



Another football season begins, and a nation holds its breath. Will trouble on the terraces once again sully our national sport? Or is fighting itself our national sport? And if so, why? Mark Piggott talks to former hooligan Cass Pennant about aggro, Oi! and flared trousers...

Cass Pennant isn't happy. Five minutes before we're due to meet to discuss his two new books, 'Cass: an autobiography' and 'Congratulations: you've just met the ICF', I ring to tell him I can't make it. He's already driving to the station, and sounds displeased. I've just stood up one of Britain's hardest men, a good friend of Frank Bruno, numerous bouncers and half the hooligans in Britain. Gulp.

When we do finally do our interview two days later, Cass doesn't sound too concerned about my messing him around. I guess when you've been shot three times, run through with a sword, and taken part in more violence than Roy Keane's shinguards, being left in the lurch by a five foot seven Yorkshireman with a beer belly doesn't hurt much.

Besides which, nowadays our Cass is a changed man. He's an author, an advisor to film-makers like Guy Ritchie, and, in his new capacity of hoolieologist even introduces the DVD version of 'Trouble on the Terraces'. First released in 1994, the video showed endless footage of hoolies on the rampage and earned the approbation of August national newspapers and the hang 'em flog 'em brigade.

'What the media just can't understand is the buzz that it gave you,' says Cass with admirable honesty. 'All these middle-class professors get millions in lottery funding and try to explain our

behaviour as some kind of political statement, but it isn't. It's just that feeling, of being with all your mates, all in the same boat, singing, chanting and kicking off. There's just nothing else like it.'

Adopted at six months old by a working-class white family, Cass grew up in a small town on the edge of London. Fights were commonplace, and being the only black kid at his school meant Cass had to fight more than most. He soon got a bit of a name as a trouble-maker, which can be good for your street cred but not so good for a respectable career.

'Back then, if you came from my sort of background you were earmarked for the factory or the building site. You didn't really have many ambitions, except leaving school as soon as you could to buy your first pack of fags and a pint. These days kids are obsessed with grades, with careers, and with one to ones on their computer, they don't have that same shared experience.' The reasons why football hooliganism reached its nadir in the 70s and 80s - and if you don't believe me, read Cass's books or watch the video - were a result of a combination of factors. Everyone was in the same boat, no-one had much money, and the only holidays most working class kids took were to Margate and Southend.

'Back then, kids like us didn't really go abroad. The only chance you got to travel was with your team. We'd go to all these places, Liverpool, Leeds and Portsmouth, and they were just the same. So to separate ourselves we identified by a team, by a chant, and then by our clothes.' Cass is a firm believer that football fashions have never been given the credit they were due. 'Every other British street culture, whether it be punk, mod, new romantic or whatever, now all these designers fall over themselves to name them as their influences. But football fans, especially when we started wearing name brands, casual clothes, we helped create a billion dollar industry.

'Coming from London meant you had to dress a bit special; people expected it. But when the chain stores opened branches in the north, everyone could dress the same. Kids in Newcastle looked as trendy as those from

London. Then Liverpool and Arsenal, who were playing in Europe more, brought back designer labels from France and Italy, and everyone wanted to copy them. So a trip to Europe for the sole purpose of stealing clothes was common. ‘One of the first youth fashions was skinheads, back in the 60s. In the 70s it was pretty bad really, all flared trousers and platform shoes, until punk came along. Bands like the Clash didn’t reflect our lives, just middle-class kids singing about Nicaragua, so we started our own.’

Bands like the Cockney Rejects and Angelic Upstarts were all from the streets and the stands, and that’s what they sang about - loudly. The Rejects were ‘faces’ at Upton Park for years, and appeared in the infamous *Hooligans* documentary in the mid-80s.

The much-derided ‘Oi!’ movement, which the music media called ‘racist’, was simply a way for working class kids (black and white) to express themselves. Though almost all his friends were white, Cass never found race a problem. ‘You were just all in it together. The only colours that mattered were the colours of your team.’

When travelling to away games, the West Ham fans soon earned the name ICF (Inter City Firm) because of the way they travelled on ‘ordinary’ trains, rather than football specials, in order to surprise the locals. They were the first to leave ‘calling cards’ on the unconscious bodies of their rivals bearing the words, ‘Congratulations. You have just met the ICF’.

‘Back then there was loads more fighting inside the ground,’ says Cass. ‘You had the terraces, so you could just go and stand with your mates. These days, with the all-seater stadiums, you have to sit just where they tell you, and pay a fortune for the privilege.’

Cass is convinced that the way football has changed has also changed the nature of hooliganism. ‘It never went away, it just moved away from the grounds and it got much smaller, better organised. These days it’s just about thuggery pure and simple.’

It might surprise some politicians to discover that people like Cass, who was locked up for three years in the 70s by a judge anxious to ‘set

an example’ of a hooligan, looks back with nostalgia. But he believes the whole collective experience has gone from the game, leaving it to the Nick Hornbys and the nutters, making it more sterile.

‘Back then, we were all involved. Maybe not everyone actually fought, but we all did the same chants, all came from the same places. The football grounds were surrounded by the same little streets all over the country. Now they’re in retail parks and industrial estates, or in the case of the East End, poncy docks. Most of the old East End faces have moved out to Essex. It just ain’t the same.’

Not that Cass looks out the bottom of a rose-tinted pint glass. Violence in the early 80s got progressively worse, culminating in the tragedy at Heysel in which 39 Italian supporters were killed after running from Liverpool fans. Cass, along with many others, was sickened by what happened, and after Hillsborough in 1989, it became apparent that things simply had to change.

When he went to prison, Cass found himself in the company of men who were violent for a living. ‘Contrary to what the papers say we weren’t that deprived, we all had a few quid, and Monday to Friday most of us were basically law-abiding citizens. In the nick I’d meet men who’d chopped someone’s head off with a kebab knife, which is a whole different ball game.’

In prison, Cass began writing about his incredible life and at first found it hard to get a publisher. But over the last few years a whole industry has been created out of hooliganism: there are website discussion boards where rival firms taunt each other, computer games, and dozens of books by fans who claim to have been ‘there’. What makes Cass’s one of the most interesting is that there is absolutely no doubt about where he was: at the front, steaming in. ‘I had a great time,’ he says. ‘Sneaking down the drainpipe at home, round to your mates, chip together for a bottle of cider, out to Watford Gap and thumbing it up North overnight. Kids just don’t have to do that nowadays, they can fly to Ayia Napa for fuck all. Why would they hitch to Sunderland in the rain?’

Maybe it's time to log off, put down your joystick and get your thumb out. You never know - you might like it. I decide to admit to Cass the reason I stood him up at such short notice. It wasn't that I'd decided to pick a fight with a Millwall firm on the train. It was because all London's cash machines went down, leaving me without funds even to buy the big man a pint. Cass laughs loudly. So it seems I'm forgiven - this time. But wait till he finds out I'm a Cockney Red...

READY TO RUMBLE! RECENT FOOTBALL RIOTS

The World Cup was all peace and love, so the hooligan problem's gone away - right? Wrong. This year has witnessed major kick-offs all over the world.

MOSCOW MAYHEM

There wasn't much serious mayhem in Japan, but supporters watching Russia on TV in Moscow went mental when their team lost to Japan. Two were stabbed to death and over 100 were injured. Fans swept through the city torching cars, overturning and smashing other vehicles, shops, and a Japanese restaurant.

DUTCH COURAGE

Over 80 Feyenoord fans were arrested after a major rumble following their side's victory over German side Borussia Dortmund in the UEFA Cup final. Hooligans clashed with riot police after they started throwing bricks and bottles, destroying dozens of car and shop windows.

BARMY IN BELFAST

Twenty-eight coppers and 50 others were hurt following a match in Glasgow. The clash occurred when Rangers, mostly supported by Protestants, and Catholic-backed Glasgow Celtic, faced each other in the Scottish Cup final, which Rangers won. Police and troops moved in to separate the rival factions and plastic bullets were fired. Petrol bombs and fireworks were thrown and one police officer was struck on the head by a breeze block.

Police used clubs and water canons against the rioters at three sites across the city.

MENTAL MILLWALL

Millwall have always had a reputation as being among the worst hooligans in the country- even their motto is 'No-one likes us, we don't care'. After a First Division playoff with Birmingham City in May, over 120 policemen were injured when 1,000 Millwall nutters went on the rampage near the ground.

CRAZY CARDIFF

Cardiff City fans are among the most notorious in the game. Following their team's 2-1 victory over Leeds United in the FA Cup last year, thousands of Cardiff fans invaded the pitch and tried to attack the Leeds fans- a set of supporters who are hardly renowned for their tact and restraint in such circumstances.

DOUBLE DUTCH

Back in Holland, home to some of the most fanatical hooligans in Europe, around 500 fans of Amsterdam club Ajax rioted in the city after the team won its 28th Dutch championship. Cops made 28 arrests after fans started throwing stones at riot police and demolished tram stops.