

# Hooligans<sup>\*</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes hooligans: rival football fans bent on brawling. It develops a simple theory of hooligans as rational agents. We model hooligans as persons who derive utility from conflict. Legal penalties for conflicting with non-hooligans drive hooligans to form a kind of “fight club” where they fight only one another. This club makes it possible for hooligans to realize gains from trade. But it attracts ultra-violent persons we call “sadists.” If the proportion of fight-club members who are sadists grows sufficiently high, the fight club self-destructs. Rules that regulate the form club conflict can take, but don’t eliminate conflict, can prevent the club from self-destructing even when populated exclusively by sadists. This creates strong pressure for private rules that regulate conflict to emerge within the club. To illustrate our theory we examine the private rules that developed for this purpose among English football hooligans.

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# 1 Introduction

Hooligans are rival football fans bent on brawling. This paper investigates hooliganism. To do so it uses the theory of rational choice.

Traditional economic analyses of conflict involve two or more parties who contest the same resource. Conflict is a means, not an end. If parties could secure as much of the contested resource as they desire without fighting, they wouldn't fight.

With hooligans things are different. Hooligans don't conflict to get more of a contested resource. They conflict to conflict. For hooligans, fighting is a source of utility.<sup>1</sup>

We model hooligans as persons who enjoy conflict for conflict's sake. Legal penalties for conflicting with non-hooligans drive hooligans to form a kind of "fight club" where they fight only one another. This club makes it possible for hooligans to realize gains from trade. But it attracts ultra-violent persons we call "sadists."

If the proportion of fight-club members who are sadists grows sufficiently high, the fight club self-destructs. Rules that regulate the form club conflict can take, but don't eliminate conflict, can prevent the club from self-destructing even when populated exclusively by sadists. This creates strong pressure for private rules that regulate conflict to emerge within the club. To illustrate our theory we examine the private rules that developed for this purpose among English football hooligans.

Our analysis is most closely connected to the literature analyzing the economics of conflict that considers the emergence of private rules of order where they're least expected. One strand of this literature examines the emergence of such rules among populations whose very way of life would seem to preclude them: persons who use violence for a living. For example, Leeson (2007,

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<sup>1</sup> Not every self-described "hooligan" fits this description. But many do. It's these hooligans that this paper is concerned with.

2009a, 2009b) studies the development of private regulations of violence and theft among Caribbean pirates. Skarbek (2010) considers the development of private rules of law and order among prison gangs. And Leeson and Skarbek (2010) show that constitutions governing conflict permeate nearly all criminal organizations.

The second strand of this literature considers the emergence of private rules of order among warring hostiles. For example, Schelling (1960) and Axelrod (1985) point to unwritten rules regulating conflict between enemy soldiers engaged in warfare. Leeson (2009c) analyzes the “laws of lawlessness” that emerged to govern warring hostiles on either side of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Scottish border. And Leeson and Nowrasteh (2011) consider private institutions of order that developed to reduce the deadweight loss of plunder between belligerent privateers and their merchantman targets in the Age of Sail. More broadly, like these papers, ours is connected to the literature on spontaneous order, which studies the organic development of social rules and institutions of their enforcement (see, for instance, Hayek 1996 and Benson 1989).

Our study of hooligans contributes to these literatures by analyzing the emergence of private rules for regulating conflict among unlikely persons—persons who derive utility from clashing with others and, moreover, are as bitterly embroiled in long-standing hostilities as opposites in international war: rival football fans. At the level of hooliganism generally, even if not at the level of individual hooligan firms, those rules are emergent, evolving, and reflect a kind of organic order.

Finally, our study is connected to the economics of sports literature that considers informal rules of play among athletes. For instance, Fink and Smith (2011) explore how norms emerge and are enforced among Tour de France riders to supplement official rules. Bernstein (2006) details the informal rules of fighting in professional hockey. Bernstein (2008) and Turbow and

Duca (2010) examine the informal rules of baseball. Bernstein (2009) studies the informal rules of football. And Bird and Wagner (1997) describe the private rules governing competitors in professional golf.

Our analysis contributes to this literature by illuminating the economic forces driving the emergence of informal rules regulating conflict among hooligans. Hooligans aren't athletes. But the activities they engage in are intimately connected to and necessarily revolve around athletes: association football teams. Further, while hooliganism isn't a sport, as we discuss below, in important respects it very much resembles one—albeit a violent and formally ruleless variety: fighting between rival football fans.

Section 2 of this paper describes English football hooliganism. Section 3 develops our theory of hooliganism. Section 4 analyzes the hooligan “code of conduct.” Section 5 concludes.

## 2 The “English Disease”

The term “hooligan” dates to 19<sup>th</sup>-century England.<sup>2</sup> Originally a hooligan was a person who engaged in any kind of rowdy, possibly criminal, behavior. In the mid-1960s the contemporary concept of a distinctive “football hooligan” was born: a person bent on rowdy, possibly criminal, football-related behavior, most importantly, fighting.<sup>3</sup>

Football hooliganism is found throughout the world. But historically it has been and remains most prominent in the country where it emerged: the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> Hooliganism's heyday

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<sup>2</sup> The word may have originated from an Irish immigrant family named Hoolihan or Hooligan that terrorized the “East End” of London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Cowens 2003: XXI; Stott and Pearson 2007: 13; Williams and Wagg 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Hooligans are overwhelmingly 20-something year old men. Many, though not all, of them are unskilled or semiskilled laborers (Trivizas 1980: 285; Harrington 1968: 25).

<sup>4</sup> The English seem to have exported their hooliganism to countries such as Holland, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and France, where some copy the chants and styles of English Hooligans. Other incidents involving hooligans have

was between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s. Because of its British prominence, during those decades it came to be called the “English Disease.”

Football hooligans are almost exclusively male. Most are in their 20s and come from working-class backgrounds. According to a sample of more than 500 persons arrested for various football-related “disorders” in the mid-1970s, the average hooligan was 19 years old. More than 80 percent of hooligans were manual laborers or unemployed (Trivizas 1980: 280-281). And 36 percent of them had histories of previous convictions (Trivizas 1980: 283). In the 1980s the hooligan population became slightly older and more socioeconomically diverse. But the typical hooligan remains a young, working-class man.

Hooligans are distinct from “ordinary” football fans who might occasionally drink too much and find themselves in altercations with the fans of opposing teams. The former persons see conflict with likeminded rival fans as one of their primary ends. They attach as much, if not more, importance to participating in such conflict than participating in the enjoyment of the football matches that provide occasion for it. The latter do not.

Hooligans derive utility from fighting (Brimson and Brimson 1996: 9; Murphy et al. 1990: 12).<sup>5</sup> In the words of one hooligan, “being involved in football violence is the most incredibly exciting and enjoyable thing. To anyone who has not been a part of it, that will probably be an astonishing statement but nevertheless, it is the truth” (Brimson 2000: 56).<sup>6</sup> Far from hoping to

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even occurred in countries in South America, Asia, and Africa. See Frosdick and Marsh (2011), Giulianotti (2000), Stott and Pearson (2007), and Williams et al. (1984).

<sup>5</sup> Several scholars have attempted to find sociological reasons for hooligan fighting (see, for instance, Clarke 1973; Ingram 1985; Finn 1994; Kerr 1994; King 2001; Robson 2000; Taylor 1971). However, “Most of the scholarly literature on the subject suggests that hooligans are as much motivated by the desire for fun, excitement, and peer status [associated with fighting] as they are by ethnic, regional or other animosities. The latter seems a pretext for trouble rather than a cause of it” (Smith 1983: 152).

<sup>6</sup> Our claim that hooligans derive utility from fighting shouldn’t be taken to mean that they derive no utility from officially recognized aspects of football, however. Many hooligans care about the football matches that frame hooliganism. But fighting is an equally, if not more, important part of the overall experience for hardcore hooligans (see, for instance, Murphy et al. 1990: 86).

avoid conflict, hooligans seek it out. As one English football hooligan colorfully described it, “I go to a match for one reason only: the agro [i.e., fighting] . . . I get so much pleasure when I’m having agro that I nearly wet my pants . . . I go all over the country looking for it . . . every night during the week we go around town looking for trouble” (Harrison 1974: 604).<sup>7</sup> Or, in the words of another hooligan, “We don’t—we don’t go—well, we *do* go with the intention of fighting, you know what I mean . . . (W)e look forward to it . . . It’s great” (Murphy et al. 1990: 87). For hooligans, fights surrounding football rivalries are a central part of the sport, or even a sport itself (Dunning et al. 1988: 16).

Hooligans are different from most other people in that they enjoy fighting. However, they’re similar to most other people in that they don’t enjoy being seriously injured. Hooligans aren’t masochists.

Hooligans are willing to subject themselves to a reasonably small probability of serious injury, which naturally attends any altercation. That probability is necessary to make hooligan fighting “real” and thus a source of excitement. But most hooligans are unwilling to subject themselves to a high probability of serious injury, which is simply masochism.

In football hooliganism’s earliest days, hooligans organized in small, informal groups around kinship, friendship, and neighborhood ties.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent football hooligans organized in more formal, rival groups called “firms” associated with rival football teams. Some prominent English hooligan firms include “The Red Army” (Manchester United), the “Headhunters” (Chelsea), “The Gooners” (Aresnal), the “United Service Crew” (Leed), the “Bushwhackers”

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<sup>7</sup> As Dunning et al. (1986: 222) point out, this hooligan is probably exaggerating the extent of his involvement in and enjoyment of “aggro.” Still, his remarks illustrate our basic point that hooligans derive utility from fighting *per se*.

<sup>8</sup> Some were associated with other youth-subculture groups such as the Teddy Boys and, by the late 1960s, skinheads. Although it’s common to associate hooligans with racist skinheads, Brimson and Brimson (1996: 54) note that this association has been greatly exaggerated.

(Millwall), the “Blade Business Crew” (Sheffield United), and the “Inter City Firm” (West Ham United).

Hooligan firm sizes vary considerably. But they can be surprisingly large. At its height in the 1980s the “Inter City Firm” boasted 150 core members, with numbers swelling to 500 in larger confrontations (Murphy et al. 1990: 92).

Football matches and the activities that surround them, such as patronizing pubs and traveling to and from matches, provide a convenient focal point for persons interested in fighting one another. Team rivalries supply ready and willing opponents: hooligan fans of opposing teams. And large excited crowds make it less risky for hooligans to clash in public since they’re less likely to be arrested for creating a disturbance (Finn 1994: 95; Murphy et al. 1990: 11; Poulton 2001: 129). Indeed, to avoid legal trouble, rival hooligan firms sometimes prearrange meeting times and places to fight outside of football-related events (Brimson and Brimson 1996: 31).

Occasionally hooligan conflicts are extremely violent (Allan 1989; Ward 2004; Brimson 2000; Brimson and Brimson 1996; Francis and Walsh 1997). Naturally these fights are the ones that receive attention from the media, which has done much to exaggerate the extent of hooligan violence. But many hooligan fights are ritualistic and non-violent (Marsh 1978a; Marsh et al. 1978). They involve verbal conflicts, such as taunting, name calling, and chasing. Even physically violent hooligan conflicts, which may involve punching, kicking, and weapons, rarely result in serious injuries.

This is puzzling. Hooligans are clearly capable of seriously injuring one another. Most are young men—aggressive persons in their physical prime. Equally important, hooliganism would seem to suffer from a severe selection problem. Hooliganism is an activity known for violent

conflict. It threatens to attract sadistic persons—persons who enjoy seriously injuring others in violent conflicts. Thus we would expect hooliganism to suffer from uncontrolled conflict and generate rampant serious injuries. But it doesn't.

## 3 A Simple Theory of Hooliganism

### 3.1 Fighting “In the Wild”

The theory of hooliganism when hooligans are rational is simple. Consider a society populated by  $N$ , risk-neutral persons with identical physical and mental capabilities. Some proportion of this population enjoys fighting with others. Call these persons “hooligans.” Fighting includes physical exchanges, such as exchanges of punches and kicks, thrown objects, and chasing, and non-physical ones, such as exchanges of aggressive and threatening language, non-verbal intimidation, harassment, and so on.

A proportion of the hooligan population enjoys fighting others, but not seriously injuring the persons they fight with. Call these hooligans “brawlers.” Their proportion of  $N$  is  $B$ . The rest of the hooligan population not only enjoys fighting others. They enjoy seriously injuring the persons they fight with. Call these hooligans “sadists.” Their proportion of  $N$  is  $S$ . The proportion of society consisting of non-hooligans—“ordinary” persons who dislike fighting with others and thus never assault others—is therefore  $1 - B - S$ .

A fight occurs whenever one person assaults another—i.e., instigates a fight by being the first to engage in one of the aggressive behaviors described above. Since they're physically and mentally identical, if any two persons in this society fight, each has an equal chance of winning and losing the conflict.

For anyone who fights, winning is preferred to losing. However, for hooligans, who enjoy fighting *per se*, even losing a fight generates a higher payoff than not fighting at all provided that, if they lose, their adversary doesn't seriously injure them. Everyone's payoff from being seriously injured in a fight is negative.

Since hooligans enjoy fighting, they don't legally prosecute persons who assault them. Since non-hooligans don't enjoy fighting, they do. For simplicity, assume that the expected punishment of assaulting another person is the same whether that assault leads to serious injuries or not.

If any kind of hooligan fights with no one, he earns 0.

If a brawler fights another brawler, his expected payoff is  $x > 0$ . Win or lose, he gets to fight, which is what he desires. Moreover, when he fights another brawler, he does so without the specter of legal punishment or serious injury, which he faces if he fights a non-hooligan or a sadist respectively.

If a brawler fights a sadist, his expected payoff is  $z < 0$ . In this case the expected cost associated with the chance that he will be seriously injured exceeds the expected benefit of fighting. Thus the brawler's expected payoff from fighting is negative. Because of this, he would rather not fight anyone than fight a sadist.

If a brawler fights a non-hooligan, his expected payoff is  $y < z$ . In this case the expected cost associated with the legal punishment he incurs exceeds the expected benefit of fighting. Thus, here too, the brawler's expected payoff from fighting is negative. Indeed, because of the legal punishment he incurs, fighting a non-hooligan yields an even lower expected payoff than when he fights a sadist and is seriously injured but incurs no legal penalty. Because of this, he would rather not fight anyone than fight a non-hooligan.

For a sadist things are similar. The only difference is that sadists enjoy fighting everyone more than brawlers do— $a$  times more, where  $a > 0$ . Thus if a sadist fights a brawler, his expected payoff is  $ax > 0$ . If he fights another sadist, his expected payoff is  $z/a < 0$ . And if he fights a non-hooligan, his expected payoff is  $y/a < z/a$ . The reasoning for the positivity or negativity of these expected payoffs is the same as that described above for the brawler. However, the expected payoff is larger in each case since the sadist enjoys fighting everyone more than the brawler does.

Since persons in this society are physically identical, there's no way for a hooligan to tell *ex ante* whether a person he's contemplating assaulting "in the wild" is a brawler, a non-hooligan, or a sadist. This poses a problem for hooligans.

A brawler's expected payoff of fighting a random member of society is:

(1.1)

$$EV = (B)x + (1 - B - S)y + (S)z.$$

Thus a brawler indulges his conflictual inclinations if:

(1.2)

$$B > [S(y - z) - y]/(x - y).$$

For given expected payoffs of fighting a non-hooligan, a sadist, and another brawler (i.e., given  $y$ ,  $z$ , and  $x$ ), it's easy to see from equation (1.2) that when the proportion of brawlers in society is larger, the proportion of non-hooligans in society is smaller, or the proportion of sadists in society is smaller, hooligans are more likely to instigate fights.

For a sadist things are the same except that  $ax$ ,  $y/a$ , and  $z/a$  replace  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  in the inequality from above, yielding the following condition:

(2.1)

$$B > [S(y/a - z/a) - y/a]/(ax - y/a),$$

or,

(2.2)

$$B > [S(y - z) - y]/(a^2x - y).$$

Since their payoff of fighting everyone is higher, sadists are more likely to instigate fights than brawlers: equation (2.2) is easier to satisfy than equation (1.2). But if, as is likely, punishments for assaults are high (leading  $y$  to be smaller) and the proportion of non-hooligans in society is high compared to the proportion of hooligans (leading  $B$  and  $S$  to be smaller), neither brawlers nor sadists will instigate fights.

### 3.2 “Fight Club” Formation and its Sadistic Spoilers

This isn't the cause for celebration one might expect, however. When hooligans are prevented from fighting, “gains from trade” go unexploited. If brawlers fight with brawlers, non-hooligans and sadists are no worse for it. And brawlers benefit significantly. If brawlers, or at least hooligans more generally, could identify other hooligans, a more efficient outcome would be possible.

To capture these otherwise unexploited gains from trade, suppose that hooligans form a “fight club.” One hooligan advertizes that he seeks other persons who enjoy fighting. The resulting recruits meet at specified locations and times to do so. To make the fighting more enjoyable, the hooligans who gather decide to separate themselves into opposing “teams” whose

members fight one another but not each other. Hooligans are matched randomly with other fight-club members from opposing teams to fight with.

This fight club has the potential to permit hooligans to capture otherwise uncaptured benefits. But it faces a problem. While non-hooligans won't to turn up at fight-club meetings, both kinds of hooligans—brawlers and sadists—will.

Even if he's a sadist, the fight club-organizing hooligan would prefer to keep sadists out, or at least to prevent them from indulging their sadistic desires. Sadists enjoy seriously injuring others. But, recall, they don't enjoy being seriously injured themselves. Sadists aren't masochists.

The problem the fight-club organizer and member hooligans face is a modified version of the one they faced above: hooligans can't tell *ex ante* whether other fight-club members who they may be matched with to fight are brawlers or sadists. They would like to fight with the former. But they would prefer not to fight at all rather than risk the serious injuries that may be generated by fighting with the latter.

Brawlers now confront the following expected payoff equation:

(3.1)

$$EV = (b)x + (1 - b)z$$

where  $b$  is the proportion of fight-club members who are brawlers and  $1 - b$  is the proportion of fight-club members who are sadists. Thus a brawler is willing to participate in the fight club only if:

(3.2)

$$b > z/(z - x).$$

Sadists now confront an analogous expected payoff equation:

(4.1)

$$EV = (b)ax + (1 - b)(z/a),$$

which means a sadist will only participate in the fight club if:

(4.2)

$$b > z/(z - a^2x).$$

For the marginal hooligan—the hooligan for whom the benefit of fighting even a brawler isn't especially high—even a low proportion of sadistic fight-club members is enough to drive him out of the fight club. Further, since brawlers' benefit of fighting is lower than sadists', a brawler is more likely to be the marginal hooligan. This is problematic.

When the marginal hooligan exits the fight club,  $b$  falls and the proportion of remaining fight-club members who are sadists rises. When this occurs, satisfying the conditions required for fight-club participation in (4.1) (and (4.2)) becomes harder. The now higher proportion of sadists creates pressure driving out the next marginal hooligan, who again is more likely to be a brawler than a sadist. This raises the proportion of remaining fight-club members who are sadists still further, and so on. Eventually even the hardest-core sadists find participation in the fight club too risky and they exit too. The fight club self-destructs.

### 3.3 Regulating Conflict

Sadists spoil the fight club and put all hooligans back “in the wild” where they’re unable to realize the gains from trade available from fighting one another. This reduces brawlers’ welfare. But it reduces sadists’ welfare too.

Sadists prefer to seriously injure their opponents when they can. But short of that, they would rather fight persons who won’t prosecute them for assault than be unable to fight at all. Further, brawlers would be pleased to be such persons if they could somehow be sure that sadists wouldn’t indulge their sadistic inclinations.

This creates pressure for the emergence of rules within the fight club that regulate conflict: rules that permit fighting, which is, after all, the whole point of the club, but that prevent sadistic behavior, such as seriously injuring one’s adversary. If such rules can be enforced, they can save the fight club from self-destruction and in doing so permit hooligans to realize the mutual benefits of fighting one another. Even sadists will in principle agree to such rules. If they don’t, they can’t participate in the club. And they would rather be allowed to participate in the club but compelled to behave like brawlers than to be excluded from the club and thus unable to fight at all.

Our simple theory of hooliganism, then, has three parts: first, fight-club formation as a means by which persons who derive utility from conflict can enjoy the benefits of conflicting with others where the law prevents them from doing so outside the club; second, the threat that sadists pose to the fight club’s existence by driving more restrained hooligans, and ultimately the sadists themselves, to exit the fight club; and finally, an institutional response from within the fight club establishing rules regulating conflict as a means of permitting hooligans to capture the mutual benefits from the fight club’s existence by preserving its existence.

The model of hooliganism developed above is of course just that: a model. We don't claim that it accurately describes the process by which real-world football hooligan firms developed historically. It surely doesn't. To our knowledge, no football hooligan ever advertized the existence of a "fight club" for persons who enjoy conflicting with others. It's doubtful that any football hooligan even thinks about hooliganism in such terms.

As Section 2 described, hooligans in natural environments find one another through their associations with fans of professional football teams. The sport and its fans' activities provide a focal point for attracting the attention of persons who enjoy fighting (among other displays of club loyalty). And the rivalry that unavoidably attends competing professional football clubs and their fans provides a focal "reason" or justification for expressing that urge among others who seek to express it as well.

What our model does do is bring into analytical relief the basic kinds of forces that help give rise to hooliganism as an "organized" activity; the features of that activity in terms of more familiar constructs, such as the idea of a "fight club;" the problems that such activity confronts given the heterogeneity of potential participants and their conflictual purposes in interacting; and the resulting pressures that shape how hooliganism operates in response to those problems. We turn to a discussion of English football hooliganism's response to those problems below.

## 4 Ordered Disorder: A Hooligan Code of Conduct

To regulate "fight-club" conflict in a manner that permits fighting but prevents sadistic behavior, English football hooligans rely on a set of private, informal rules—a "hooligan code." As one former English hooligan describes it, "There is . . . a certain code of honour among the firms, one which draws specific boundaries marking what is and is not acceptable behaviour" (Brimson

2000: 71). The rules of the hooligan code are simple. They're also effective. Perhaps unexpectedly, because of this code, "it is in the episodes of conflict and antagonism that the presence of [hooligan] order is most strikingly revealed" (Marsh 1978b: 67).

#### 4.1 "Fronting Up:" The Rules of Initiating Conflict

The first form of conflict regulation the hooligan code provides for is in "fronting up," hooligans' term for initiating a fight. As we described above, hooligans seek to fight other hooligans—not ordinary football fans or other members of the non-hooligan public, who are likely to bring them legal trouble. Indeed, this the first rule of the hooligan code. Members of a hooligan firm may only initiate conflict with members of an opposing, rival firm (Pearson 2009: 250).

To identify such persons—i.e., other members of the "fight club"—hooligans have historically seated themselves in particular areas of football stadiums known to be inhabited by hooligans (Armstrong 1998: 9; Brimson and Brimson 1996: 19; Dunning et al. 1986: 225; Marsh et al. 1978: 58; Murphy et al. 1990: 90). Traditionally these are the "football ends"—the seating areas immediately behind the goals on either side of the field. When outside these seating areas, in public places frequented in the times around matches, such as pubs, or when *en route* to matches, for example at train stations, hooligans have historically identified fellow "fight-club" members by their style of dress.<sup>9</sup> Traditionally, hooligans have worn scarves around their wrists and shirts in their team's colors and Doc Marten boots (Dunning et al. 1986: 224; Marsh 1978a: 71; Marsh et al. 1978: 16; Thornton 2003: 43). More recently their dress has evolved, many

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<sup>9</sup> Ironically, the attempt by law enforcement officials to track down and intercept hooligans has forced hooligans to avoid wearing identifying clothing or colors, thus making it harder for hooligans to correctly identify other "fight club" members (Dunning et al. 1986: 224; Lowles and Nicholls 2005: 7; Marsh 1978b: 71). This renders the procedure for initiating a fight and acceptance more important.

hooligans substituting expensive designer wear for the old uniform (Dart 2008: 44; Dunning et al. 1986: 224). For example, members of the Chelsea Headhunters became known for wearing “Armani pullovers and other designer clothes” (Haley 2001). Other hooligans sport gear from CP Company, Paul & Shark, Ralph Lauren, Stone Island, and Versace (Thornton 2003).<sup>10</sup>

Dressing this way permits hooligans to “readily identify others dressed like them, but following other clubs, who would be willing to fight” (Treadwell 2008: 124). Though their choice of seating areas (at matches and in traveling to matches) and clothing (outside those areas), hooligans communicate to one another that they’re members of the “fight club” and thus comparatively safe targets of conflict in terms of legal repercussions.

Because of these markers, hooligans have no trouble identifying other members of the “fight club.” As one hooligan put it, “We know who they are; they know who we are. We know they want it and so do we.” When non-hooligans come into the danger area amidst a “fight-club” foray, hooligans may even cease fighting to avoid the legal repercussions they may incur if a non-hooligan is accidentally injured. Thus the same hooligan quoted above remarked that on one occasion when he witnessed a hooligan “fight on the terraces that was interrupted to allow a woman and child to pass, [and] then promptly resumed (Buford 1991: 120).

Once a fellow “fight-club” member has been identified, to initiate a fight the hooligan code requires a clear challenge to be made and accepted by the rival hooligan(s) (Armstrong 1998: 249; Marsh et al. 1978: 106). Fight initiation may involve behavior as simple as staring intently at a rival hooligan without diverting one’s eyes, to name calling, chanting or singing threats or boasts, or, at matches, the invasion of rival hooligans’ seating area—their “territory” (Armstrong

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<sup>10</sup> For more on hardcore hooligans wearing designer clothes, see Frosdick and Marsh (2011: 16) and Giulianotti (2001: 146).

1998: 9; Brimson and Brimson 1996: 106; Clarke 1978: 54; Dunning et al. 1988: 6, 16 & 225; Marsh et al. 1978: 105; Murphy et al. 1990: 90).

Hooligan rules for initiating fights limit the injuries hooligans are likely to sustain. They achieve this by constraining sadists who are less interested in “fair fights” and more interested in bodily damaging others as much as possible. The rules of fight initiation prevent unanticipated physical attacks, such as “sucker punching,” wherein the target of the attack is least prepared to defend himself and thus most likely to be seriously hurt. Similarly, hooligan rules for initiating fights permit hooligans who on a particular occasion aren’t up to a fight, perhaps because they’re severely outnumbered, physically weak, or suffering from some other circumstance that would render them less capable of more evenly defending themselves, to decline physical conflict in these situations where they’re more likely to be seriously injured if they conflict.

## 4.2 “Booting and Nutting:” The Rules of Conflict

The most important rules regulating conflict between hooligans are those that regulate fighting itself—physical violence involved with and surrounding so-called “nutting,” hooligan slang for head butting, and “booting,” hooligan slang for kicking. These rules bound how violent, and thus injurious, “fight-club” fights can be. Most physical fights between hooligans are with fists and feet. However, certain weapons are also permitted. As a former “Blades Business Crew” hooligan described it, “Glasses and bottles are acceptable . . . anything you can get hold of, you know, a bar stool, ashtray, bottle, because they’ve got the same chance; but knives are out of order,” as are guns (Armstrong 1998: 249).

The underlying logic of this rule is one of “fair play” and limiting potential bodily injury. Everyday objects lying about in the space where a physical fight occurs are available to both

adversaries. This levels the playing field to a certain extent, preventing highly lopsided engagements that are more likely to lead to one or the other party's serious injury. Similarly, since obviously lethal weapons, such as knives and guns, are unlikely to be lying about for either party to grab, but instead would only be available to a party if he brought it with him to the fight, this rule limits the bodily injury that either party can expect to suffer.<sup>11</sup> In this way limiting permissible weapons to equally accessible everyday objects constrains sadists from being able to indulge their sadistic desires.

At the same time, weapons restrictions—as opposed to a blanket weapons ban—preserve the specter of danger, excitement, and so on that “fight-club” members seek through their membership. As one scholar of English football hooligans puts it, “in order for [hooligans'] ritualistic confrontation to work effectively in creating excitement and danger, there has to be enough of an element of violence to make it interesting, but not so much that the hooligan game is spoilt . . . . [T]he rules of engagement are . . . act as a constraining factor, maintaining a balance between extremes, and allowing aggression and violence to be experienced within a wider context of relative safety” (Kerr 1994: 12).

A final rule of fighting is that a fight may be ended at any time by either fighter. According to the hooligan code, when a hooligan indicates that he's had enough, the conflict must cease (Marsh et al. 1978: 107). To indicate as much a hooligan must display clear signals of submissiveness. Such signals include, for example, refraining from action, keeping quiet, looking down at the floor, and running (Marsh et al. 1978: 108). As one hooligan put it, “You can tell

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<sup>11</sup> In some cases the use of knives is permitted. One hooligan describes this rule change to the stepped-up intervention of police. As he put it, “The police have now got so good . . . that we're more constrained than before. We just don't have the time that we use to have. The moment a fight starts we're immediately surrounded by dogs and horses. That's why everyone has started using knives. I suppose it might sound stupid but because the policing has got so good we've got to the point where we have to inflict the greatest possible damage in the least amount of time, and the knife is the most efficient instrument for a quick injury . . . . If the policing was not so good, I'm sure the knifings would stop” (Buford 1991: 120).

when somebody's had enough—really you're trying to stop them giving you a lot of mouth. You get mad at them but you know when to stop.” As a consequence of the rule requiring hooligans to back off adversaries who “cry uncle,” in the words of this hooligan, “normally, anyway, the kids don't get all beaten up” (Marsh et al. 1978: 95).

Similar to the rules regulating weapon usage, this rule limits the potential for bodily injury. It prohibits sadists from indulging their sadistic inclinations, which would involve continued pummeling even after one's opponent recognized defeat, by banning physical violence that one's adversary hasn't consented to be subjected to.

### 4.3 Enforcing the Hooligan Code

Hooligans use reputation to enforce the rules that regulate “fight-club” conflict. They do so through two channels. The reason for this is straightforward. There are two reputations at risk for each individual hooligan: the reputation of his firm and his reputation as an individual within his firm.

Hooligan firms care deeply about and invest substantially in their reputations. This is apparent from the ominous and memorable names they give themselves, such as “The Aggro Boys” (Swindon Town), the “South Midlands Hit Squad” (Oxford United), the “Hull City Psychos” (Hull City), and so on. It's also apparent from firms' creation of “calling cards,” which some hooligans leave behind in the location of a brawl or act of aggression against the members of a rival firm. Equally important for the reputation of hooligan firms is their “uprightness”—i.e., their reputation for abiding by the rules of fair play embodied by the hooligan code—and, on the other side of this, their reputation for not being rule-breaking cowards.

A hooligan firm whose members instigated fights with unwilling rivals, mercilessly beat rival hooligans who “surrendered,” or used prohibited weapons to gain an upper hand quickly come to be seen by the members of other hooligan firms as cowardly and dishonest—the kind of hooligans one shouldn’t associate with or who should be targeted for violent punishment. Hooligan firms that earn such a reputation may lose their ability to fight others under the auspices of the “fight club” or be subjected to violent retribution by fellow “fight-club” members. For example, the “Blades Business Crew” not only didn’t carry knives. They considered anyone who did carry them weak and cowardly and so ostracized them (Armstrong 1998: 252). Because of this, to maintain their membership in the hooligan “fight club” in good standing, hooligan firms must obey the “fight club’s” rules regulating conflict.

The fact that an entire firm’s members’ reputations can become tarnished by the rule-breaking behavior of just a handful of its individual members creates strong incentives for firm members to monitor the behavior of each other internally. This explains why, for example, members of the “Blades Business Crew” firm “were even at the forefront in demanding that other Blades cease [unwarranted] hostilities” (Armstrong 1998: 249). Similarly, it explains why, as one hooligan put it, “Bringing a Knife . . . by your own supporters sometimes it’s looked down on as being a form of, you know, cowardice” (Marsh 1978b: 63). Firms create internal norms that reinforce inter-firm, “fight-club” rules as a means of supporting the enforcement of the latter. If they don’t, the whole firm may suffer as a result.

Likewise, firm members’ concern for their firms’ reputation explains why, if they observe one of their members continuing to pummel an opponent who has been clearly defeated, they will step in to pull their fellow firm member back (Marsh 1978b: 70). Indeed, to protect their reputations, hooligan firms are unlikely to admit simply anyone expressing an interest to join

them. Rather, membership is restricted, requiring a lengthy process over which a would-be firm member must demonstrate his character to existing firm members (Brimson and Brimson 1996: 73). This process permits hooligan firms to vet would-be members for their willingness to obey “fight-club” rules and in doing so helps to screen for potential sadists, or at least tends to admit only those sadists who are willing to reign in their sadistic inclinations that would operate to undermine the firm’s broader reputation and thus standing in the hooligan “fight club.”

The second channel through which hooligans leverage reputation concerns to promote the enforcement of “fight-club” rules is creating opportunities for “promotion” inside hooligan firms. Hooligan firms’ internal organizations create “career structures” that allow for promotion and status based upon demonstration of character (Armstrong 1998: 15; Buford 1991: 119-120; Brimson 2000: 70). For example, a five-month undercover police investigation into the Chelsea “Headhunters” hooligan firm revealed a highly structured organization akin to military rank (Kerr 1994: 91).

A firm leader tends not only to be the best fighter but, equally important, “the one who remains calm in a given situation.” Such leaders are commonly referred to as “Top Boys” or “Generals” (Brimson 2000: 70). Hooligans become firm leaders by contributing greatly to the reputations of their firms. That means not only defeating rival hooligans in conflicts, but also bringing “honor” on their firms by abiding by “fight-club” rules whose infraction, as noted above, would often be seen as a sign of weakness or cowardice.

Because of hooligans’ incentives to enforce the hooligan code regulating conflict—at the firm level and individually—while extreme violence can and occasionally does occur within the hooligan “fight club,” on the whole that club achieves its purpose: it permits conflict between persons who desire it without frequently degenerating into unacceptable violence that would lead

the club to implode. Consider the following account from an interview one scholar of hooliganism conducted with two English hooligans named Mark and Mike (Marsh et al. 1978: 102):

*Interviewer:* Take fights between two people – one from either side, where there is room to actually hurt someone. To what extent do people get hurt in those sort of fights?

*Mark:* It's more like a wrestling match really.

*Mike:* That's right – you don't get anything that serious.

*Interviewer:* It would seem to me to be quite possible for two people in those situations to bash [the] hell out of each other...

*Mike:* Yes, it would seem like that but it seldom tends to happen that way.

Or, in the words of Ged, a former “Blade Business Crew” hooligan (Armstrong 1998: 248-249):

Football feyts? ... they never last more than about 60 seconds, hardly anyone gets a thump in, nobody carries weapons and it's not every week. For most people it's about getting together, all going on a journey, having a few beers, a laugh, a quick battle. Then home.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Our economic analysis of hooliganism leads to several conclusions. First, hooliganism may reflect a kind of “fight club” through which persons who derive utility from conflict can capture the gains from clashing despite the fact that most people in society have opposing preferences and would otherwise prevent hooligans from capturing these gains.

The problem this club confronts is that it attracts all kinds of persons who derive utility from fighting—including those who derive utility from hurting others seriously in fights, or what we've called “sadists.” These persons threaten to undermine less-violent hooligans' ability to realize the benefits the fight club provides them by destroying the fight club and, in doing so,

undermining their own ability to enjoy more utility through the fight club than is available to them without it.

Second, to address this problem, our analysis suggests that even hooligans—persons who enjoy and pursue conflict, and in many cases have long-standing and bitter rivalries with fellow fight-club members—are likely to develop private rules regulating conflict between themselves because they have strong incentives to do so. The case of the world’s most notorious hooligans—the hooligan firms of England—illustrates this incentive. English football hooligans have developed a kind of “code of conduct” that regulates conflict between them. That code regulates how fights may be initiated, the form fighting may take, how far fighting may go, and is enforced through hooligan firm- and individual hooligan-level concerns about reputation. The hooligan code limits the likelihood that fight-club members will be seriously injured when conflicting but, critically, preserves hooligans’ ability to conflict and to do so in a way that maintains the dangerous elements of “genuine” conflict that hooligans seek.

Of course the hooligan code is imperfect. Even in the presence of rules designed to curb violence, physical conflicts can escalate beyond desired bounds. And such rules are less likely to be rigorously enforced when would-be enforcers are themselves caught up in the heat of battle. Similarly, it can be difficult to distinguish intentionally caused serious injury from such injury caused accidentally. This makes it harder to identify hooligans deserving of punishment and thus weakens the hooligan code’s ability to regulate conflict. Given these obstacles and the persons involved in hooligan fighting, what’s remarkable isn’t the occasional break down of hooligan order, but the fact that the hooligan code manages to regulate conflict at all—let alone to the degree that it appears to.

Finally, our study suggests that when such rules are effective, hooligans' fight club is preserved and conflict coexists alongside social order. The rules and mechanisms of enforcement that the hooligan code creates incentivize sadistic fight-club members whose ultra-violent behavior would otherwise lead the club to implode to behave like non-sadists, or what we've called "brawlers." This is true even when the fight club is populated exclusively by sadists who would prefer to seriously injure the persons they fight. The case of England's football hooligans highlights this fact. English hooligan conflicts sometimes lead to serious injuries. But compared to hooligan conflicts without such injuries, this is rare.

The emergence of cooperation *within* conflict that we observe among hooligans isn't unique to them and may be a more common phenomenon than most people think. For example, in the international context, rules of warfare are common and longstanding. Although these rules didn't develop to prevent sadistic nations from spoiling an international "fight club" between countries, they reflect a basic need shared by English football hooligans: the need to regulate conflict where conflict is a prominent feature of interactions. In this sense our study of order among hooligans serves as a microcosmic example of the order amidst disorder that often emerges in larger contexts.

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