

The Ellis Park Stadium Soccer Disaster Interim Report

By

John Van Stan

Tracker

Durban, South Africa

tracker1@iafrica.com

The “Interim Report: Commission of Inquiry into the Ellis Park Stadium Soccer Disaster of 11 April 2001” chaired by Judge B M Ngoepe was released in April, one year to the month of South Africa’s worst sports crowd management horror. Forty-three people were killed and more than a 150 injured at the Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg during a popular soccer match.

The Commission’s 90-page report documents an appalling lack of event preplanning and implementation, preparation, risk assessment, and an arrogant indifference to public safety by certain crucial organizations involved in a highly anticipated championship match.

The report notes that the Premier Soccer League (PSL) match between rivals Kaizer Chiefs and the Orlando Pirates was well known to be a full house event during the planning stages and the spectators were well known not to purchase tickets in advance but only on their arrival at the gates on match day. A precursor to the Ellis Park disaster was a 1998 incident between fans of the two teams. Police used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse crowds trying to buy last minute tickets at the match site. Worse than that and almost unbelievable is the crowd riot of 1991 between the two teams during a match south of Johannesburg. Forty-two people were killed and scores injured. Thus, there should have been no surprises and contingency plans should have been in place for all eventualities.

Unfortunately, legislation in South Africa does not include sufficient health and safety measures appropriate to large scale crowd management, apart from Fire Safety and Occupational Health & Safety requirements, which are not comprehensive enough for these types of events. There is nothing other than common sense, to determine minimum security staffing levels and other measures at any event. Thus, inexperienced or budget restricted promoters / venue operators, can and often will, only employ the minimum professional staffing and equipment required.

The Interim Report does not draw any conclusions, though a final report is expected to identify “any mismanagement on the part of anybody.” Among some of the interesting “facts that led to the disaster” identified in the report are:

- The number of spectators that turned up for the match was said to be approximately 80,000 persons – less than 4000 tickets were pre-sold. The majority of spectators purchased tickets at the gates on the day of the game!

- A mobile big screen television facility, to placate impatient crowds, proposed to be positioned outside the stadium was not provided, there was minimal security and/or police representation in the venue control room by critical role players and absolutely no management control or effective crowd management command structure in place. No proper contingency plans were prepared or implemented and no management in immediate overall control to devise and implement measures to deal with situations arising.
- The lack of radio or other efficient communication between perimeter access gates and the JOC and absence of effective management, thereby causing inexperienced and junior level security personnel to make on the spot decisions borne out of crisis management, without understanding the ramifications of these decisions.
- The absence of an experienced Security Co-Ordinator or Crowd Control Manager appointed in overall command - each organisation operated basically independently.
- At the preliminary planning meetings for the match, it was discussed and minuted that there were serious concerns about the size of the crowd to attend and the need for measures such as a big screen to televise the match for arriving spectators outside the grounds and thus reduce pressure on the gates. This advice was ignored, presumably for financial budget reasons. The match should have been rescheduled to be played at a larger venue right from the very beginning.
- The report describes further, the failure of the traffic management plan, leading to completely obstructed access roads around the stadium, limiting access to the stadium by emergency and other essential vehicles.
- There are allegations of corruption at the gates, that certain security personnel had accepted bribes to allow spectators in, without tickets.
- To add to the chaos there appeared to be little or no co-operation or effective communication between the PSL Security (the soccer leagues own in-house personnel) and the other commercial security service providers.
- The South African Police (Public Order Police) are also criticized in the report for failing to respond timeously and effectively.
- The guidelines of the International Federation of Football Associations and the South Africa Football Association state that a game should not be started until the situation inside and outside the stadium is under control, evidence shows that when the game was started, there were still thousands of spectators outside the grounds, perimeter gates were being ripped open, security personnel overwhelmed, the stadium being vandalised and ticket booths attacked and cashiers escorted away by armed security personnel – yet they still started the match!
- Due entirely to the lack of co-ordinated information, the match officials were unaware of the crowd status within and outside the grounds and no attempt was

made to establish this before play commenced.

- There are considerable disparities in the ticket audit – some 4000 tickets seem unaccounted for.
- There are allegations of tear gas being discharged illegally by an unknown person/s at or near a main entrance gate, this possibly worsening the crowd situation.
- Only two spotters were deployed inside the stadium to monitor a crowd expected to be around 60,000 spectators – an impossible task.
- The venue public address system at the perimeter gates was also found inadequate, as also was the deployment of additional loudhailers. The breakdown of communication with the crowd made its control difficult.
- In some cases, disagreement or confusion as to areas of responsibility by certain role players
- Gross underestimation of the possible crowd attendance at the match is cited as the fundamental cause of the tragedy.

The Interim Report sadly chronicles an easily preventable major disaster. Even more tragically, despite this disaster occurring over a year ago, there is still no effective government legislation to implement and regulate, a structured system of major event planning and preparation or event safety licensing.

There are competent and highly experienced South African safety professionals and organisations that could immediately demonstrate safe crowd management planning systems, but they are presently ignored. Major international concerts, festivals, cricket matches and other huge events take place in this country all the time without mishap. Perhaps future governmental enquiries will include these experienced private sector resources and include their recommendations in future legislation.

Ellis Park Stadium Management must, however, be praised for their own swift action in recent months, where they have voluntarily introduced many measures, both architectural and operational to prevent any such disaster occurring again in the future.

Presently, there have been no prosecutions, nobody blamed and no effective government action taken to prevent another tragedy. The recommendations of the final report and an inquest to follow could change this.