



Auditteam Voetbal en Veiligheid

When the Smoke Has Cleared

A Study of Fireworks in Professional Football

Summary

About the 'Auditteam Voetbal en Veiligheid'

The 'Auditteam Voetbal en Veiligheid' (Audit Team Football and Safety, AVV) is an independent partnership in the Netherlands that supports municipalities, the Police, the Public Prosecution Service, the 'Koninklijke Nederlandse Voetbalbond' (Royal Dutch Football Association, KNVB), professional football organizations, and the national government in strengthening safety and public order in the context of professional football. From this independent position, the Audit Team Football and Safety conducts practice oriented research and provides advice on current safety issues.

Background and Mandate

The Audit Team Football and Safety investigated the illegal use of fireworks by fans in Dutch professional football. The motivation for this investigation is threefold: the persistent nature of the problem, the growing public concern about the safety and health risks posed by fireworks, and the political debate over a nationwide ban on fireworks. Despite previous agreements between professional football organizations, the Police, municipalities, the Public Prosecution Service, and the national government, illegal fireworks remain a recurring phenomenon in and around stadiums.

The central question of this study is:

"What is the nature, extent, and impact of the illegal use of fireworks in professional football, and what options are available—particularly in light of changing legislation—to reduce its negative effects?"

Research Approach

The study combines various research methods. In addition to an extensive national and international literature review, data records were analyzed, four case studies were examined, observations were conducted, and 51 respondents from twelve public and private organizations were interviewed. Furthermore, a large-scale survey of over 22,000 fans was utilized. This combination of sources provides a comprehensive picture of both the nature of fireworks use and the underlying mechanisms, as well as opportunities for an effective approach.

Key Findings

The study shows that fireworks in professional football are a complex and persistent safety issue. Over the past three seasons, there has been an average of one recorded fireworks incident per three matches. Although the number of recorded incidents appears to be declining in recent years, the current recording system provides only limited insight into the actual scope, severity, and impact of the problem. After all, a single record may refer to either a single smoke bomb or a large-scale, carefully planned pyrotechnic display.

Within certain segments of fan culture, particularly among so-called ultra groups and hardcore fan bases, fireworks play a significant role in identity, group formation, and overall experience. Pyrotechnic use by supporters is often found to be systematically organized. This involves a division of labor, joint financing, international procurement, innovative smuggling methods, and centralized coordination during matches. Social media plays a key role in preparation, mutual competition, and visibility.

At the same time, the research shows that fireworks have long since ceased to be merely a means of creating atmosphere. They pose substantial safety and health risks to fans, stewards, players, and emergency services. Smoke, fire hazards, panic, hearing damage, respiratory problems, and game interruptions are now among the recurring consequences. In addition, supporters are increasingly using fireworks during disturbances and protests outside the stadium, deliberately pushing the boundaries.

It is striking that most Dutch fans oppose the illegal use of fireworks. 71% of them would rather seek out alternative ways to create a festive atmosphere, such as displaying more banners, fireworks shows organized by football clubs themselves, flags, light or laser shows, and (live) music and performances.

Only a quarter of the fans consider fireworks to enhance the atmosphere, while many fans point out the safety and health risks and the negative consequences for their club. This shows that the perception that fireworks are widely supported within the fan community is incorrect.

Fireworks as a Broader Social Issue

A key conclusion of the study is that fireworks are not exclusively a football problem. The groups responsible for large-scale fireworks displays are often also involved in other forms of antisocial or criminal behavior. Football thus regularly serves as a stage on which broader social issues come to light. The issue touches on public order, group dynamics, crime, and social polarization and therefore requires a comprehensive approach in which multiple partners work together.

Evaluation of the Current Approach

The Audit Team Football and Safety concludes that many elements of an effective approach have been known for years. National agreements were reached on this matter in 2018. The main shortcoming, therefore, lies not in a lack of plans, but in their implementation. Ownership was found to be insufficiently established, agreements were not consistently honored, and the parties involved did not hold each other sufficiently accountable for their responsibilities. As a result, insufficient structural progress has been made.

Furthermore, the study shows that enforcement alone is not sufficiently effective. The strong cultural entrenchment of fireworks within certain fan groups calls for a broader strategy in which standard-setting, prevention, communication, enforcement, technological innovation, investigation, and cooperation reinforce one another.

Recommendations

The Audit Team Football and Safety advocates for a sustainable, nationwide, and comprehensive approach in which all parties involved assume long-term responsibility. The key recommendations are:

- establish national coordination, monitoring, and clear ownership;
- improve incident reporting so that not only the numbers but also the impact and degree of organization are visible;
- increase the likelihood of apprehension through technological innovation, better access controls, and enhanced investigation;
- target interventions at different groups within the fan community;
- communicate more emphatically about the health and safety risks of fireworks;
- combine dialogue with fans (about alternatives) with consistent enforcement based on the “high trust, high penalty” principle;
- use the upcoming nationwide fireworks ban as an opportunity to establish a clear standard and ensure consistent enforcement;
- explicitly view illegal fireworks as part of broader safety and social issues.

Concluding Remarks

The study shows that there is no simple solution to the fireworks issue in professional football. However, the complexity of the problem should not be an excuse for inaction. The most important task lies not in developing new plans, but in the long-term and consistent implementation of existing agreements, strengthening cooperation, and jointly taking responsibility. Only an integrated approach in which prevention, standard-setting, investigation, and enforcement complement one another offers the prospect of a structural reduction in the illegal use of fireworks and a safer, more welcoming, and more accessible professional football environment.

Colofon

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