



## Why do fans riot? It all depends on what country they call home.

**THE NEWS OF TWO RECENT SPORTS RIOTS ABROAD** stopped me cold. You've probably heard or read about the uprisings in Buenos Aires over soccer and in Vancouver over hockey. What amazed me weren't the images of violence that went viral, causing the word "hooligan" to pop as a trending topic. And it wasn't even the fact that the riots followed historic losses—a playoff defeat for River Plate that demoted Argentina's version of the Yankees to a lower division for the first time in 110 years, and a bitter Game 7 Stanley Cup loss that left the long-suffering Canucks still searching for a title.

No, what stunned me was the realization that this kind of violence rarely happens in American pro sports. We riot after wins.

Think about it. The Broncos won the Super Bowl in 1998, and the swath of destruction in Denver was likened to the path of a tornado. Phillies fans went berserk following the 2008 World Series, giving new meaning to the phrase Broad Street bullies. Lakers Nation went bonkers after last year's NBA Finals, burning LAPD squad cars. Which raises the question: How can we be better losers than the rest of the world but worse winners?

For an answer, I turned to Jerry M. Lewis, a professor at Kent State University who has studied more than 200 outbreaks of sports violence. Using a model he created, Lewis predicted that the Stanley Cup finale would lead to mayhem. Here are the three warning

SHAUN ASSAEL IS A SENIOR WRITER FOR ESPN THE MAGAZINE.

### HOW CAN AMERICANS BE BETTER LOSERS THAN THE REST OF THE WORLD BUT WORSE WINNERS?

signs he's learned to spot: a) a hotly contested championship final; b) watched by lots of young men; c) in a common urban gathering spot with a history of violence. But his prediction was wrong in one key respect: Lewis thought the trouble would take place in the winning city.

"My model is structurally built to predict celebratory violence because we haven't seen European-style fan violence in North America," he says. He believes that because we have so many professional sports and teams, American fans don't get wildly upset over any single one. We'll hurl raspberries but not rocks.

In countries in which a single sport dwarfs all others, the rabid nature of fanaticism is complicated by the dark opportunism of hooligans. In Argentina, there have been allegations that the River Plate fan club *Los Borrachos del Tablon*, which translates to "The Drunks of the Stands," demands protection money—mob style—from stadium vendors. So it's not hard to believe that "The Drunks" pelted players from the stands and started fights and fires in the streets. After all, relegation to a lower league is perceived as a direct hit to one's financial and political power. "It's a ripple effect," says Stacey Hall of the National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security.

But that doesn't explain the worst riot in Vancouver's history. In a rush to judgment for the looting that flared after the Bruins skated to a 4-0 victory, police generally blamed "anarchists." But as one activist told Dave Zirin, sports editor of *The Nation*, "It's ridiculous that even a hockey riot needs a scapegoat." Free-flowing booze, the debatable decision to let 100,000 people gather downtown, and slow-footed police who resorted to using tear gas all seem to be contributing factors.

I asked Lewis whether he thought fan rioting after a loss could happen in the States, and he shook his head. "Sociologists don't like the idea of imitation," he says. "It ignores the influence of social factors like public opinion." In Argentina, a group called Let's Save Football is rising, bent on confronting the local thugs. And after the Vancouver riots, 20,000 people posted photos on a Facebook page dedicated to trying to identify the guilty. Public opinion is a powerful weapon.

Here in the States, fans seem to understand that no matter how big the money or the hype, games are just games—not the political grudge matches that Franklin Foer, author of *How Soccer Explains the World*, once described as being between "clubs that have freaky fascist pasts bleeding into a xenophobic present."

We can separate sports and state, and we're the better for it. Now let's work on winning with dignity. ■

