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Ryan Radmall
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, ryan.radmall@unlv.edu

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Fans Gone Wild: 
An Interdisciplinary Review of Spectator Violence

Ryan L. Radmall, Logan P. Kennedy & Tamara D. Herold
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Department of Criminal Justice

Spectator Violence
Spectator violence refers to physical violence that occurs at special events within entertainment venues. This phenomenon can be problematic for event attendees, promoters, and security at these events. Madensen and Eck (2008) note six common forms of spectator aggression:

1. Verbal violence includes singing, chanting, and yelling taunts or obscenities.
2. Gesturing includes signaling to others with threatening or obscene motions.
3. "Missile" throwing refers to throwing items at specific or random targets.
4. Swarming includes rushing an area to try and gain access.
5. Property destruction refers to the intentional damaging of venue or other’s property.
6. Physical aggression includes any type of physical violence or force being used against another individual.

Factors Related to Spectator Violence
Madensen and Eck (2008) characterize factors associated with spectator violence according to three categories: venue, event and staff characteristics.

Venue
Physical characteristics of venue and external environment that promote or reduce violence.

Event
Cultural characteristics and details of the event that promote or reduce violence.

Staff
Characteristics and behaviors of the individuals managing the event that promote or reduce violence.

Fan Identification Theory
Fan Identity Theory claims that sports fans feel an in-group connection to teams or individuals and their success in matches. Highly identified fans feel a sense of personal victory from their team’s successes and a sense of personal loss resulting from team failures. In this way, the emotions of heavily identified sports fans can alter in response to participating in spectator sports (Devlin, Billings & Leeper, 2017). Fan identification has often been proven to be a significant predictor of aggression during sporting events (Devlin, Billings & Leeper, 2017). Fan identification can also apply to individual athletes, not just teams as a whole (Brown et al., 2013), and has been linked to sporting events because of the nature of physical competition (Andrew, et al., 2009).

Highly identified fans:
- Are more commonly young, male (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2010), sensation-seeking individuals (Brown et al., 2013),
- Typically engage in higher rates of aggression and feel less in control of their actions at sporting events than other types of spectators (Dimmock & Grove, 2005).
- Engage in significantly more in-group-protective behaviors such as blasting and booing than low-identification spectators, particularly in response to a team loss (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2010).

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)
Seungmu, Greenwell, Andrew, Lee, and Mahony (2008) argue that violence is a major motive for fans to attend MMA events. However, it is unknown whether violent tendencies of fighters translate into spectator violence. According to Cheever (2009), approximately 60% of MMA fans surveyed online had engaged in street fights at some point in their life and more than half reported feeling like fighting after viewing MMA (55%). Like many other sports, it is believed that fan identification may play a large part in the probability of violence during MMA events (Brown, Devlin, & Billings, 2013).

Similarly, MMA marketing has hinged on displays of hypermasculinity and primitive images of violence (Ferrari, 2013). This works to symbolically reinforce the naturalization of aggression within the sport (Ferrari, 2013). However, recent research has indicated that as more women have been drawn to the sport by the creation of women’s divisions and a developing roster of women fighters have emerged, shifts in advertising and promotion materials have become less violent (Greenwell, Thor, & Simmons, 2015), and have been marked by a natural affinity to one’s gender (Greenwell, Hancock, Simmons, & Thor, 2015). In examining 57 pieces of artwork used for promotional materials by MMA organizations, Greenwell, Thor, and Simmons (2015) have noted that only 13.4 percent contained violent text or imagery and only 21 percent of news releases contained violent content. These findings indicate that the presence of women fighters in the sport of MMA has lead to more female fans and less violence in advertising and promotional materials.

A Comparative View of Spectator Violence
Akin to the unruly American MMA fan is the term “football hooliganism” which is associated with spectator violence at international soccer matches. Much of the research exploring violence at international soccer matches predominantly focuses on unruly soccer fans (Dunning, Murphy, & Williams, 1986). Dunning et al. (1986) draw a connection between English soccer teams and violence at events, claiming that fans of these teams tend to engage in higher rates of violence. This is largely due to high identification within these fan bases. Highly identified football hooligans have been characterized as a “muscular, shaven-headed and tattooed Englishman” that is covered in blood and often restrained by police “who appear as menacing cyborgs in black helmets and body armour” (Stott & Pearson, 2007). This description paints an alarming picture of violence and disorder that characterizes spectator violence in Europe.

Future Directions/Policy Implications
Future research should work to:
- Identify common characteristics of unruly fans in order to determine methods for reducing spectator violence
- Understand the differences in spectator violence between masculine and feminine characteristics
- Further explore the effect of fan identity on spectator violence
- Examine the effect of both sanctioned and unsanctioned athlete violence on spectator violence
- Compare across different sports and types of events in order to understand patterns of spectator violence
- Develop comprehensive measures, methods, and models for predicting spectator violence

Photo retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMLrWRULo8k