

Why Is There One On Every Bus?

Prologue

Football and trouble have always gone together, but certain fans attract it more than others. Anyone who has ever been to a match must have wondered what it is about the male condition that means 'there's one on every bus'.

The question has specific relevance for me. I was 28 and in a 6 year relationship with a 'nice girl' when I came out as gay. At school in 1980s small town Scotland, gay was so wrong, so outlandish, it wasn't even on the agenda to be dismissed. I'm always asked "How did you find out?" It was not a sudden revelation. It was a process of several years but I can pinpoint the start; the trigger: it was my first fight as an adult, at Ibrox. The trigger unquestionably violence not sex.

Looking back, it's no surprise I ended up a masochistic gay skinhead; happiest under a bigger man's boots. Oink.

It is true - there is one on every bus. And if each bus holds 50 guys, and Ibrox Stadium holds 50 000, then there are 1000 at every match. Maybe things have changed, it was almost 30 years ago. The spring sky almost as blue as the throng of shirts and scarves that made their way from north, south, east and west to watch two teams battle for a white sphere on an acre of grass on the west of the city. But why? The interest in 22 men on that acre of green is out of all proportion to the event itself. Why, week after week, do thousands make that pilgrimage, often unaffordable, for an event cheap – if not free - to view by television?

Here is not the place for an analysis on football and the male psyche; volumes have been written on that already, but to understand this story, you will need to understand the context, especially as, despite being one of the pilgrims, I hate football.

In the endless recession of the 1980s, post industrial west central Scotland was a depressing, hopeless kind of place to grow up. Reserved and essentially conservative, Scottish working class manhood was never very good with its emotions. Take away the factory floor and the assembly line, the steelworks and the mine, and you take away the few spaces where sodality can exist and men can express themselves.

Why are those spaces important?

Firstly, like it or not, men are fundamentally tribal. It is not perhaps the most attractive of facets. There is a degree of power exchange; squabbling to establish supremacy. But, left to ourselves, without the confines of polite society, a hierarchy will emerge, though not necessarily democratic or fair. Most men would rather be in that hierarchy, even right at the bottom, than outside it. The value of brotherhood is high, and the bruises collected on its bottom rungs are worn with pride rather than shame. At the close of the last century, football provided one of the last spaces where men could be tribal; where we could be men.

Secondly, society expects better behaviour. The anonymity of a football crowd gave me (and thousands like me) a safety valve: a space to behave antisocially with impunity for 90 minutes a week.

The Saturday in spring, 199* is the same as any other, except my payday pocket is somewhat lighter than usual. I had bought a ring and intended that evening to propose marriage. One little question would propel me inexorably to the aspiration of a semi-detached house in suburbia, 2.4 kids and a Ford Sierra on the driveway. GULP.

But it is only noon, kick-off is 3pm, and a mere 30 miles and 60 minutes by road separates my village from Ibrox Stadium, home of Glasgow Rangers FC.

The bus contains only the most undesirable demographic of society – white and male. Cropped hair, tattoos, muscles, boots, football shirts and scarves in blue. But even macho is not homogeneous and we could be split roughly into three groups.

- The 'traditional fans' complete with replica top and scarf.

- The much flashier and altogether better looking, smarter, 'casuals' - Chinos, Ralph Lauren, Pringle, Barbour. But don't let looks deceive. This group might *look* much more respectable but they are dressed to kill with an attitude to match.

- And then us misfits at the back. Punks, boots n' braces skinheads and even a goth – refugees from a bygone age of fashion.

The 'one on every bus?' No. Not me. But like me a skinhead. Picking pointless arguments about nothing with anyone. That he would end up fighting with one of his own team before the full time whistle was a nap. In fact it was something of a rite of passage to anyone new joining the supporters' bus. Despite sustained provocation since the start of the season, I had no trouble but had watched him repeatedly pick on others until they finally bit back. The result was seldom more than a half hearted exchange of punches, or memorably an almighty full face slap, but nothing serious.

Although football violence was a hot topic in the press, real trouble between rivals was seldom and restricted to one of a few other notable firms like Aberdeen or Hibs. The exception being 'old firm' matches when Rangers met their city and religious rivals, Celtic. Protestant meets Catholic. Then there are no bystanders and even the meekest picks a side. But low-level trouble, in our case literally 'blue on blue' between our own supporters was much more common.

Local regulations discouraged alcohol on supporters' buses. Enforcement, however, was only a reality within the city boundaries. Consequently by the time we left the jurisdiction of Central Scotland Police and entered Strathclyde Constabulary, 10 miles from our destination, our drink was drunk and so were we.

FOLLOW FOLLOW WE WILL FOLLOW RANGERS

Fifty lusty voices, tuneful? - no. United? - to a man.

UP THE FALLS DERRYS WALLS WE WILL FOLLOW ON.

Just as our fathers had before; the road they had followed was now a motorway, but the sentiment was the same.

DUNDEE HAMILTON FUCK THE POPE AND THE VATICAN

And so was the hate and the sectarianism. This was the afternoon it was safe to give vent to the frustrations and anger that had been growing dangerous all week behind polite society's fragile veneer.

IF THEY GO TO DUBLIN WE WILL FOLLOW ON.

(Would you believe that it's no longer legal to sing those words. WTF?)

The atmosphere is growing more charged with every mile. Aggression isn't the right word. But it's not the wrong word.

U. D. A. - ALL THE WAY - FUCK THE POPE AND THE IRA

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The 'one on every bus' - his name is Spud. Because he is. A total spanner. At the moment he is representing a low level nuisance by slapping my leg every alternate syllable of the chorus. It is conventional to slap your own thigh or stamp out the tune. Less conventional to slap someone else.

Let it pass.

HULLO HULLO WE ARR THE BILLY BOYS

The HULLOs are always shouted rather than sung. It's better if they are not shouted in your face.

HULLO HULLO YOU'LL KNOW US BY OUR NOISE

I'm shouting back in his face. I'm biting. Reacting when I know I shouldn't.

UP TO THE KNEES IN FENIEN BLOOD SURRENDER OR YOU'LL DIE

We are eyeing each other - reasonably evenly - in what has become a grotesque serenade.

Spud is bigger than me. He is carrying weight but not necessarily muscle. I'm lean, but what there is of me is fit. At 5'7" I'm shorter than him, but still 160lbs of stocky Scottish skinhead. If you multiplied power by weight we are probably evenly matched.

For the last 20 miles a low-level struggle had been going on between us; a struggle to dominate the cramped legroom available on football buses. I have a window seat. He sat next to me. This afforded him the comfort and space of the central aisle. Rather than take advantage of that, his splayed legs were deliberately cramping me against the window. Now sitting splay-legged for more than a couple of miles is uncomfortable, and so an unspoken struggle had been going on for most of the journey. He moved, I occupied, I moved, he occupied. It would have been an easy resolution for either of us to have simply sat somewhere else, but that would have involved an element of backing down (remember what I said about hierarchy?) and we were both too close in age and size to concede.

Crossing the Kingston Bridge and off the motorway. Finally arrive at Ibrox.

When we got off the bus four things happened in quick succession.

If I had been a little more sober, I would have been a little less reactionary, and would have stopped it before it started but, that wasn't how it happened. This was:

1. I alighted the bus, lit a fag and began walking across the waste ground towards the stadium.
2. Spud alighted behind me and took a 'playful?' and unexpected kick at my heels, causing me to stumble.
3. He then gave me a slap across the back of the head and sprinted a few steps in front.
4. I first lost my cigarette and then my composure. I turned my stumble into a dive at the back of his legs.

My shoulder caught him behind his right knee and down he went. There was an almighty mocking cheer from behind us.

Now the wisdom of this action was more than questionable. Having brought him to the ground was one thing, but I had started something that I now had no option but to finish.

He, of course was delighted with the result. He had provoked the physical conflict he wanted.

I really had not thought this through. I should have been straightway on his back with the element of surprise, but fatally I paused at my own reckless anger. This gave him enough time to spin round to face me. Momentum now his and we were both on the deck. I had caught his right wrist with my left hand thus blocking his attempt to land a punch and I was now grappling to keep hold of it. His advantage of weight saw him on top of me, but my advantage of a free right hand allowed me to push against his throat and reverse the situation. Although my weight was now on top of his, the absence of friction from the sheer nylon of our thin replica football shirts had us slipping over each other like eels and my victory was short-lived.

Whether a deliberate headbutt or accidental contact I don't know, but my nose was bleeding and in the confusion he was back on top of me. I could feel every ripple as his chest slid up over my stomach until we were eyeball to eyeball –panting exertion. By this point he had caught *my* right wrist and had it pinned to the ground. I lost concentration and let go of *his* right wrist and any advantage I had. He was now on lying top of me pinning both of my hands to the ground. I had stretched my arms wide to deprive him of leverage, so we were in full body contact; breathing hard into each others' face. It was the closest physical contact that I had ever had with another guy.

With arms out of action, I was happy to fight dirty. My left leg was between his, and I moved to execute the only option left – a knee to his balls. But he anticipated me and clenched both his legs tight together - gripping my left leg firm and arresting its movement. This had an unexpected consequence. Groin to groin, where I should have been aware of my cock, I could instead feel his, unmistakably hard, throbbing through our tight denim jeans. Now it follows that if I could feel his cock, pressing into me, then he could feel mine, rock-hard right next to his.

It was one of those moments when time froze. Pin-sharp definition of myself and my surroundings. I could feel that every inch of me could feel every inch of him.

I was suddenly acutely aware that this was the most intimate that I had ever been with another man.

The smell of sweat and testosterone and cheap aftershave against the sharp spring air. The dull pain of scuffs and bruises from struggling on the rough earth as a background to my muscles straining hard against his. My focus: the determination, the exertion and the effort that just wasn't enough; his strength, his dominance, our conclusion; me physically overpowered, exhausted in submission.

My defeat was sheer exhilaration.

We were looking straight into each other's eyes. The connection was every bit as powerful as his body on top of mine. Not a word was spoken. There was no need. It was all in that stare:

- "You are conquered. You are mine".

- "I am beat. I am claimed".

Then he did something I didn't expect. Remember, I might not have been big, but what there was, was muscle. I was still putting up a struggle. To my surprise, he eased his grip on both my wrists. This was

no accident. He didn't want this to end any more than me. Before I knew it the roles had reversed and I was back on top of him. However, before I had any chance to take cognisance of our new situation, external intervention.

Someone, much bigger than me - or him – had grabbed the waistband of my jeans and the collar of my shirt and had dragged me off to one side.

“Will youse two fuckin’ BEHAVE. Youse’ll get lifted by the POLIS before KICKOFF.”

“Fuckin’ GROW UP”.

Someone else had done likewise with my opponent. Suitably admonished by our elders we stood, eyeballs still locked, growling at each other.

In the back of my throat, the metallic taste of my own blood; in the front of my mind, no contradiction in the pride of the fight by the shame of defeat.

This was real. This was genuine. I felt more alive; more aware, more like a man than ever before in my life.

Epilogue

Rangers won 2:1. A cracking Duncan Ferguson defenders goal from the middle of the park. Arms round each others shoulders Spud, me and sundry others sang our way back to the bus; drunk our way home.

Something felt so right than day; something new. But I also knew, deep down, that something else was very wrong. I couldn't say exactly what, but I put the ring to the back of a drawer and the back of my mind. Rather than meeting my intended fiancée, I stood at the bar with a pint singing hate-filled sectarian songs until closing time.

It's statistics. There was one gay on every bus simply because at least 5 per cent of us are gay. Gays that couldn't identify with the camp stereotypes of the day -John Inman, Larry Grayson, Graham Norton &c. We looked and behaved like Scottish working-class men because that is what we are.

Why one nuisance on every bus? Statistically, don't know. I can only report what I found and you can't go from the specific to the general. But I do know this. After that Saturday, there wasn't one our bus; there were two.

Because I would set out with the deliberate intention of using football violence as a route to intimacy with other men. It was more acceptable than being gay. How fucked up is that?