

Playing it safe

The construction of sports stadia impact on many aspects of the legal world, but arguably, says Simon Loveday of solicitors VizardsWyeth, the most critical role the law has to play is in relation to health and safety



A memorial at the Reebok Stadium (also pictured right) dedicated to the 33 people who were killed at Bolton's old ground, Burnden Park, in 1946

Once spectators and the players are within the confines of a stadium it is vital that they are in a safe environment.

There have been a number of disasters at football matches in the UK and more in other countries. The problems really came to a head in the 1980s, although there had been a number of earlier disasters, including 33 people killed at Bolton's old ground in 1946 and 66 fans trampled and crushed to death at Ibrox Park in 1971. Until the 1980s, football stadium safety was governed by the following legislation:

- The Green Guide – Safety in Sports Stadia 1973.
- Safety at Sports Grounds Act 1975

The above legislation placed the control of sports grounds with local authorities. Certain designated grounds, those with a capacity of over 10,000, had to obtain a safety certificate from the relevant authority.

In the 1980s widespread hooliganism began to plague football matches. In turn this led to erection of perimeter safety fences to confine fans and keep them away from the pitch. In 1985 there was a fire at Bradford City stadium and 55 people burned to death. A key factor was the inability to climb the perimeter fence to escape the fire or the ensuing crush to leave the stadium. In 1986 there followed a tragedy at Heysel Stadium in Belgium. Fighting between Juventus and Liverpool fans led a wall to collapse and crush 39 fans to death. Following the Bradford disaster there also followed The Fire Safety and Places of Safety of Sports Act 1987, which made it the duty of local authorities to enforce the Act. In particular, covered stands with a capacity of 500 or over joined the "designated grounds" required to obtain a safety certificate.

In 1989 at Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield, 96 fans were crushed to death against perimeter fencing at an FA

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Cup semi-final when two stands became overcrowded.

The Bradford and Hillsborough disasters led to the publication of the Popplewell Report 1986 and the Taylor Report 1990 which made the following key recommendations:

- All-seater stadia for Premier/Division One leagues by 1995
- Reduced capacity in all stadia with terracing.
- Increased safety elements such as barriers, monitored entrances and exits, and clear signage
- Removal of perimeter fencing
- Adequately manned gates, opening onto pitch
- Removal of stands/seats made from flammable materials
- Adequate stewarding and sufficient training of stewards
- Segregation of supporters
- Closed circuit TV and full-time monitoring from a control box
- Enhanced

The Kassam Stadium: a case study

The Kassam Stadium (pictured right), now home to Oxford United FC, has been built at a cost of £15 million, has a capacity of 12,500, and is a state-of-the-art stadium, complete with ground breaking multi purpose playing field. Originally started in the mid 1990s, building work was halted when the club ran out of money. In 1998 London hotelier Firoz Kassam bought the club, but his plans to restart building work were thwarted for two years due to legal problems.

The club was left in £500,000 debt to Oxford City Council as part of an agreement signed in 1999, when planning permission was granted, although agreement was later reached. It had also been agreed that payments would be made to help improve the surrounding Blackbird Leys area, including pedestrian access, transport infrastructure, controlled parking and security measures.



On top of construction work being compliant with Health and Safety legislation, the resultant costs of building new stadia show that it is not a task to be undertaken lightly.



communications between control box staff and stewards

As a direct result of these reports, in particular the Taylor Report, many clubs were steered rapidly towards the completion of completely redeveloped stadiums or relocation to new stadia.

Since 1990 more than 30 football clubs have either moved to new stadia built either on 'brownfield' sites or out of town greenfield sites, or have redeveloped their original sites.

In addition, the capacity designated grounds governed by The Safety of Sports Grounds Act 1975 was again

reduced in 1996 to 5,000 spectators for all sports stadia in which association football is played and which is occupied by a club that is a member of the Football League Limited or the Football Association Premier League Limited.

Football stadia redevelopment or relocation is aided by the Football Foundation – a Government body funded by Pools revenue, and perhaps just as well given that the safety requirements have meant construction has often overrun timescales and financial budgets, Oxford (see panel opposite page) and Wembley (below) being cases in point.

