



End Soccer Hooliganism with a Dose of Property Rights

Owner-Less Clubs to Blame for Rampant Violence, Says Cato Institute Scholar

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Across Latin America, violence in professional soccer matches is a deep-seated problem, and a solution is nowhere on the horizon.

Young and old join the world of *barra bravas*, the hooligans who forget soccer is just a sport, and turn it into a matter of life or death. When passions overcome reason, the rights of others go out the window.

In Argentina, Let's Save Soccer keeps track of violent deaths in local soccer matches: 307 deaths over roughly 100 years. However, about 20 percent took place just in the last five years.

Peruvian lawyer Enrique Ghersi, head of the Legal Studies and Research Center and adjunct scholar with the Cato Institute, thinks there is a way out. He sat down with the *PanAm Post* to talk about the roots of violence in soccer and how the discipline of law and economics can address the issue.

Why has the problem of *barra bravas* grown over the last years?

It's a consequence of the lack of property rights in soccer. While in other sports it is clear who is the owner of a team, in soccer, sadly, teams don't have an owner. There are a few cases where soccer teams that are owned by individuals or shareholders.

They are what the lawyers call a general partnership, a group of people who come together for a nonprofit purpose, namely to promote sports. This creates a fuzzy situation: when an institution has no owner, the economic problem known as the tragedy of the commons emerges. A good is over-consumed and begins to be depleted.

What do you think of anti-hooligan legislation that fines soccer teams for fans' bad behavior or bans the away-team's fans from a particular stadium?

None of them have been effective. Actually, the only one that has succeeded is the English response, which was strictly based on policing efforts. The British government ordered the very efficient British police officers to rein in soccer violence. They detained the hooligan gang

leaders and invited them to see the match at the police station, keeping them away from stadiums.

But the British experiment couldn't be replicated in other places.

In some countries like Argentina, the authorities tried to implement a more elaborated method that, for example, takes away tournament points from the team that incited riots and assigns them to its rival.

When they started to enforce it, the *barra bravas* disguised themselves as the opposing team and set fires in the stadium. It became a strategy to secure points that the team would have otherwise lost.

To me this method doesn't solve the problem. We need to strike at the root of the problem, and that is a legal reform that would allow property rights to enter soccer teams.`

What's your proposal then?

I advocate for a legal reform: turning soccer teams into a public limited company, so they can have an owner.

But wouldn't "privatizing" soccer teams cause an aversive reaction from fans, members, and managers?

Well, teams are already private, so saying that teams are being privatized is incorrect. The proposal is to create a clear system of property rights.

Currently, teams are private yet owner-less organizations. They are a no man's land where the strongest comes on top. The best way to change this is to set a structure of property rights that prevents violence from deciding the present and future of soccer clubs.

This is what is happening with soccer teams. Since they don't have owners, no one can be held responsible, and the managers get their support from the violent fans. The *barras bravas* act as their private arm. The problem affects individual clubs up to the sport's governing body, FIFA. Look at all the corruption going on in professional soccer.

Is it fair to blame soccer teams for their fans' violence?

Well, in a way, violence is a consequence [of clubs]. If soccer clubs had an owner, this problem wouldn't exist. Consider other sports. The only one with a problem such as the *barra bravas* is soccer. Even in sports closely related like rugby, there are no hooligans. No one sets a rugby, football, or basketball stadium on fire. Only soccer suffers from violence.

Why? Because hockey teams, basketball teams, and rugby teams all have an owner. When there is no owner, *barras bravas* take over clubs. The exclusion [of others from the clubs] is done through violence, and that creates a perverse system of incentives that ends up destroying not only the show, but physical safety in stadiums.