



Part of STAR's remit has been, and always will be, engaging with the club as well as the fans. As we've said time and again, the pandemic temporarily paused this ongoing working relationship. In the last few weeks, both parties have come together on a variety of occasions in a number of settings for various reasons.

This weekend saw me carry out a pre-planned and pre-discussed day going behind the scenes shadowing Safety Officer David Parker. This is something I was excited about on a number levels, not least because I would be able to see, first hand, how a match day operates and how much goes into the administering of the day. Of course, I didn't see the pre-planning, the meetings, the liaisons with the visiting club, the local police, the catering company, the outside vendors - that all happens in the week. Likewise, I didn't see the filling out of incident reports, the debrief with the stewards, the full clean up, the checking of every single seat in the stadium - that happens long after the bars around the ground have closed and every fan has left to head home.

The first thing to say is that David, both in the lead up to my visit and during the time I was (quite literally) shadowing him was nothing but open, honest and professional. This is a man, after all, who carries a huge responsibility on his shoulders every single time an event is held at the stadium. It is his responsibility to keep everyone safe. I know that, with comments on social media, the decisions taken by stewards and the safety are not always popular, but nothing I saw suggested the supposed "witch hunt" that certain fans who sit in certain areas feel is in place. And I don't just say that from David's perspective - everyone I spoke to, from match day stewards, to the Deputy Safety Officer, to Carl who staffs the cameras in the control room, to senior stewards, have everyone's best interests at heart in terms of safety. That doesn't mean that difficult decisions didn't have to be made during what was deemed to be a "low risk game", but they were done after careful consideration and what was best for the individual and the groups affected by, in my opinion, quite mindless behaviour.



When I first met David just before 10, he was kind enough to take me on his walk around the stadium, inside and out and answer all my mundane questions. It was a strange one walking round places I'd only heard of before: the changing rooms, the players' lounge, the office spaces where all the decisions for matchday are made and taken, the different concourses and the never-ending row of hospitality suites. We then spent some time discussing his role in preparing the referee's team from a safety point of view and how procedures would be followed in case of an emergency anywhere in the stadium. All fire exits and escapes were checked separately by the fire marshall and a full debrief between him and David occurred prior to kick off, but the amount of areas to be checked and analysed was never ending, or so it seemed. During a break in one of these checks, I was able to watch Hawkeye being installed in the goals, which was actually quite fascinating!

We then headed towards the corner South East corner, where David would first brief the senior stewards and supervisors, before bringing the main stewards (and myself) into the meeting room. David talked through the briefing document (which included some genuinely interesting information) and how Barnsley's fans had been over the past few games. This allowed for any potential flashpoints to be considered in advance and a discussion around the different coaches and who was on them was explained in detail.

Because of the layout of the stadium, the flashpoints, obviously tend to occur between the away fans and the home fans seated in Club 1871. I suppose, because of this, there are people who sit in that area of the home support who feel hard done by and victimized. Going into the game, I had no opinion on this: I live a sheltered life in the Dolan Stand because that's the matchday experience I've chosen for myself. Of course, like everyone, including the staff at the ground, I was frustrated with the events and the way it all played out against QPR, but this was an event in isolation and one that the club (of which every department had a role to play) has learnt from and has already put into place systems to stop such events occurring again in the future.

The stewards I spoke to were honest and open, of which one invited me back for another game to shadow him in the stadium itself. These people are fans of the club, they are fans of the fans but they have a legal duty of care to protect everyone in the stadium so that their matchday is as enjoyable as it can be. If you continually using foul language, you will be told not to. If you decided to use language which is deliberately intended to offend (a hate crime, basically) you will be ejected. In fact there was a tool box training input provided to staff prior to kick off which centred on hate crime. Fancy jumping on the blue netting? You won't stay in the ground. Deliberately trying to provoke other fans? You'll be ejected. These aren't rules that are made up on the spot: these are rules written very clearly in the stadium safety policy and supporters' code of conduct. The stewards are there to keep everyone safe. The bottom line is that if we don't have stewards, the game cannot be played, it's as simple as that. In a lot of respects, they are more important than the officials and the players. Certain clubs (of which I will not name them here) are very, very close to having their match day licenses revoked because they can't obtain the required number of stewards to keep the crowd safe each matchday.



Before the turnstiles opened at 1.30, David took me up to the control room, where he and I, along with his team, would spend the game watching the stands, whilst trying to keep one eye on the game. The control room is one of those places I've always wondered about and seeing it first hand was great. 60 plus cameras were on and ready to keep everyone safe and as they record all the time, they never miss anything and can zoom in and out as needed. One of the things that blew my mind was that the safety announcement wasn't recorded: it's always done live by a chap called Terry (who used to be Sir John's driver).

It didn't take long for the first ejection, from Club 106 and it was a man who was extremely drunk. The second, which came from an outside team, using the cameras to track and then eject someone who was involved in illegal betting streams (basically sending information to the far east for customers to bet on due to the time delay). This was then followed by many of the main cameras being trained on the Barnsley fans, a couple of which were clearly there to cause trouble, provoke other fans and be as difficult as possible towards the stewards. I could tell by the body language of them that they were not being polite, and I dread to think about the language they were using in person to the people in yellow and orange jackets. This resulted in the team being able to radio down to the ground team and pick out these individuals clearly and quickly and prevent any serious reaction from any other fans.



The first half wore on in terms of the pitch action, with no serious incidents on or off it (except the linesmen's desire to give Reading absolutely nothing in terms of offside decisions). A penalty claim was (wrongly) waived away, which bought plenty of gesturing, pointing and mocking from both sets of fans towards each other. As half time arrived, I went for a little wander along the media gantry in search of some free sandwiches, but I couldn't find any so I popped down to the concourse to grab a coffee and came back up (I needed the exercise to be fair!).

The second half produced some nervy moments on the pitch for Reading and the home fans nearest the away support became agitated and started to provoke the away fans, who responded by moving toward them, slowly but surely, sitting close to the netting that was there as a segregation tool. I asked if having the fans further away from each other was better or worse and David explained that it depended on the circumstances. If the distance is widened, it gives fans more of a chance to run at the other set and it can also lead to objects thrown. However by letting the fans getting within touching distance is a risky tactic and would be hard to defend if fans sustained injuries.

Reading scored late in the game, which sent the home fans into raptures. In his haste, a chap from the South Stand jumped onto the blue netting deliberately and spent a prolonged period of time gesturing to the away fans. Personally, I've never understood the need to goad the opposition fans instead of just enjoying the moment, but this guy was spotted pretty quickly and was removed from the stadium. Others did encroach onto the netting, but ultimately did not spend as much time as this guy did and quickly returned to their seats.

The final stages of the game, from a safety point of view, were spent stopping any flashpoints in the ground and monitoring both sets of fans and their reactions to the events on the pitch. Stewards were deployed between the two sets of fans to prevent any crossing over and to protect the camera man who was perched right up at the top of the South Stand! The game fizzled out on the pitch and no further action, from a safety point of view, was needed, with fans filing out sensibly into the evening. On a sour note, a fan from Club 1871 had his flag taken and I know the club are looking into this to get it back for him and find the person who took it.

All in all, it was a very positive day. I saw nothing that concerned me or that I felt was unjust in anyway. Although I'm not a security expert, I am pretty sure I know what is safe and what isn't and the kind of response I would expect if I wasn't being safe. Do I understand the criticism of the club in light of earlier games this season? Yes. Do I think all stewards are bad? No. Do I think that the club do their absolute best to keep everyone safe and treat people with respect, even in the face of terrible abuse? I do, absolutely. And to be honest, the only criticisms I can make are aimed at those of a very small percentage of the home and away fans, in particular those intent on watching and goading other fans rather than focusing their team play.

I live in the real world and understand that everyone has their own opinions, I'm a teacher by trade after all. But what I hope is that the fanbase, on the whole, can continue to work with our stewards (some of whom have worked at the club for 20 years or more) to make matchdays as positive, safe and exciting as they can, for every single person who enters the stadium for a game.

I'd like to place on record my thanks to David Parker, his team of safety officers, the Deputy Safety Officer and his team, Jackie Evans and the club as a whole for welcoming me to the ground to carry out this visit and for being open, honest and engaging throughout the entire I was there. I look forward to coming back this season to carry out a different role with a different department.



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