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Match-going mood killers?

By Chris Whyatt

You know something is up when even Mr Man United himself compares the atmosphere inside Old Trafford with a "funeral".

Sir Alex Ferguson's complaint came after Manchester United scraped past Birmingham on Tuesday - but it is not just his beloved, 75,000-plus "Theatre of Dreams" that is left reeling.

Ferguson's explosive comments have triggered a bout of soul-searching up and down the country as, like a naughty pupil who has been admonished by the headmaster, clubs and fans ponder whether their behaviour needs improving.

The Premier League may have glamour and passion on the pitch. And billions of pounds ploughed into it off the pitch.

But is the atmosphere within the hallowed stadiums in which top-flight English football is played diseased? Is it in danger of becoming, as Ferguson observed, "dead"?



Many fans feel the atmosphere could be better at their games

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BBC Sport spoke to prominent voices from supporters within eight clubs to dig deeper into the issue.

IS THERE REALLY A PROBLEM?

The man who has seen it all in British football, the most successful manager of the modern era, certainly thinks so.

Ferguson - usually entrenched in the dug-out - noticed the lack of voice from Old Trafford's 75,459 crowd after watching the match from the directors' box as part of a two-match touchline ban.

"That was the quietest I have heard the crowd, it was like a funeral," he said. "There are some situations when we need them to get behind us and give us a lift."

"The players need the crowd sometimes but the atmosphere inside the ground wasn't good."

Middlesbrough Official Supporters Club chairwoman Sue Gardener certainly thinks they the problem is endemic.

"I see it a problem throughout Premier League football," she said. "It's a two-way thing between the team and the supporters."



Some fans feel fellow supporters demand results without contributing

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"Yes, fans want to be entertained, but with a lot of corporate fans going to the matches now, and with the all-seater grounds, it's having a ripple effect on the atmosphere."

Liam Cooper, spokesperson for Wigan Athletic Supporters Club, is also of the opinion that the atmosphere within top-flight football can be stale.

"In the Premier League now, there's a lot more riding on games," he said. "People go and they just want results."

WHY IS THE ATMOSPHERE SUFFERING?

Where on earth do you start? Maybe 1992. Football has changed beyond recognition since pre-Premier League days. And thus the answers are like the roots of an ancient oak tree - deeply-rooted and complex.

"At Elm Park the singing fans used to be along the side of the pitch under a corrugated roof that made the sound bounce well," remembers Paula Martin, chairman of the Reading Supporters' Trust.

"When you go into a nice bowl stadium it just seems to dissipate and always makes the away fans sound louder, partially because we're spread out more."

With a flurry of clubs moving to swanky new grounds in the past decade or so - Reading, Arsenal, Middlesbrough, Arsenal, Southampton, Manchester City, Bolton, Wigan, Derby - it is clear that upping sticks initially takes its toll.

Fans are also now questioning the motives of their clubs, with the attraction of corporate supporters coming at the expense of the atmosphere which the fans hold dear.

A lot of clubs go for the corporate image. Boxes are more important to them

Navid Nazir
Villa Fans Combined

"Roy Keane was right when he said the 'prawn sandwich' brigade have taken over," says Navid Nazir, founder member of Villa Fans Combined.

"A lot of clubs now go for the corporate image and the boxes are more important to them than the bread and butter fans."

According to most clubs' fans, the nature of all-seater stadia - with specific seats allocated primarily to season ticket holders - means that sitting next to big group of similarly vocal supporters is rare, and thus creating a rousing atmosphere even rarer.

"Since the all-seater era, with games mainly sold out to season ticket holders since the ground was redeveloped, some games are great - if the team puts on a performance and everybody's up for it," says Mark Jensen, editor of Newcastle fanzine The Mag.

"But there isn't one significant part of the ground where the atmosphere starts, which used to happen in the old

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Chelsea - renovation

days, when people would congregate.

"You have a group of 10 or so lads drinking in the city centre and singing as they make their way to the ground, but when they get there, three go that way, three go the other, and four drift off on their own.

"There is a great atmosphere in the pubs, but it doesn't continue inside the ground."

Jensen also jovially points out, without any negativity, that the broader demographic of modern football has quite naturally diluted some of its boisterous force.

"These lads get inside and they are sat next to a granny or a couple with kids. At the minute there isn't a natural way for people that are like-minded to be together."

Money talks ever louder in football and this, says Nigel Tresidder, chairman of Portsmouth Supporters' Club, is a large reason why some supporters rest on their laurels when it come to encouraging their team.

"There is so much money in the game now that the fans are expecting more out of the players," he said.

"The fans pay so much money to go. Those that can still afford it, they are expecting to see more. If a player is on £120,000 and you are paying £40 to see them, how do you get behind them if they don't perform?"

I think it depends upon which team we are playing and, more importantly, how our team is playing

Sue Gardener
Middlesbrough Supporters' Club

Paul Matz, chairman of the Arsenal Independent Supporters Association, says that the substantial rise in ticket prices - and not enabling people to stand safely - have contributed to the falling ambience at football grounds.

But whatever the reason, most fans seem agreed on one common point.

As Middlesbrough supporter Sue Gardener puts it: "I think it depends upon which team we are playing and, more importantly, how our team is playing."

WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

One thing, is quite clear: it is not all doom and gloom.

In fact, a number of clubs, having adapted to the edicts of the Taylor Report in 1990 and responded to challenges faced by new grounds or the changed face of football, are now enjoying lively atmospheres.

"It used to be a problem," says Nazir of VFC, "but not since Villa changed their policy."

"Behind the North Stand we



used to have the away fans, 3-4,000 behind the goal and it was difficult, because you used to hear them more than the Villa fans.

"Now they have made the whole of the North Stand Villa-fans only and they have moved the away fans to a corner of the old Doug Ellis Stand.

"Having fans behind both goals now has improved the atmosphere at Villa Park a hell of a lot."

Wigan fanatic Liam Cooper says: "A lot of our fans have moved into the corner of the East Stand at the JJB.

"It's almost always full every game and that's where all the noise comes from. It does generate a good atmosphere and is definitely an improvement from last season.

"In fact, the atmosphere has been really good at recent games.

"It may seem a bit last ditch, but someone has now brought a drum to the games. Most people hate them but, really, it does generate atmosphere."

Manchester City Official Supporters' Club representative Kevin Parker says noise is building at Eastlands - and not purely because of the Sven-Goran Eriksson revolution.

"Over the last couple of seasons, things have dramatically improved, especially since City introduced the specific singing section where you can buy a season ticket there," he said.

"What that does is generate atmosphere that builds all around the rest of the stadium.

The supporters' groups must work to ensure atmosphere is improved. The club, in turn, need to ensure not everything in football is money-driven

"They were concerned at first that singing would be restricted within that area but the opposite has happened and its improved the atmosphere throughout the stadium."

Paul Matz
Arsenal Independent Supporters'
Association

Perhaps the final word should go to Paul Matz, talking about what happens when 60,000 Gooners gather to watch the pulse-setting league leaders Arsenal.

"The atmosphere at the Emirates Stadium is improving all the time," he insists.

"We have a fantastic supporters' group called RedAction, who are leading the drive to improve the atmosphere and it's getting better with every match.

"RedAction have a section of the ground reserved for them, they work closely with the club and that area is noticeably noisier and that gradually spreads to the rest of the stadium.

"The solutions are to have ticket prices of all ranges. It's great to have the expensive seats but there must also be seats affordable to everybody.

"Then the supporters' groups must work to ensure

atmosphere is improved. The club, in turn, need to ensure not everything in football is money-driven."

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