

Football fans must take the lead in the fight against racism

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In the wake of the racist behaviour of a group of Chelsea supporters on the Paris Métro last week, a range of excellent critical commentaries emerged, pondering what these actions signified and how English football should respond. The [argument has been made](#) in the Guardian newspaper that a range of organisations need to intensify and co-ordinate their efforts in eradicating racism from the professional game: clubs, the Football Association, the Premier League and UEFA. In reality, though, it will all boil down to one crucial part of the game: the fans.

The majority of real football supporters have been outraged by the events in Paris. Indeed, they are prepared to articulate, publicly or online, their concerns over broader racial injustices in football, especially when they affect their own clubs. Opposition to Lee Bowyer's [transfer to West Ham United](#) in 2003 and the appointment of Malky Mackay [as manager of Wigan Athletic](#) last year are cases in point. There is also [now a smartphone app](#) that allows anonymous reporting of racist incidents, enabling monitoring and retrospective action.

However, directly and immediately challenging the racism that still occurs at English grounds, and on the way to and from matches, remains a different proposition, even if incidents occur more sporadically than in the past.

Stand up, speak up

The difficulties facing those many individuals appalled by the racist speech acts and behaviours of other football fans are apparent. Unfortunately the tribal ethos of football fandom makes some supporters feel that they cannot, or should not, speak out against their fellow fans.

Other factors are perhaps easier to acknowledge and accept. For instance, challenging bigots head-on requires guts and certainly benefits from a critical mass of support. It is also arguably easier for those individuals whose identities reflect the dominant demographic of the crowd – white males – to oppose racism, with those who do not fit this profile understandably anxious about how their difference might become the target for further abuse.



A thankless task? [rob colonna](#), CC BY-SA

Crowd stewards, many of whom are themselves from minority ethnic backgrounds, often lack the power to prevent prejudicial behaviours. With [police officers taking a back seat](#) inside grounds, fans are left fundamentally to regulate themselves. Yet one of the crucial, if overdue, observations of the incident in France was that the multicultural spectacle on the pitch and elite clubs' diverse global fanbases have become more distant from the demographic of match-going followers than ever.

While statistics suggest that football crowds are [becoming slowly more ethnically diverse](#), they are still overwhelmingly white and male, with an

average age of over 40. Live football fandom remains a peculiarly exclusive activity.

Combined with [a re-emerging culture of laddishness](#), and residual ones of misogyny and homophobia, this can inhibit the existence of a progressive politics found in other areas of popular culture.

Leading by example

Then there is the very serious issue of fans feeling disillusioned in their capacity to challenge racism in the stands. It is understandable that they may feel unsupported by lip-service-paying authorities, or lack faith in a positive outcome being achieved, given the negligible punishments enforced when their idols on the pitch, in the dugout or in the boardroom behave in such a way.

As the World Soccer website [pointed out last week](#), Chelsea's public condemnation of their supporters' behaviour in Paris seems a world away from their steadfast and stubborn [defence of their captain, John Terry](#), even after he had been found guilty in 2012 by an FA commission of racially abusing Anton Ferdinand.



John Terry takes issue with a decision. [Ronnie Macdonald, CC BY](#)

Silence can represent opposition to racist chants; a refusal to validate the perpetrator's presence and intentions. But the absence of opposition might also be read, even if mistakenly, as complicity. A few years ago I rebuked a group of young followers of the Premier League club which I follow, who I encountered chanting racist slogans outside Wembley before an FA Cup semi-final. My objection was met with incredulity, with one teenager asking me, "What's your problem mate? You're as white as we are."

As [Lesley Houtts Picca and Joe Feagin highlight](#), certain forms of racism occur when individuals interpret their surroundings as signifying a value consensus, and believe their actions will not cause offence or be resisted. At Wembley, these young people were wrong on all counts.

In the early 1990s, when the majority of English football's dominant institutions looked the other way, a small number of fan groups at different clubs took the lead in creating an anti-racist presence. This involved challenging overt racism on the terraces, opposing the sale of Far Right publications outside grounds and producing fanzines with a distinct anti-racist ethos. Without such activist collectives, the climate and political space for nationwide initiatives such as [Kick It Out](#) and [Show Racism The Red Card](#) to exist would not have been possible.

A quarter of a century on, the anti-racist football movement has changed immeasurably. It has become formalised and institutionalised. Such a transformation has enabled anti-racist campaigns to achieve many successes and the profile of anti-discrimination work has been raised exponentially.

However, these processes have also seen notions of everyday anti-racism move inadvertently away from the identities, proclivities and involvement of the average fan. For those who are politically inclined, new times present new issues, such as [opposing ticket prices](#) or the corporate negligence of club owners. Others perceive that the battle has been won amid a supposed shift to "post-racial" times. Within probably the largest segment, a casual apathy towards anything that impinges on their leisure time and the spectacle of the game prevails. This complacency needs to be challenged and anti-racism returned to the forefront of fan agendas.

Professional clubs, the Football Association, the Premier League and UEFA may have the power and institutional clout to enforce the penalties that could make a difference, but if the fight against racism in the stands is to be won,

then fans must be positioned, as my colleague Mark Doidge notes, “[at the vanguard of anti-discrimination](#)”.

We have the numbers to make a difference. History tells us that fighting for social justice is often most successful when it is organic, populist and involves a bottom-up approach; an anti-racism that is cultural as much as institutional.