

DSB football guides

– a Danish solution to an international problem?



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Good hosting

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by Malene Friis and Jonas Havelund, 2012

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Foreword

Every year thousands of Danish football fans follow their team's away matches by train. For many years, this has caused numerous problems for other train passengers and staff. But most of these problems belong to the past. Today football fans travel in separate coaches with specially trained staff – so called football guides. The interaction between guides and fans is characterized by a positive atmosphere. This small booklet provides a description of this DSB scheme and the reasoning behind the initiative.

The overall purpose is to focus on “good hosting” in the handling of sports spectators in public places. It is carried out within the framework of an EU-funded interregional project on “event based innovation”. The project is based on collaboration between universities, municipalities, regions and private companies in the areas around Gothenburg in Sweden, Oslo in Norway and Aarhus in Denmark. The aim of the EU project is to attract and handle large sporting events through innovative projects.

Introduction

For many years, Danish football fans caused numerous problems for other train passengers and staff when travelling to and from football matches. However, since 2009 when the football guide project was initiated, these problems have been dramatically reduced primarily through a strategy of cooperation with football fans, which has meant that both passengers and train staff no longer feel apprehensive about the match days of the Danish Super League. The reason for this positive development may be found in DSB's (Denmark's largest train operator) so-called football guide scheme, according to which train travel arrangements are made with fans that travel together in separate coaches or train with specially trained staff. This article provides a description of this DSB scheme and the reasoning behind the initiative.

Background

A shift toward potentially violent football fan culture took place relatively late in Denmark. While 'hooliganism' and other football-related

'disorder' in other Western European countries saw significant increases in the 1970s and 1980s, Denmark rightfully prided itself on its peaceful fans. Indeed, in 1984, the International Fair Play Committee awarded Danish football fans the Fair Play Diploma for their exemplary behaviour during the European Championships in France that year. At around that time, the Danish media came up with the nickname of "Roligans"¹ to stereotype the jovial and peaceful nature of Danish fans in contrast to their infamous "Hooligans" counterparts.

However, during the 1990s, Danish fan culture took a different turn. With the establishment of the Danish Super League in 1991, attendance figures rose and thereby also the number of fans who followed their favourite teams, attending both home and away matches. Fans organised themselves in official and unofficial factions inspired by fan cultures in countries such as Italy and Britain. During this time Denmark experienced a fan culture in which openly violent groups gained ground, though the extent and

¹ The Danish adjective "rolig" means "calm".

severity of the problem never reached the scale and intensity witnessed elsewhere, Danish fan culture is currently characterised by significant incidents and threats of football related safety and security challenges.

Initiative

DSB is Denmark's largest train operator, servicing all the main lines throughout Denmark. Even before the start of the scheme, football fans often chose DSB as their transport provider. This was partly because several of the infamous factions were shunned by coach companies whose drivers often turned the fans away. This in turn created problems for DSB in the form of vandalism and dissatisfied 'non-football' passengers who felt annoyed or were made to feel uncomfortable by the fans' threatening and sometimes violent behaviour. Moreover, train staff often called in sick when they realised that they were down to work on days when they risked meeting large groups of football fans. In short, travelling Danish football fans became a significant problem for DSB who often felt that

they had no choice other than to ask the police to accompany the fans on their journeys to and from matches.

A few DSB employees had been considering for some time what could be done to solve this problem. The strategy that transpired was quite simply to meet informally with fans and to agree with them how best to organise their train travel. DSB decided to pilot the strategy following a match in April 2008 between AGF and Brøndby IF where the costs of the acts of vandalism perpetrated by these fan groups caused damage to the rolling stock of approx. €250,000. The co-author of this article, Malene Friis, is the DSB employee who pioneered the approach through establishing dialogue with key individuals among fans in order to agree on an arrangement that would be acceptable to both parties.

Friis established contact by meeting the fans on the platform in the town where a match had been played and then getting on the train with them and sharing their homeward journey. Getting in contact with football fans was in a way both easy

and difficult. Friis found it easy in as much as the fans were easy to identify and to talk to when you met them on the platform. However, as we will discuss later, it was not just a matter of getting in contact with fans generally. It was about getting in touch with key individuals among the fans – and that was a great deal more difficult. Thus, it took eight months from when Friis first started attempts to communicate with one of the key individuals among the ‘hard-core’ fans of Brøndby IF until he formally introduced himself to her. However, as time has passed, it has become easier for DSB to make contact with other factions. One of the main reasons is that despite their rivalry, the fans of the different clubs actually have quite a good communication network. These days, the issue is in fact turned on its head in as much as new factions of fans – and even fans of other sports – contact DSB asking to join the scheme.

Scheme

In the main, the scheme consists in DSB providing separate carriages exclusively for the

fans. The fans buy their tickets on the train (which is not customary practice) at prices that are easy to remember. Thus, the price is DKK 100 per section² (approx. € 13,50) of the country for a return ticket. Therefore, a return journey between Copenhagen in one part of the country and Aalborg at the other end of the country costs DKK 300 (approx. € 40,50), and the fans buy their tickets in cash from the football guides. The prices more or less correspond to the discounted tickets that DSB calls Orange Tickets (discounted tickets that may be purchased in limited numbers and well in advance) or the price per person when travelling as part of a group. The calculation of the number of coaches or train sets that are required is based on the estimated number of fans travelling. The fans themselves contribute to estimating these passenger figures using various discussion forums and social media, such as Facebook. DSB's scheme coordinator also has a Facebook profile which is used to communicate with fans. All

² Denmark may be divided into three main sections: Jutland, Funen and Zealand.

communication between DSB and the fans goes through the scheme coordinator.

There are very few rules on the football trains. However, it is emphasised that there is to be no violence, vandalism or sale of drugs on any of the football fans' journeys. Other than that, the football guides rarely interfere with the behaviour of the fans, permitting a more rowdy atmosphere than usual. The scheme is based on mutual respect and depends on a level of self-discipline among the fans. The fans take ownership of the scheme and this is a huge strength. Thus, it is not unusual for the fans themselves to help clearing up the coaches when they are nearing their destination. The football guides build on the fans' self-discipline by being kind and obliging, by paying no attention to the fans' political persuasions and by not judging the fans' presumed actions outside DSB's domain. Moreover, a close dialogue is maintained with key individuals among the fans at all times.

On the day, a football guide's work consists of selling tickets and providing a general level of

service for the fans. The provision of this service is based on an in-depth knowledge of fans and their patterns of behaviour. This knowledge is crucial in relation to the continuous risk assessment undertaken by the staff in order that they may be proactive in deescalating potentially violent or disorderly situations and maintaining a safe and relaxed atmosphere throughout the journey. A great deal is required of the football guides on duty. Depending on the number of passengers, there are between three and nine football guides on duty per journey. With nine football guides and 700 fans within the confined space of a train, it stands to reason that clear division of labour and solid team work are absolutely essential. The individual football guides' roles and areas of responsibility are agreed on the day. Some will be responsible for specific exits, while others will be given freer roles, allowing them to move about, engaging the fans in dialogue, and to be on hand to defuse conflicts in a calm manner. The work can be mentally demanding. Therefore, the scheme cannot function effectively if a football guide on duty has an off-day. This is why it has been

agreed that the person in charge on the day has the authority to send home a colleague, if – in his or her assessment – the particular football guide will not be able to handle the job of dealing with the fans throughout the day.

The fans are aware that the football guides do communicate with the police to some degree. Before each journey, DSB sends an e-mail to its partners, including the police. This e-mail includes details of the time of the departure of the train, coach numbers, general safety information and measures taken onboard the train. Some 1,200 people are recipients of this e-mail. The fans are aware that the police get this information. Transparency and integrity are central principles in dealing with the fans. This also applies in the event that a football guide is a witness to a criminal act. In such a situation, the football guide may be called as a witness like anybody else, and this has happened in connection with an act of violence on a platform.

Training

DSB has itself undertaken the training of the football guides. The training of the first group of football guides, 22 in total, took place over two days. The subsequent group, also of 22 individuals, received one day's training. The training consisted of a mixture of group discussions and class teaching. There were special presentations from a doctor (on handling stress), the police (on the importance of dialogue in police work) and researchers of fan culture (on fan culture and police handling of fans). The object of the training was to give the football guides a professional grounding and, not least, to ensure that they got a common understanding of the concept and the background of the scheme.

However, you cannot learn to become a football guide purely in the classroom. The most important part of the training takes place on the job when new football guides shadow their more experienced colleagues. On the first three to five journeys that a football guide undertakes, he or she is included as an extra on top of the manpower required. For new football guides, it is all about learning from their experienced

colleagues and gradually acquiring in-depth knowledge of fans and their patterns of behaviour. These are basic skills in relation to being able to identify and handle risks and therefore absolutely crucial for a football guide to be able to contribute to deescalating potential conflict situations.

A good football guide is characterised by the following behaviour profile: he or she has a good sense of humour, is tolerant and understanding as well as patient, flexible and capable of taking charge of a situation in a proactive and calm manner. It is a plus if football guides are interested in sport, though they must refrain from giving any clear indications of favouring any particular clubs. Some importance is also given to an applicant's appearance and stature, as experience shows that these can have an influence on fan behaviour.

Out of the 44 football guides that were trained, 38 are still in the job. On an annual basis, they work on between three and ten journeys depending on their place of work (with the

exception of the scheme coordinator who participated in 40 out of 41 possible journeys during the 2010–2011 season). Since the beginning of the scheme, not one employee has called in sick on account of an incident in relation to the football trains. In fact, there has only been one incidence of absence due to illness across the 123 journeys, which the football guides have made since the beginning of the scheme.

Conclusion

With the football trains, DSB has managed to turn an untenable situation into a popular scheme. In 2008, DSB spent some €1,346,000 clearing up and making repairs as a consequence of football-related vandalism, while the cost of this was only €5,400 in 2011. In this way, some of the problems that DSB was faced with on account of the shift in Danish fan culture have been solved through a strategy based on facilitation and dialogue. The scheme is, to a great extent, sustained by the self-discipline and sense of ownership among the fans. In recognition of the scheme, DSB was nominated

for the LIVIA Foundation Award in 2010, for the corporation's contribution to constructive, non-violent conflict resolution.

Naturally, the scheme poses challenges for DSB. In relation to logistics, DSB would normally plan long-term, whereas the football guide scheme requires the flexibility of short-term planning. Thus, the scheme relies on the goodwill of management and the logistics staff, who manage to find the necessary coaches or train sets, as well as the staff, to run the football trains.

To everybody's satisfaction.