

Football: This Year's Champions League Final Was a Showcase for Police Brutality in France

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The Champions League final is one of the biggest events in world sports. UEFA and the French police turned it into a brutal, dangerous fiasco — and Emmanuel Macron's ministers are lying through their teeth about what happened.

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The Champions League final is meant to be the pinnacle of European football. This year, the sport's governing body, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), joined forces with the French state to offer a very different kind of spectacle — one of casual police brutality and official negligence that might have had lethal consequences. Coming just weeks after Emmanuel Macron creaked his way into a second presidential term, the match in Paris held up an unflattering mirror to Macron's France and to the condition of the modern game.

“Out in the Wild”

Unsurprisingly, Macron's government ministers weren't happy to be confronted with their own reflection, and they've responded by blaming the victims and wheeling out discredited talking points. Macron himself said back in 2019 that it was impermissible to talk about “police violence” or “repression” in a country like France: “Such words are unacceptable in a state under the rule of law.”

From this perspective, it doesn't matter if there were hundreds or even thousands of witnesses, including politicians and police officers from Britain. They must have imagined it when they saw French riot cops using tear gas and pepper spray for no good reason against Liverpool supporters who had been channeled into dangerous bottlenecks on the way to the stadium.

Macron's interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, [claimed](#) there was “massive, industrial-scale and organized fraud.” He suggested that thirty or even forty thousand Liverpool fans turned up at the stadium with fake tickets: “Manifestly, this kind of incident only seems to happen with certain English clubs.” Darmanin also [insisted](#) that the use of tear gas was a humanitarian act, “necessary to free up space, so that people weren't trampled to death.”

The sports minister Amélie Oudéa-Castéra [echoed](#) Darmanin's line, laying great emphasis on the fact that there were no reports of difficulty for Real Madrid fans on their way to the final:

The fact that the Real Madrid club has supervised the coming of its supporters to Paris to such an extent, by scheduling buses from the airport and organizing everything from start to finish — which contrasted sharply with what the Liverpool club did, letting its supporters out in the wild — made a huge difference.

By the time Darmanin and Oudéa-Castéra brandished these excuses, dripping with class contempt ("out in the wild"), Ken Early of the *Irish Times* had already [explained](#) the supposed contrast between the two sets of supporters. Unlike the two French politicians, Early witnessed the fiasco at close hand:

Madrid had the north end of the ground, and the Madrid fanzone was located just one kilometer north of the stadium, so many of their supporters would have arrived in the general Saint Denis area earlier in the day. The most convenient train station for them to arrive at was the Saint Denis metro to the north of the stadium rather than the RER stations to the south. On the wider northern approaches they did not encounter the sort of bottlenecks that were delaying the Liverpool crowd. The Liverpool fanzone, by contrast, drew tens of thousands of supporters to Cours de Vincennes, in the east of Paris, 10 kilometres from the Stade de France and at least 45 minutes away by public transport. There was no reason for these supporters to head out to Saint Denis hours beforehand — unless they were anticipating something would go wrong.

Early summed up what did go wrong on the night:

The basic problem was that the southern approaches were too constricted to accommodate the flow of people to the match. The crowd management plan essentially required a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, and when the camel proved unable to get through in a timely fashion the police got stuck into it with pepper spray and tear gas. . . .

. . . Those tempted to assume that the police must have had a good reason to unleash their clubs and chemicals should remember that for riot cops, beating people up is the most enjoyable part of the job. UEFA are lucky this organizational shambles did not turn out to have much worse consequences.

For all practical purposes, the people who run modern football treat it as a business, a mass-market entertainment product, ignoring the fact that supporters don't shop around between different clubs in the same way cinemagoers decide which Hollywood blockbuster takes their fancy. But they can't even be trusted with the safety of their supposed customer base at the most prestigious level of the game.

Picking at a Scab

Early's observation about the recreational habits of riot police may not go down well with people

who think we can never show enough gratitude to the “thin blue line.” But it will certainly resonate with those who have experienced the culture of French policing firsthand, such as the twenty-four protesters who were [blinded by rubber bullets](#) between November 2018 and May 2019.

French government ministers responded to criticism of the police by blaming the victims and wheeling out discredited talking points.

The events of last Saturday were different because there were so many witnesses, of the kind that French cops don't usually have to worry about when harassing teenagers in the Parisian *banlieues*. For one thing, there were match-day police officers from Liverpool, who quickly [rebutted](#) the official narrative: “The behavior of the fans at the turnstiles was exemplary in shocking circumstances.” Liverpool FC's Scottish defender, Andy Robertson, challenged the claim about fake tickets, noting that one of his friends had been told his ticket was counterfeit even though it came directly from Robertson himself.

Liverpool's metro mayor [Steve Rotheram](#), a Labour politician, was told to climb over a fence by riot cops, and had his jacket pickpocketed in the process:

I walked over to the police to tell them I'd had everything stolen and one of them said: “Welcome to Paris.” Some Liverpool fans shouted to them: “He's our mayor.” Two French lads who had come over to help translated to the gendarme, who were nonplussed until one of the lads Googled me and showed it to a gendarme. He immediately took me through to get a duplicate ticket.

Rotheram said that he confronted the UEFA president Aleksander Čeferin about what was happening after securing entry to the ground:

I politely introduced myself and explained what I'd witnessed and the concerns I had. He seemed oblivious to it. He said to me: “We've only had three months to organize this, we've killed ourselves to get this game on.” To which I replied: “I'm more concerned that people aren't killed outside.” He indicated that I was being disrespectful.

Some of the Liverpool fans in Paris were survivors of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, which claimed the lives of ninety-seven people. Kevin Cowley [told the Guardian](#) that it immediately brought back memories of that day. He also compared the way Macron's government was talking about the Champions League final to the notorious cover-up that came after Hillsborough:

Every time I read the narrative that they are putting out there it just hits me between the eyes with Hillsborough all over again. The only thing I take any solace in is the fact that what happened this time was viewed by the world's press, and we've got social media and cameras, so they can't get away with what they are trying to spin. But every time I read this narrative it is like someone is picking at a scab.

Financial Doping

Fortunately, there was no repeat of the mass casualties at Hillsborough on Saturday evening. But official mendacity isn't the only thread connecting the two matches. Another Hillsborough survivor, Adrian Tempany, discussed the ironic legacy of that day for English football in his book, [*And the Sun Shines Now*](#).

While the lies about Liverpool fans assaulting police and urinating on the dead were still ricocheting around Britain's public sphere, the stewards of the English game were seizing on the opportunity to introduce all-seater stadiums. This was part of a process that transformed England's top division into a vastly lucrative global product. Broadcast rights money from Rupert Murdoch, whose *Sun* newspaper demonized the Hillsborough victims, supplied the necessary rocket fuel to send the Premier League into orbit.

During the first decade or so of the new regime, the big English clubs still relied on the revenue streams they could generate, directly or indirectly, from within the world of football (ticket sales, merchandising, sponsorship deals, and their share of the TV cash pile). Then the Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich bought Chelsea in 2003. The Premier League finally decided that Abramovich was a dubious figure after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and obliged him to sell the club; UEFA transferred the Champions League final from Petersburg to Paris for the same reason. By then, the horse had long since bolted from the stable, as Jonathan Wilson [observed](#):

What Abramovich did was in effect decouple a club's capacity to invest from success on the pitch and the usual rules of commerce. Arsenal built a new stadium to try to compete with Manchester United; Abramovich just put his hand in his pocket.

During his time as Chelsea's owner, Abramovich shelled out £1.5 billion in loans, which the club will apparently never pay back. The Arsenal manager Arsène Wenger referred to this as "financial doping."

Abramovich established a template that his fellow petro-capitalists in the Middle East went on to copy. The current deputy prime minister of the United Arab Emirates, Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, owns Manchester City through his Abu Dhabi United Group. The emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, owns Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) through Qatar Sports Investments. City have won four out of the last five Premier League titles, while PSG have won eight out of the last ten French championships. Both clubs have reached the Champions League final since 2020, and there's every reason to think they will snap up the winner's trophy sooner or later, just as Chelsea did in 2012 and 2021.

Some of the Liverpool fans in Paris were survivors of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, which claimed the lives of 97 people.

Last year, the great white shark of the Gulf Cooperation Council decided to follow where its minnows had previously led. The Saudi Public Investment Fund, under the control of Mohammed bin Salman, took an 80 percent stake in Newcastle United. *Ceteris paribus*, we can also expect Newcastle to vacuum up their share of domestic and European trophies in the coming years.

Mohammed bin Salman certainly played a far more intimate role in the invasion of Yemen than Abramovich did in the invasion of Ukraine, so the Russian businessman's forced departure is no indication of a belated ethical awakening at the highest levels. Indeed, the British government

[actively lobbied](#) the Premier League to wave through the Saudi takeover.

The Next Stage

Earlier this month, for the second time in the last four years, Manchester City had to wait until the final day of the season before confirming their latest Premier League title. By any rational benchmark, it should be absurd to describe their main opponents, Liverpool, as underdogs. The Merseyside club's US owner, John Henry, made his fortune as a commodities trader, and gave his support to the abortive [European Super League project](#). Liverpool's [net outlay on transfer fees](#) over the last decade was a little over £290 million.

However, there's nothing rational about the political economy of modern football: City spent almost three times as much on players in the same period. One £100 million purchase, Jack Grealish, proved to be something of a flop this season, yet that didn't stop his club from winning the league. Liverpool's achievement in running City so close is remarkable, but they still couldn't get the better of their rival, and they may not be able to defy the laws of economic gravity for much longer.

If football continues along its present line of march, we may find ourselves thinking of the Guardiola-Klopp era as a comparative golden age, when there were still some limits to the power of money (just as many fans now look back nostalgically at the Ferguson-Wenger era of rivalry between Manchester United and Arsenal, which came just before the arrival of Roman Abramovich). To stop that from happening, it will require the kind of social transformation that reaches far beyond the world of sport.

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 05.31.2022:

<https://jacobin.com/2022/05/champions-league-paris-madrid-liverpool-police-macron>

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