

Scoring A Goal In The Fight Against Anti-Semitism In Football



By Benji Flacks
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The sixth Global Forum for Combating Anti-Semitism was convened in Jerusalem this week, with one of the topics being the prevalence of, and possible responses to, anti-Semitism in European football. The event was attended by renowned experts and, notably, representatives of the English Premier League team Chelsea F.C.

Football stadiums have long been venues in which fans express opinions on a wide range of issues—from the political to the social—generally conveyed through chants, song, and often yelling. But increasingly, such messages are being tainted with anti-Jewish undertones as well as racist allusions to other groups.

Rafal Pankowski, co-founder of Never Again Poland, an expert on the manifestation of anti-Semitism in football, stressed the imperative of eliminating the widespread phenomenon. “It is often the [football] stadium that influences society,” he told The Media Line, “and the football culture in Poland is so infiltrated by far-right ideology that we clearly see a spill-over onto the streets.”

Pankowski highlighted as an example a far-right demonstration in Warsaw this past November. “Watching the participants you could identify that the bulk of the 50,000 people were young men mobilized through football fan groups under the banner of radical nationalism. This shows how problems associated with fan culture extend beyond the sport and become issues on a different level.”

The matter is not limited to Poland, though. Fans of Ajax FC in Holland, for example, a club that is considered “Jewish,” are regularly subjected to chants such as, “my father was in the commandos, my mother was in the SS [Nazi unit], and together they burned the Jews because Jews burn the best;” and, “ Hamas [the Palestinian terrorist group], Hamas, Jews to the gas.” Other well-publicized cases of anti-Semitism include the recent distribution at a home match of the Rome-based Lazio football club of stickers depicting Anne Frank wearing the opposing team’s jersey.

For its part, Chelsea F.C, marred by anti-Semitic incidents primarily targeting London rival Tottenham Hotspur—whose fans have acquired the moniker “Yid [Jew] Army”—is fighting back.

Simon Taylor, the head of the Chelsea Foundation, who appeared on a panel at the Jerusalem conference, launched a campaign in January called, “Say no to Anti-Semitism.” The initiative involves several practical steps, including training the club’s staff to identify and combat anti-Semitic behavior; distributing educational materials to fans; inviting Holocaust survivors speak to team members; and creating a permanent exhibit at the Chelsea Museum in partnership with the Jewish Museum London.

Taylor told The Media Line that while the program has thus far achieved positive results, “it is too early to tell whether other clubs will follow suit.”

Lisa Jordan, who helped developed the project and also attended the Jerusalem event, told the audience that, “the campaign has been almost universally well received, the fans fully support what we’re doing and the staff are a vital part of that. It’s also important to point out,” she elaborated, “that we have much more to do, we’re not going to stop, we’re not going to quit.”

To this end, Chelsea F.C. has forged relationships with Jewish organizations across the United Kingdom in an effort widen the scope of the campaign and increase its impact.

A common theme throughout the conference was the role athletes themselves can play in fighting anti-Semitism. “These footballers are role models whether they like it or not and are idolized by millions of people around the world,” Taylor concluded. “They have a very important voice and can lend a large mouthpiece to the movement.”

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