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# Swedish supporter culture – restrictions, conflicts, resistance

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## ABSTRACT



This study investigates the conflict between, on the one hand, the Swedish police and law enforcement and, on the other, supporters, football clubs, and the organization of Swedish Elite Football. The core of this conflict is the introduction of a new structure for maintaining order, referred to as the Condition Ladder (Villkorstrappan), aimed at addressing disturbances and pyrotechnics in the stands. The aim of this article is to chart and analyse the impact of the Condition Ladder on Swedish football culture. The methods are media analysis, analysis of police documents and interviews. The study confirms previous findings regarding the role of the media in public discourse, but also indicates that the previously negative media image of the supporter culture has changed into a more positive view. The study shows that the new restrictions create conflicts and tensions between the involved actors when these actors are to handle risk elements in Swedish supporter culture.

## Introduction

The starting point for this study is a conflict that has arisen within Swedish football. One side comprises the police and law enforcement, while the other side consists of supporters, clubs, and Swedish Elite Football (SEF), an interest group representing the male elite clubs. The conflict was sparked by the introduction of a new policy structure for maintaining order, referred to by the police as the Condition Ladder (Villkorstrappan), aimed at addressing public disturbances and pyrotechnics in the stands. The Condition Ladder has prompted a crisis of trust between legislative authorities and those who organize football events in Sweden, that is, mainly the football clubs themselves. The conflict is reflected in a myriad of newspaper articles representing various voices in the football landscape. The purpose of this article is to chart, analyse, and explain the situation that has arisen from the implementation of the Condition Ladder and how it affects the contemporary Swedish supporter culture. The theoretical frame for the analysis relates to the concept ‘risk society’ which is connected to contemporary societies increasing strive for risk management to deal with various safety aspects.<sup>1</sup>

Generally, as Johannes Persson argues, the focus on risks in public discourse leads to an atmosphere of fear and control.<sup>2</sup> In this study, we will demonstrate how the development of the Condition Ladder relates to the concept of risk, but also how various groups resist the risk-discourse in football culture. The key questions for the study were:

- How do supporters, clubs, and police/law enforcement relate to the implementation of the Condition Ladder in relation to the risk concept?
- What is the impact of the Condition Ladder on the Swedish supporter culture?
- How can media narratives about the Condition Ladder be understood and analyzed?

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## Football culture: defining the good supporter and the proper culture

The discussion about what constitutes good and bad supporter culture is not new; on the contrary, it has been a recurring topic for debate since the emergence of football in Sweden in the late-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The debate is focused on what is seen as unruly behaviour and hooliganism. In Sweden, the word hooligan has been part of the Swedish media discussion since 1965.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it was not until the 1990s that organized hooliganism began. Inspired by the infamous English supporters, Swedish hooligans began to organize fights using new mobile technology to set up the fights, avoiding police interruption. The research on football fans in England had for a long time focused on hooliganism and fan rivalry.<sup>5</sup> The Swedish hooligans adopted the English casual style and dressed in designer clothes and formed a clear distinctive sub-culture.<sup>6</sup> There are, however, many different spectator performances in the stands which can be divided into two main categories: sonic, in the form of organized songs, and visual, in the form of flags, banners, and pyrotechnics. Since the 1990s, organized choreographies tifo appeared in Sweden. Tifo seemed to fit the Swedish context as the supporters were well-organized.<sup>7</sup> Today, most teams in the highest division have a specific supporter group that creates tifo, and the supporters fund the tifos through fundraisers at the arena or online.<sup>8</sup> The tifo group can include both regular supporters and Ultras supporters, and is a fundamental part of both supporter and Ultras culture. It can therefore be difficult to separate the latter from the tifo group. The tifo culture comprises a mixture of different supporters; mainly males between the ages of 15–30, though girls and women are (usually) welcome. Different tifo groups compete to create the most resourceful, creative, and stylish tifo.<sup>9</sup>

Today, pyrotechnics has been seen as a bigger problem than hooliganism in Swedish football culture. This is manifested in the strategies of the Swedish Ultras, claiming to be autonomous in relation to the society and the police. For example, some Ultras buy and smuggle pyrotechnics into the arenas, and hide behind large flags in order to use pyrotechnics without being recognized by the police. Ultras oppose commercialization and what they see as corruption and abuse of power. This resistance is mobilized under the slogan *Against modern football* – a growing international movement that strives to maintain football's local roots and authenticity in protest against increased hypercommercialization and commodity culture of football culture. In Sweden, this has been expressed in the fact that the football association's members must own at least 51 percent of a club, private investors a maximum of 49 percent.<sup>10</sup>

Research indicates that it is beneficial for the relationship between supporters, police, and authorities when the latter two are able to recognize that there are different types of supporters. When police and law enforcement maintain a constructive relationship with supporters, it is less likely that peaceful supporters will become disruptive. Several researchers stress that a dynamic risk assessment is the most appropriate way to deal with sports-related disturbances and clashes.<sup>11</sup> This means that the police adopts an interactive strategy that facilitates contact and trust-building relationships and distinguish between specific groups within large crowds. The groups that have a violent agenda do not wish to interact with the police – they want to fight each other without interruption from the police – while more peaceful groups are more ready to cooperate with the police in order to secure benefits for themselves and counteract violent tendencies. This approach will limit (though not entirely prevent) conflicts and risks, rendering it easier to isolate instances of violence. This requires that both the police and various supporter groups maintain an open dialogue. This approach was a guide for the successful strategy utilized 2014–2017.<sup>12</sup> In *Understanding and managing risk*,<sup>13</sup> the English researcher Clifford Stott and the Dutch scholar Otto Adang emphasize the importance of a cosmopolitan police force with a cultural competence within the football landscape:

For a public order management to help decrease the likelihood of incidents, it is crucial that the police tactics fit closely with relevant risk assessments. It is of great practical importance to know and assess the social identities of the various (sub) groups of fans, their values and standards, aims and goals, their sense of what is

right and proper, their stereotypes and expectations of other groups, their history of interaction with these groups and anything (dates, places, objects, forms of action) that has particular symbolic significance.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of the police having an understanding of the local and cultural context is emphasized.

Previous research has shown that traditional media held hegemonic power over the supporter narrative; setting the agenda, determining selection criteria, and maintaining a gatekeeper function.<sup>15</sup> Simply put, the 'old media' structured the news flow. Newsreporting on the supporter culture upheld an outsider perspective; the phenomenon was described through the journalists' lens. The contemporary social media landscape enables thousands of new voices to formulate descriptions of football and supporter culture, meaning that traditional media no longer have the same interpretive precedence.<sup>16</sup> Instead, traditional media are moving towards more diversified and diverse sports coverage.

## Method

The analysis is based on a media analysis, police protocols and semi-structured interviews. The media material consists of 71 articles from the biggest newspapers in Sweden: *Dagens Nyheter* (20), *Aftonbladet* (25), *Expressen* (13) and *Göteborgs Posten* (13).<sup>17</sup> The articles were published from 1 September 2021, until 10 October 2021.<sup>18</sup> In media, voices from the police, clubs, SEF, and a few supporters have been investigated. In addition to the media analysis, we have interviewed eight supporters to gain a better understanding, as their voices are rarely represented in media.<sup>19</sup> Seven of the interviews were conducted with supporters involved in the organization of tifo.<sup>20</sup> In this article, they are pseudonymized and presented as Tim, Johan, Per, Simon, Leo, Jacob, and Rasmus. Additionally, the chair of the Swedish Football Supporter Union (SFSU), Sofia Bohlin, was also interviewed. The interview focused on SFSU's experiences of working with the police before and after the application of the Condition Ladder. Quotes from media, police protocols, and interviews are translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

## From dialogue to restrictions

Allowing the autonomous and creative supporter culture to flourish while simultaneously curtailing supporters who break the law has been a difficult balancing act for Swedish police and authorities. The definition of a 'good' supporter is, however, contested. A recurring topic for debate has been whether Ultras are good or bad for Swedish supporter culture.<sup>21</sup> The focus of this discussion has been pyrotechnics and how clubs, police, and law enforcement ought to manage the use of illegal pyrotechnics. In the last decade, there has been a strong shift from a control strategy based on dialogue between the supporters, football clubs and the police to a strategy based on strict restrictions where the responsibility for overseeing that supporters follow the conditions has been placed on the football clubs. As a consequence conflicts between supporters, the clubs and the police have escalated.<sup>22</sup>

Spectator interest in men's elite football has grown in Sweden. The country has seen the largest percentual increase in attendance of all European countries during the 2010s: from an average of 6,518 spectators in 2010, to 9,167 in 2019.<sup>23</sup> As attendance has risen, the atmosphere in the stands has changed with a significant increase in visual displays of support for the teams, known as tifo. Thus, despite the fact that Swedish football matches are mediocre in comparison to the wealthiest leagues in Europe from a sporting point of view, the supporter culture has shown growth and commitment.<sup>24</sup>

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (abbreviated BRÅ) is a knowledge centre serving the Swedish criminal justice system. The BRÅ report of 2008 states that the primary concern with regard to football supporters should be for the police to develop its ability to manage large

crowds in a ‘friendly but firm’ manner, also known as ‘low policing’.<sup>25</sup> This means that police behave in a discreet and friendly way, but are able to act decisively when necessary.

In the years 2011–2012, the strategy did not seem to have been employed by all of the Swedish police as several of Stockholm’s supporter clubs boycotted ice-hockey matches in protest against what they experienced as violence inflicted by police officers, and which the supporters felt affected innocent people.<sup>26</sup> Supporters accuse police of operating in a confrontational, controlling, and oppressive manner; something several European sports researchers have indicated as a major concern.<sup>27</sup> Against this background, a new dialogue-based model was developed in the years 2014–2017, drawing on research that was subsequently integrated into police strategy. This national strategy was officially signed and approved by the Swedish Police (Represented by the Swedish Police Authority, the Swedish Prosecution Authority and the three largest police regions in Sweden) and Swedish football (represented by Swedish Football Association and the clubs).<sup>28</sup>

The Police Action Plan 2014–2017 states:

The positive supporter culture must be strengthened and the number of individuals with unsafe behavior must be reduced by those who work with sporting events gaining knowledge and education about the conflict-reducing principles. By applying the principles of conflict reduction, our hope is that treatment, respect, and dialogue with the individuals in the various supporter groups who attend a sporting event will be improved.<sup>29</sup>

In this action plan, supporters are described as an important asset and as being essential to Swedish football:

The positive supporter culture is one of the sport’s greatest assets, which is emphasized by leaders as well as athletes and arena visitors. The spectator in the stands brings the sport to life. The vast majority of sports supporters are orderly, contribute to a good atmosphere, and attend sports events because they find it enjoyable and interesting [...] The supporters spend considerable time following their clubs, organizing tifos, and helping to create a wonderful setting around the matches.<sup>30</sup>

SEF’s survey from 2013 shows that 92 percent of football match attendees feel that the atmosphere created by the positive supporter culture by means of tifos and songs is an important part of their overall experience.<sup>31</sup> Between the years 2014–2017, the police, the Swedish Football Association (Swedish FA), SEF, clubs, and the supporter clubs had a collective dialogue and a shared set of aims: increased security and reduced conflicts. Through this dialogue, great functional and positive results appeared, but the use of pyrotechnics still existed.<sup>32</sup>

Paradoxically, the successful, dialogue-centred approach was gradually altered, and the police authority shifted its strategy for combating the use of illegal pyrotechnics by implementing stricter restrictions through the Condition Ladder.<sup>33</sup> The Condition Ladder was issued in 2016, but was not operationalized until the season of 2019.<sup>34</sup> The purpose of the Condition Ladder is to compel the organizer – the club – to assume greater responsibility for security at matches. The clubs are expected to minimize the risks of violent behaviour and the use of pyrotechnics. If the clubs cannot ensure security, sanctions are put in place – and the police is allowed to determine which measures are necessary.

The Condition Ladder comprises three modes and of risk behaviour. The police shift the organizers up and down the three-step ladder depending on how they perceive the clubs’ ability to maintain order and avoid risky behaviour.<sup>35</sup> Here, we will shortly summarize the steps (Figure 1):

The working method is supposed to be applied consistently throughout Sweden and the main objective of the Condition Ladder is to increase security, avoid risks and reduce the use of police resources. Initially, responsibility for the work was eventually intended to be shifted from the regional to the national level, with the working group within the police – the National Operations Department (NOA) – taking charge.<sup>36</sup>

A new aspect of the Condition Ladder compared with previous policies was that police permission to organize a football match would now be granted conditionally on measures affecting all spectators, rather than individual offenders. In other words, it became a form of collective

First step	The event is conducted in a safe and orderly manner
Second step	If order and safety are considered insufficient, the cause of the problems must be identified. Conditions for future events are decided, adjusted, or restricted to address the causes of disorder (e.g., pyrotechnics, drunken individuals, fights, drug crimes). For example, the number of spectators can be limited in the stands where pyrotechnics have been used.
Third step	Unless order and security are improved at the next event, police will tighten restrictions further, with potential measures including requirements for more security guards, partial or complete restriction of spectator numbers, or more extensive body searches to stop problems with pyrotechnics.

Figure 1. The condition ladder.

punishment. The clubs also experienced a marked increase in demands on their security work, and felt that they were expected to conform to unrealistic standards when it came to managing risks.<sup>37</sup>

The situation is, however, complex. The police tactics for dealing with the issue of sports-related violence have often been criticized; not only by supporters, but also by many police officers themselves. Officers who are part of the supporter police indicate intra-organizational difficulties; claiming that they have difficulty communicating their own cultural competence about the supporter culture to their higher-ranking colleagues.<sup>38</sup> This in turn means that supporter police assess risk differently than the police as a whole, which may result in tougher interventions than those suggested by the supporter police. When asked about his colleagues within other branches of the police, a supporter police officer states:

Many times, they have a poor understanding [ . . . ] If there are 100 or 200 supporters in the same place, they see a huge problem, although it may be calm and instead there are 15–20 people further away who are the problem.<sup>39</sup>

Interpretations are thus negotiated on different levels: not only between police and supporters, but also between different branches of the police organization itself. Two main themes have been identified in police officers' statements relating to the Condition Ladder: that the police should be less involved in security work in relation to football games and that clubs should take more responsibility for their events.

Stefan Hector, who is the head of implementing the Condition Ladder, states:

In five years, we want a situation where the police are not a part of football, and where we avoid the narratives that describe the police as working against the fans. It will probably require many dialogues and there will be some steps forward, and some steps back, Hector says, and believes that financial or sporting sanctions for disturbances such as pyrotechnics could be a way forward.<sup>40</sup>

Pyrotechnics appear to be the main problem and the core of the conflict. Ultras feel that pyrotechnics are essential to creating an autonomous supporter culture – but simultaneously do not wish to cause financial or sporting sanctions for their club.<sup>41</sup>

In an interview, police Hector is asked whether he perceives the Condition Ladder as a form of collective punishment and replies that the strategy is aimed at keeping people safe in the stands. This, he explains, is motivated less by the illegality of pyrotechnics than the danger they pose:

Reducing the standing capacity is not done to punish a club. This is done to make it possible to carry out a rescue operation. To keep the spectators safe and make sure that it does not get overcrowded. It is not about the fact that pyrotechnics are illegal, it is about what is dangerous.<sup>42</sup>

In another interview, Hector is asked why no injuries are reported with so many pyrotechnics in the stands. Hector responds, without answering the question asked, that the police adapt to the standards set by the fire brigade for assessments of fire safety and the grading of danger.<sup>43</sup>

However, the source material for this study shows that there are policing regions that do not apply the Condition Ladder. In Region South, chief Karlsson states that his police force has opted instead to use individual access bans:

We work a lot with access bans, to make sure to get rid of the small, small minority who do not attend the games for the right reason. Earlier, we were not so good working with that, and received justified criticism from MFF. This was around 2018. We shaped up, and we became very good at doing our part.<sup>44</sup>

Karlsson describes a working strategy that is based on collaboration with the club (Malmö FF), and on the specific needs of that club. Karlsson's words about 'the small, small minority' who attend games for the wrong reasons, is a reference to disturbances caused by a few individuals, rather than a collective. This also evinces a discrepancy between the national level of the Condition Ladder and the ways in which it is operationalized at the regional level. Sometimes, police officers' express sympathy for the supporters' critiques. For example, police officer Magnus Almerfors comments thus on the flag ban levelled at IK Sirius:

I understand the protest from the supporters, I really understand that they feel that their activity is attacked, but from the police and the authorities we have different perspectives, if something is illegal, we must deal with it.<sup>45</sup>

There may be a difference between police officers working close to the clubs and supporters compared with those who make decisions at the national level. If so, this is congruent with the findings of previous research.<sup>46</sup>

### **Resistance from various actors in the football landscape**

In contrast with previous conflicts between police and supporters, the established football culture – represented by SEF and clubs – support the fans and are opposed to the police and the introduction of the Condition Ladder by law enforcement. The resistance is even found in media.

As noted above the implementation of the Condition Ladder led to conflicts. An area of conflict related to the Condition Ladder has been the flag ban and limitations on visual displays, which affect the choreographics of tifo. While tifo itself has not been banned, the materials used in tifo are impacted. In the source materials for this study, both the supporters cited in media and the interviewed supporters who create tifo see the Condition Ladder as problematic since it does not distinguish between visual displays that are legal (tifos) and illegal (pyrotechnics).

This can be exemplified, by the situation when GIF Sundsvall was banned from using flags in their stands early in the 2019 season.<sup>47</sup> This upset many supporters, leading to protests from various fan groups. A nationwide protest was organized by the Swedish Football Supporters Union (SFSU), a national interest group for supporters. The union represents around 40 supporter clubs and 50,000 members.<sup>48</sup> In round 14 of Allsvenskan 2019, supporters of nearly all teams in the league manifested their dissatisfaction with the Condition Ladder by remaining silent during the first 20 minutes of the match. SFSU's chairman Sofia Bohlin stated in an interview that the 20 silent minutes represented the dissatisfaction of the two million people who annually attend Allsvenskan.<sup>49</sup> Dissatisfaction and protests against the policy spread and the supporters were backed by the Swedish FA, SEF, clubs, players, and a number of sports journalists. Tensions between the Swedish police authority and its former interlocutors increased significantly.<sup>50</sup>

Another example could be seen in several banners that have been produced and showed in the football stands to protest against the Condition Ladder. The most common banner in Swedish arenas during the years 2019–2021 was: 'Save Swedish football – Scrap the Condition Ladder'. Other banners, used as slogans to criticize the Condition Ladders, include protests against ban on flags, age limit on standing, ban on away supporters, closed stands and day-time weekly matches. The messages of the banners reach a large audience outside the arenas and contribute to influencing perceptions of the Condition Ladder by the public, other supporter groups, and media. One telling

example of a banner used as a tool in the discussion of narrative control was on display among supporters of AIK after the introduction of the Condition Ladder<sup>51</sup>:

In the 2019 season, the police chose a new strategy  
from research and dialogue to prestigious idiocy  
With a stated goal of zero disturbance  
Disproportionate measures were launched by the monopoly on violence.

The banners show that the supporters are aware of the historical context of the police tactics for handling disorderly conduct and that they are critical and problematize the Condition Ladder.

According to the supporters, a continuation of the bans and limitations will lead to a sharp deterioration of the Swedish supporter culture, with negative consequences for Swedish football. Johan says:

What we see now is not only law enforcement, but this is a way of taking rather illegal shortcuts through legal elements in the supporter culture to access the illegal and that is why this is so serious.<sup>52</sup>

Most of the tifo is legal, while the pyrotechnics are not. Thus, it is hard to separate them. Previous studies have suggested that it is difficult to clearly demarcate creators of tifo from the Ultras as the groups are often mixed.<sup>53</sup> This complicated relationship between legal tifo activities and illegal pyrotechnics make it difficult to determine whether tifo in a general sense is illegal or not.

The informants are worried that the tifo culture will disappear if the Condition Ladder remains in place. Among those who create tifos, there is an opposition to authorities dictating the appearance or message of a tifo. Jacob states that this should be decided by those who create tifo:

I would never create tifos that need to be approved by the police. Tifo should be done by supporters, for supporters.<sup>54</sup>

Some parts of the supporter culture, especially the Ultras, view themselves as operating in a cultural free zone where they are able to express themselves freely in the stands.<sup>55</sup> From their perspective, the Swedish tifo culture is what makes Swedish football culture interesting. Johan says:

In a league where the sport is not of the highest ranking, it would be devastating for Swedish football. The tifo culture is our main business card as a league.<sup>56</sup>

A possible interpretation is that the supporters who create tifos see themselves as important for their club and the whole league. In their view, limiting their expression would thus harm Swedish football. At the same time, the tifo culture appears to exist in a limbo state between the legal tifo and the illegal pyrotechnics. In addition, the supporters' opposition towards the Condition Ladder is based on the fact that it is perceived as a form of collective punishment, that it is seen as a waste of public resources, and the perceived lack of long-term investment on the part of police, law enforcement, and authorities.

The clubs and SEF have criticized the Condition Ladder, arguing that it places an unreasonable burden of responsibility on clubs; that the method is counterproductive; and that the working model adopted between 2014–2017 gave favourable results. It is mainly employees of AIK, Djurgården, and Hammarby – all based in Stockholm – who have commented and been interviewed in media, though other clubs were also represented in our material.

The overall aim of the Condition Ladder is to reach zero disturbances at football matches. AIK vice-chairman Fredrik Söderberg believes that the Condition Ladder places too much responsibility on clubs and their security managers. He says in an interview:

The police need to prosecute people who commit crimes, just like anywhere else in society. If we do this together, we as organizers can ensure good order and good security at our events. But there can never be a guarantee that someone will not be able to commit a crime. It is an unreasonable responsibility to take.<sup>57</sup>

Söderberg emphasizes that cooperation between clubs and the police is the best way to ensure safety, but that there is no way of guaranteeing that disturbances will not occur. An incident that



received considerable media attention was the football club IK Sirius receiving a ban against flags, like the club GIF Sundsvall had previously received in 2019. In connection with this, SEF General Secretary Mats Enqvist states:

I do not have much more to say than what we have been saying since 2019 that we consider this type of measure to be both misdirected and counterproductive. [...] Measures that have the wrong effect on the wrong people and deplete the trust capital and increase radicalization and dissatisfaction.<sup>58</sup>

As seen above, Enqvist expresses that the measures governed by the Condition Ladder are misdirected and counterproductive, and that the flag ban affects the wrong people.

The flag ban has thus far proven counterproductive; during the match in question, IK Sirius supporters burned over 40 Bengal fires, which they not usually do. Therefore, the application of the Condition Ladder appears to affect a greater number of people in the stands than those who cause trouble with pyrotechnics. This leads to harsh criticism towards the police, rather than criticism of the use of illegal pyrotechnics. This will be further discussed in the section on supporters below.

In another article, Hammarby IF's security manager Göran Rickmer criticizes the non-dialogue approach of the police. Rickmer explains that foreign police and representatives from European leagues and clubs previously came to Sweden to see and learn how different actors collaborated to promote a positive supporter culture:

There were huge problems with increased violence, racism and the use of pyrotechnics. At that time, Sweden was a country that could show that the amount of pyrotechnics did not increase but decreased in some years, but overall, it was quite latent.<sup>59</sup>

A possible interpretation of Rickmer's opposition towards the Condition Ladder could be that his professional experience and expertise as security manager is overlooked. Clubs previous work to increase security and address problems, such as violence and racism around football games, is not recognized or acknowledged in the Condition Ladder strategy, according to Rickmer.

The source materials suggest that clubs outside of the Stockholm region operate differently. Regional police manage events in differing manners, meaning that there are regional differences in the application of the Condition Ladder. The security manager of Malmö FF has stated that the club has a constructive dialogue with local police.<sup>60</sup> IF Elfsborg's security manager also states that the club has not been as affected as other clubs.<sup>61</sup> The club IFK Göteborg made the following statement on its website:

Since the debate was raised in the spring of 2019 – with a few exceptions – the police in Region West have avoided applying most of the debated types of conditions. Instead, they have safeguarded a functioning collaboration with football and used evidence-based working methods. The attitude deserves attention, not least from the police's own national leadership.<sup>62</sup>

These differences in police tactics raise a number of questions regarding why the police work differently in different regions, all while the Condition Ladder was intended as a cohesive national strategy from other stakeholders.

The resistance to the Condition Ladder is seen in media too. Stefan Hector, the policeman in charge of the Condition Ladder has several times said 'The police want to own the narrative'. Hector has repeatedly commented on the importance of the police owning the media narrative in order to set the agenda for the Condition Ladder.<sup>63</sup> This appears as wishful thinking; a futile attempt to control the information about the development of the supporter culture. The new media landscape empowers different supporter groups to act as independent media producers by creating and curating their own narratives. This production process changes the selection criteria for the story of what constitutes 'a good supporter culture'. In this way, contemporary supporter culture is part of a hypertextuality where several different types of media – websites, YouTube, Flashback, Instagram, Twitter, and other media platforms – are linked to each other. This leads to a diversity of stories and the creation and recreation of local as well as global narratives.<sup>64</sup>

The West-derby match, which was the first game after the lifting of pandemic restrictions, was preceded by an opinion piece in *Göteborgs Posten* authored by the chairs of two rivalling supporter clubs: Guliganerna (supporting IF Elfsborg) and Änglarna (supporting IFK Göteborg).

The fact that the Police Authority invests tons of resources and energy in this petty crime, inflicts collective punishment on thousands of ordinary supporters, and destroys the opportunity for dialogue is a waste of resources. There was a good way to work — use it!<sup>65</sup>

The authors of the opinion piece underline what they view as collective punishment, stressing that the earlier method gave favourable results. They also invoke an economical argument by discussing the use of police resources; the purpose of the Condition Ladder is to reduce the use of police resources in relation to football games.

SFSU played an important role in the strategy used between 2014–2017. SFSU chair Sofia Bohlin states that there has been limited cooperation since 2019, and that there have only been three meetings with police officers who have no influence in decision-making:

They do not take us seriously; they do not match our position in football with equal representation and officials from the police. They send someone who is five steps down, who can only listen and say, 'I hear you'.<sup>66</sup>

Bohlin states that SFSU is not given the opportunity to meet with police officials who have any power to effect change. In the interview, she highlights the differences between police officers that work on match days and those who are in decision-making positions. As a result, even if SFSU officials are granted meetings with members of the police, this does not lead to new solutions being formulated or implemented within the police organization.

A structure that is formalized with structural conversations, to create possibilities for building relationships and forms of cooperation, to be able to recognize each other as important parts with different functions within football.<sup>67</sup>

The solution to this conflict is to recognize each other's importance and work collaboratively, Bohlin argues.

## Conclusion: risks, conflicts and resistance

The purpose of this article was to chart, analyse, and explain the situation that has arisen from the implementation of the Condition Ladder and how it affects the contemporary Swedish supporter culture. We have discussed how clubs, police, and supporters have managed the Condition Ladder within their respective areas of responsibility, and how conditions and cooperation around these areas have developed since the implementation of the Condition Ladder.

The implementation of the Condition Ladder has led to new conflicts between different actors in the football landscape. Previously the conflicts were between the police, the clubs, and media on one side, and the supporters on the other.<sup>68</sup> Currently the conflicts can be seen between the clubs, media and the supporters on one side, and the police on the other. However, contradictory practices also exist within the police.

Persson writes that the characteristics of society's risks are that they are formulated and reformulated in many different contexts, politically, legally, culturally<sup>69</sup> – how supporter culture in general and pyrotechnics specifically have been handled based on different risk assessments in the different contexts are clear examples of this. Persson claims that the risks that are noticed and become significant are such risks that we can relate to or react to – those that pose meaningful human problems and society's opportunities to do something about these problems.<sup>70</sup> The media visibility of the supporter culture, not least through pyrotechnics, means that the 'pyrotechnic risk' is constantly in focus for various societal actors who manage risks. This study shows that the restrictions that are operationalized through the Condition Ladder are perceived as unreasonable by supporters, clubs, SEF, and the media, while the law enforcement and the police believe the

Condition Ladder is the best tool for achieving peace and order on the Swedish football stands, which means zero tolerance for Bengals. Because the parties are so far apart in the problem identification<sup>71</sup> of how the pyrotechnics issue should be handled, there is a collapse in negotiations with different ways of showing resistance to the Condition Ladder taking place among supporters, players, media, and SEF.

Firstly, clubs, supporters, and the police relate differently to the implications of the Condition Ladder because they have different areas of responsibility as well as differing perceptions of how to organize public events. The clubs consider themselves as very competent in organizing safe events, according to the interviews; the supporters and the tifo creators feel that they play an essential role in enriching Swedish football; and police must work to uphold the law. At the same time, supporters, clubs, and SEF question why the Condition Ladder was applied in the first place when the previous working method showed good results.

Our study shows that most actors within the milieu – including supporters, SEF, SFSU, journalists, and players – demand a more dialogue-oriented process. This also includes the part of police that works with the clubs, while the decision makers see it differently. Similar to previous studies, our study shows a disparity between the police officers who work close to the football environment and those in decision-making positions.<sup>72</sup> Although the purpose of the Condition Ladder has been to ensure consistency in police tactics and strategy, regional differences and needs appear to play a decisive role.

One reason why it is difficult to manage the risks surrounding pyrotechnics is that there are so many different actors involved. The police claim that they are dependent on the rescue service and the fire brigade to assess how dangerous the pyrotechnics are. Persson writes that the risk assessment tasks that arrive at society's various institutions often take place on the basis of organizational considerations, which may mean that it is not those who have the best knowledge of the current risks who are given the responsibility to operationalize measures to reduce the same risks.<sup>73</sup>

Secondly, our study may give some clues regarding the impacts of the Condition Ladder on the Swedish supporter culture. We see obvious risks for an escalation of the conflict which may lead to further restrictions and stigmatization of football spectators. However, the conflict is ongoing and it is therefore difficult to say anything conclusive about the long-term consequences for Swedish football and its supporter culture.

For those who create tifo, the Condition Ladder will restrict the possibility to make tifos in a way that they want to (for example, using painted fabric). This can be a threat to the autonomous and independent tifo and Ultras culture. However, the tifos is balancing between being legal and illegal, which complicate the situation, even though the tifos are mainly legal. Also, tifo is a fundamental element in both Ultras and the supporter culture.<sup>74</sup> The Condition Ladder could therefore be seen as a risk for the supporters to lose fundamental elements in their culture, and for the Ultras to lose their free zone in the stands.

In the case with the Condition Ladder, the constructive relationship with the supporters has deteriorated. However, the supporters highlight that the collaboration between different stakeholders within the football field made Sweden an example of a good practice for reducing disturbances at football games, which included the police as is stated in earlier research.<sup>75</sup> The police need to maintain law and order, the clubs and supporters used to be an example of good practice for their work with safety and football games with a positive atmosphere. Therefore, it could be assumed that this conflict will be difficult to solve while no parts see themselves doing wrong, even though all groups state that they have room for improvement.

Finally, the media narratives about the Condition Ladder show a shift away from a previous focus in which football supporters were generally depicted as hooligans and perpetrators of an uncivilized masculinity.<sup>76</sup> This study shows different media narratives where most journalists and media companies show an understanding for the clubs 'and supporters' frustrations over the Condition Ladder, they present the supporters' perspectives and criticize the police's way of handling the conflicts and risks. The previous moral panic surrounding the supporter culture

seems to have been replaced by a legitimizing approach towards football supporters, yet further research will be necessary in order to examine the long-term consequences of the Condition Ladder for Swedish football and supporter culture, and the issues concerning safety and trust in the sports arenas.

## Notes

1. Beck, *Risk Society*; and Persson, *Risker i kunskapens mellanrum*.
2. Persson, *Risker i kunskapens mellanrum*, 25.
3. Andersson, *Kung fotboll*.
4. Andersson, *Svensk fotbollshuliganism 1900 – 1970*.
5. Dunning, *Sport matters*; Armstrong, *Football Hooligans*; and Spaaij, ‘Men like us, boys like them.’
6. Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*.
7. Andersson and Radmann, *Från gentleman till huligan*.
8. Karlén, *Vad är tifo?*
9. Ibid.
10. Herd, ‘We can make new history here’.
11. Havelund et al., ‘Decidedly frosty’.
12. Havelund et al., ‘Decidedly frosty’; Havelund et al., *Fotboll och huliganism i Skandinavien*; Joern, ‘Alle Hader Os’; Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*; and Stott and Pearson, *Football ‘hooliganism*.
13. Stott and Adang, *Understanding and Managing Risk*.
14. Ibid., 37.
15. Tsoukala, *Football Hooliganism in Europe*.
16. Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*.
17. The newspaper *Göteborgs Posten* is based in Gothenburg, the others in Stockholm. The selection of these newspapers has been guided by our aim to analyse the national supporter landscape.
18. The time period for the media analysis has been chosen to include the first matches without pandemic restrictions as well as the protests against the Condition Ladder.
19. Naumanen and Stjernström, *Klacken utan röst*.
20. The supporters were interviewed in the spring of 2020, the year after the application of the Condition Ladder.
21. SOU 2012:23, *Mindre Våld för Pengarna*.
22. Havelund et al., ‘Decidedly frosty’.
23. Hannes Nyberg, ‘Allsvenska publiken växer mest i Europa’, *Sveriges Television*, 15 January 2018, <https://www.svt.se/>.
24. Montague, 1312: *Among the Ultras*; and SOU 2012: 23, *Mindre Våld för Pengarna*.
25. BRÅ, *Strategier mot fotbollsrelaterade ordningsstörningar*, 72 – 82.
26. SOU 2012: 23, *Mindre Våld för Pengarna*.
27. Frostdickand Marsh, *Football hooliganism*; Joern, ‘Alle Hader Os’; and Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*.
28. Havelund et al., ‘Decidedly frosty’.
29. Rikspolisstyrelsen, 2014–2017, 7.
30. Ibid., 10.
31. Swedish EliteFootballand United Minds. *Fotbollspubliken idag – och imorgon*.
32. Stott et al., *The value of Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs)*; and Stott et al., *Policing football in Sweden*.
33. Havelund et al., ‘Decidedly frosty’.
34. Polisen, *Alignment decision regarding the application of guideline PM 2016:21*.
35. Polisen, *PM 2016: 21*.
36. Ibid.
37. Tillberg, ‘Villkorad kärlek’.
38. Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*.
39. Hagström et al., *Va för jävla pack e ni?*, 197.
40. Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå AB, ‘Polisens svar efter missnöjet från supportrarna’, *Göteborgs Posten*, 28 September 2021, <https://www.gp.se/>.
41. Herd, ‘We can make new history here’.
42. Ibraheem Alsalmán, ‘Svaret eter kritiken: “Bengaler är farliga”’, *Expressen*, 28 September 2021, <https://www.expressen.se/>.
43. Malena Johansson, ‘Polisens mål: Bengaliska eldar borta från fotbollen inom fem år’, *Dagens Nyheter*, 28 September 2021, <https://www.dn.se/>.
44. Malena Johansson, ‘Polisens plan: Vill kunna kräva sittplats på läktaren’, *Dagens Nyheter*, 24 September 2021, <https://www.dn.se/>.

45. Andreas Johnsson, 'IFK Göteborg markerar mot polisen och villkorstrappan', *Göteborgs Posten*, 23 September 2021, <https://www.gp.se/>.
46. Havelund et al, 'Decidedly frosty' and Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*.
47. Patronerna, Instagram, 17 April 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwXn3SunZO2/>.
48. SFSU, homepage, <https://sfsu.nu/vara-medlemmar/>.
49. AnelAvdic.Allsvenska fansens nya protest: 20 tysta minuter, *Expressen*, 3 July 2019, <https://www.expressen.se/>.
50. Havelund et al., 'Decidedly frosty'.
51. AIK-Sundsvall, played 2 November 2019.
52. Interview with Johan, 18 February 2020.
53. Karlén, *Vadär tifo?*
54. Interview with Jacob, 2 March 2020.
55. Herd, 'We can make new history here'.
56. Interview with Johan, 18 February 2020.
57. Malena Johansson. Polisens besked till klubbarna: Ska ingripa mot bengalbrännare'. *Dagens Nyheter*, 19 September 2021, <https://www.dn.se/>.
58. Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå AB, 'Efter flaggförbudet: 'Skapar enormt stora svallvågor', *Aftonbladet*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/>.
59. Hugo Månsson, and Josip Ladan, 'Stockholmsklubbarnas kritik mot "nya villkorstrappan": "Det är värre"', *Aftonbladet*, 1 October 2021, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/>.
60. Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå AB, 'Efter flaggförbudet: "Skapar enormt stora svallvågor"', *Aftonbladet*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/>.
61. Wagner Michael, 'Blåvitt har bottenkänning- hoppas på rekord stöd', *Aftonbladet*, 1 October 2021, <https://www.gp.se/>.
62. Andreas Johnsson, 'Göteborgs Posten. IFK Göteborg markerar mot polisen och villkorstrappan', *Göteborgs Posten*, 23 September 2021, <https://www.gp.se/>.
63. Tillberg, 'Villkorad kärlek'.
64. Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*; Radmann and Hedenborg, 'Gender trouble in digital football fandom'.
65. Emelie Hultin and John Pettersson, 'Polisen ska lösa riktiga problem – inte vakta läkare', *Göteborgs Posten*, 1 October 2021, <https://www.gp.se/>.
66. Interview with Sofia Bohlin, 24 November 2021.
67. Ibid.
68. Andersson, *Kung Fotboll* and Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*.
69. Persson, *Risker i kunskapens mellanrum*.
70. Ibid., 98.
71. Ibid., 101.
72. Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*.
73. Persson, *Risker i kunskapens mellanrum*.
74. Karlén, *Vad är tifo?*
75. Havelund et al, 'Decidedly frosty'.
76. Tsoukala, *FootballHooliganism in Europe*.

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