associated Risks

Fans who are persistently standing take up more room than fans who are sitting down (typically 550mm rather than 460mm per person, according to the 2002 FLA report). There is therefore a risk of lateral migration into the gangways and vomitories. Blocked gangways and vomitories pose a safety risk because they inhibit both routine and emergency access by medical services, stewards and police. They also pose a service risk as they make it more difficult for fans to move in and out to use the concourse facilities.

There is also some evidence that persistently standing fans can pose security problems. According to the 2002 FLA report,

“While there is no automatic correlation between standing in seated areas and misbehaviour, there is evidence that some groups of standing spectators regularly adopt a hostile attitude to stewards and to the authorities generally. This can make it harder to tackle offensive conduct such as racist chanting or obscene language. Even where this does not lead to misbehaviour, standing spectators may not be in the mood to comply with reasonable requests (in particular to keep the gangways and exits clear) that may be for their own safety.”

Left unmanaged, this hostile attitude can and does lead to anarchy in the stands.

As well as blocking access to concourse facilities, persistently standing fans pose other customer service problems. Children, fans who find it difficult to stand for long periods and those who simply do not wish to stand are all forced to do so in order to have a view. Depending on the location of their space, disabled patrons may have their view obstructed.

Managing the Risks

There is an absolute requirement to keep gangways and vomitories clear. This can be achieved through a combination of ticket sales controls and stewarding. To prevent lateral migration, the end two seats in each section of fourteen seats to a gangway should not be sold. (14 people sitting take up $14 \times 460\text{mm} = 6,440\text{mm}$ of space. 12 people standing take up $12 \times 550\text{mm} = 6,600\text{mm}$ of space).

The front two rows of any upper tier should not be sold. This provides a 'fall zone' and a lateral working corridor for staff. Stewards should be deployed to patrol the vomitories and gangways to keep them clear at all times.

Ticket databases provide records of who has purchased each seat. It is therefore helpful for post incident investigations based on CCTV footage that fans should sit in their allocated seat.

Stewards should be deployed at the entrances to vomitories to check tickets and ensure that only fans holding tickets for that seating block are permitted to enter. They should also be deployed in the gangways to prevent lateral migration between seating blocks. Finally, stewards should be deployed in the gangways to check tickets, act as ushers and ensure that fans occupy their allocated seats.

Many stadia with high and steep upper tiers keep back unsold a small number of emergency seats on the lower tier for vertigo sufferers. This principle can be equally applied to persistent standing to provide emergency seating to relocate people who are unable or really do not wish to stand.

Disabled viewing areas should be located so that their viewing is not affected by persistently standing fans. Where this is not practicable, netting should be used to take out of use an appropriate number of seating rows below the area.

Rail Seating

The radical option is to allow stadium management the option to install the type of accommodation used at some German grounds. Rail seating is popular with fan groups and also complies with all-seating regulations. Fans want clubs to have the choice to build rail seating but the authorities are generally opposed. Debates among safety officers have concluded that rail seats would not stop persistent standing anyway.