

REPORT FROM THE LUNATIC FRINGE

Fuelled by excessive drinking, crowds at American sporting events have grown increasingly obnoxious. And dangerous

WORDS: MARK KRAM JNR



Meet Matthew Clemmens. Nothing about him is unusual. In fact, he is a fairly unimpressive lad. 'Maybe a little overweight,' his uncle later conceded. 'But he has a good heart.' On an April evening last year, we learnt that he has an even better aim. At a Phillies game at Citizens Bank Park in Philadelphia, Clemmens and three companions got, for lack of a better word, blotto. Sitting in front of them was an off-duty police captain, Michael Vangelo, who was at the game with his two daughters, aged 15 and 11. When Clemmens and his cohorts began cursing, the 15-year-old spun around and asked them to stop, which, of course, led to even worse behaviour. The young woman was spat on. But when the offender was escorted from the stadium by security, all hell broke loose.

Clemmens stood up and announced he was going to be ... sick.

At that point, he leaned over, stuck two fingers down his throat and began vomiting on the girl, while simultaneously throwing wild punches at her father. Vangelo later said it was 'the most vile, disgusting thing I've ever seen, and I've been a cop for 20 years'. Clemmens was clapped into handcuffs and became a laughing stock across the world. The *Daily Mail*, a British tabloid, blared: 'Yob is sick over family.' Clemmens later issued a tearful apology to the court, but the judge on the case called it 'feigned', perhaps noting the tattoo the young delinquent had on his forearm: HEARTLESS. The judge sentenced Clemmens to 30 to 90 days under lock and key, 50 hours of community service and ordered that he pay Vangelo \$315 in restitution for game tickets and parking.

Call it just another cozy evening at the ballpark. Though the unseemly episode just described was a new one even to me – and I tend to keep track of such aberrant behaviour for personal amusement – the lawlessness on display that evening was far from uncommon. Going to a sporting event in America these days is a journey into the profane. Within earshot of children – and remember, sports advertises itself as 'family entertainment' – fans who would presumably behave in a civilised manner elsewhere become raving lunatics. They swear. They hurl projectiles on to the field. And in some cases, they even attack on-field personnel. While Americans have always looked upon soccer riots in Europe and elsewhere

as beneath them, the bedlam that occurs at United States sports venues borders on what we'd find in some banana republic deep in the bush.

Given the coarse behaviour in the stands, security has never been greater. In the post-9/11 society in which we live, where everyone is looked upon as a suspect until proven otherwise, no one is taking any chances with unruly fans who get it into their heads to leap over the fence and run on to the field of play. We've seen this before, of course: Once, years ago at Dodger Stadium, a fan and his 11-year-old son dashed on to the field and tried to burn an American flag in protest, only to have it swept from their hands by Cubs centre fielder Rick Monday. But what we have not seen before, and what we are seeing more of these days, is the type of corrective measures being taken by law enforcement. Today, when there is even a sniff of provocative activity, the arresting officer reaches into his pocket, whips out what appears to be a pistol and drops the violator in his tracks.

Seeing it, you'd swear he'd been gunned down.

But not to worry: In a sideshow that always leaves fans howling in perverse delight, he is only zapped into submission by a taser.

There is a hostility in large crowds at sporting events that is never far from the surface. It can be triggered by anything, especially if there is beer involved. In the case of Bryan Stowe, 42, it came down to the fact that he happened to be wearing an orange and black San Francisco Giants jersey at Dodger Stadium during the home opener. Three pieces of human garbage spotted him in the parking lot, began taunting him and then beat him to a pulp. While police have arrested one of the three alleged assailants – a man and a woman were at large more than two months later – Stowe remains in a coma at a Los Angeles hospital, the latest example of the hysteria that overtakes fans.

Publicly, athletes will speak passionately of their fans. Privately ... well, that is often another story. Steve Carlton, the Hall of Fame pitcher, famously referred to fans as 'green flies', the annoying pest that plagues American campers in the summertime. Never mind through their patronage, these very same fans had endowed him with a lavish salary, which permitted him to indulge his passion for fine wines. Fans bothered him for autographs (which ►

Steven Consalvi is tasered by a policeman at a Philadelphia Phillies baseball game



John Murray is subdued by Chicago Cubs players and security after charging Randy Myers

he never signed) and, God forbid, were always critical of him when he had a poor performance. But Carlton was not alone.

Only a few weeks ago, Roger McDowell, a former pitcher and now a coach with the Braves, tangled with a fan identified as Justin Quinn at AT&T Park in San Francisco. Quinn, there with his wife and nine-year-old daughter, overheard McDowell address three men nearby: 'Are you guys a homo couple or a threesome?' When Quinn shouted, 'Hey, there are kids out there!' McDowell told him that kids did not belong at a baseball park and, with a bat in his hand, added: 'How much are your teeth worth?'

But fans are just as pissed off as the players, when you get down to it. They love a winner, but let a player slip off form and he becomes a target of such intense abuse that one would think he was an accused paedophile. Perhaps you are wondering, what accounts for this anger? Well, there are a lot of things, some having to do with the play on the field and some having to do with more intangible factors. Of the former, going to a sporting event these days is very expensive – \$20 parking, \$9 beers, \$6 hot dogs and so on. Somewhere along

the line, it has gotten so that you have to be a hedge fund manager to afford to go to a ball game. Never has that been so true than in these trying economic times, which is where some of the intangibles come into play. Chances are the spectator sitting on either side of you has had some big financial setback, either the loss of a job or a house, or even both. Meanwhile, by virtue of his very presence, the fan is supporting players who are earning millions of dollars, some of which possess only average or even below average ability. Fans have adopted an attitude towards the players that says: You owe me.

Given the inherent tension between athletes and fans, it just takes a few too many alcoholic beverages to set off a rowdy episode. Witnesses have stated that the criminals who assaulted Stowe and left him brain damaged were intoxicated. Liquor has also played a role in some alarming fan-on-player attacks through the years. Kansas City Royals first base coach Tom Gamboa was beaten as he stood in his coaching box by two men who came down from the stands at Comiskey Park in Chicago in 2002. Houston Astros right fielder Bill Spiers was attacked by a fan in Milwaukee in 1999. And Cubs reliever Randy Myers was charged by a fan at Wrigley Field in 1995. And I remember the former Baltimore pitcher Dennis Martinez describing an incident that occurred to him, again at Comiskey Park in Chicago: 'As I came out of the dugout, I saw this shadow coming over my head. And when I turned, I saw stars.' The beer bottle that struck Martinez left him with four stitches in his scalp and dizzy for three days. I could go on, but you get the picture: A visit to your friendly American sporting venue is like something out of *A Clockwork Orange*.

One would think there would be an easy enough solution to this: Curb the flow of booze. But that would not be possible, given the sponsorship ties that exist between sports teams and beer companies. Coors, Miller, Anheuser-Busch are just three of the firms that have a relationship with baseball. 'Bottom line, there is far too much sponsorship of teams by alcohol companies,' says Bruce Livingston of industry watchdog group Marin Institute. Organisations argue that they keep an eye on the level of alcohol consumption, yet a University of Minnesota study revealed that 74% of people pretending to be drunk were indeed served and were three times more likely to buy it from a vendor working ▶

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Bryan Stowe is transferred from Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center after being beaten up in the Dodger parking lot

the stands than at a concession booth. At NFL games on Sunday, the boozing begins before the stadium gates even open. In tailgate parties in the parking lot, fans swill beer by the buckets in the hours leading up to the game. By kick-off, they are not just tipsy but shit-faced. Once last year as I hunted for a parking space at Lincoln Financial Field before an Eagles game, I ended up with an exuberant soul pounding out a Calypso beat on the hood of my car.

To keep the drunken revellers at bay – and to keep the other fans and players safe – security has wheeled out the Taser, also known as the ‘stun gun’. Supposedly, using it is an effective form of crowd control. The downside is, it is an upsetting spectacle to behold. I happened to see it employed last year at a Phillies game. Steven Consalvi, a 17-year-old, ran across the outfield waving a towel, as a uniformed officer

began chasing him down. Consalvi was having what appeared to be the time of his life when, suddenly, police fired a Taser at him, bringing him to the ground under the force of thousands of volts of electricity. Consalvi, who was described by his mother, Amy Zeigler, as ‘just a goofy kid’ who ‘clowns around’, issued a public apology and was sentenced to 80 hours of community service.

Somewhat less apologetic was Pittsburgh Pirates fan Scott Ashley, 41. At a Pirates game in April, Ashley was reported to police for unruly behaviour. When an officer asked him ‘to step out and talk about what was going on’, Ashley replied, ‘Fuck you. Get out of my way. I’m trying to watch the game.’ Calmly, the officer said: ‘We can either do this the easy way or the hard way.’

Guess which one Ashley chose?

The officer zapped him.

However, the Taser did not penetrate the coat Ashley was wearing.

So the officer hit him with a club.

As someone who attended many sporting events as a youth, I can remember none of this occurring. Oh, back during the ‘70s at the height of ‘streaking’, an occasional fan would disrobe and run out on the field. Once, that happened at a Baltimore Orioles game during an era when the team was having trouble drawing fans. No one seemed to be unduly upset by it. In fact, when the police asked the club general manager what he wanted them to do with the culprit, the GM replied, ‘Give him \$50 and tell him to come back tomorrow.’ Today, the poor fellow would have his balls shot off.

But an ugliness on display now has just become increasingly worse. There is a lack of civility across the culture, one that is entrenched in politics, business and sport. Fans are no longer content to just go and watch a ball game. Somehow – and I suppose the teams have promoted this – they have this idea that they are part of the event itself. By buying a ticket, it is not enough for them to sit there and be entertained but they have to draw attention to themselves in some way. Regardless of who is in earshot – young children or old grandparents – it is the spirit of the American sports fan to stand up! And belch. ■

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