

Football and Medical Emergencies: Why matches are now being stopped when a fan takes ill

For Leo Daniels, January's League cup semi-final between his beloved Tottenham and Chelsea was like any other game. Spurs were losing and heading out of the competition at the hands of their London rivals. In the 86th minute the match was stopped. Leo had suffered a seizure and required urgent medical attention.

"I don't even remember feeling ill beforehand," Leo says. "I was watching the game and nothing was out of the ordinary. Next thing I remember I was being stretchered into an ambulance."

Leo's story is not uncommon. There have always been incidents of fans taking unwell during matches - but it is rare they gain any kind of coverage. This season has seen a shift in perspective, with games now being stopped to allow those affected to receive medical care. Numerous fixtures across the country have been paused as a result.

"The care I received was superb," Leo says. "The doctors said it was the best place to seize given the amount of medical care available in stadiums."

Thankfully, Leo's story has a positive ending. Post-match scans discovered a brain problem - but it is treatable and he will make a full recovery. In the meantime, he has started attending games again.

Tragically, not every stoppage ends positively. In January, Paul Parish lost his life after suffering a heart attack during Fulham's match against Blackpool. In February, Sunderland fan Michael Waggott died after falling ill while watching his team play Burton. Both games were stopped for over 40 minutes to allow the men to receive treatment.

Joe Cosgrove has been a crowd doctor for over 20 years, working alongside safety officers, paramedics and first aiders at St James' Park to ensure crowd safety. Prior to this season, he had never seen a game halted for a fan's medical emergency. He believes it is too early to tell if the stoppages coincide with more fans taking ill or whether it is just a case of it being more widely highlighted.

It was a match he covered, Newcastle 1-3 Tottenham, where the first stoppage happened after Newcastle fan, Alan Smith, suffered a cardiac arrest. The decision received huge publicity and those involved were widely praised for their actions. A precedent was set.

A small, vocal group have tried to claim the rise is due to the vaccine. This is refuted by Dr Cosgrove who cites the wider societal issues caused by Coronavirus.

"The likelihood of having a cardiac problem as a result of the vaccine is incredibly small. The chances are 40 to 50 times higher if you have Covid while unvaccinated.

"If there has been an increase it is most likely due to physical deconditioning that has occurred as a result of the pandemic and lockdowns. Lack of exercise, worsening diet and an inability to access screening checks have all contributed.

Football has always had a higher incidence of cardiac events. A 2003 Durham University study found mortality from heart attacks and strokes increased significantly in men living in the North-East when their local football team lost at home.

Research into the effect of World Cup performances in Germany and the Netherlands revealed a similar pattern. With the stress inherent with following football, this perhaps comes as no surprise.

It is unclear how long the current trend of halting games will continue. For Leo it is an easy decision.

"I believe stopping games is absolutely the right thing to do. It allowed the necessary attention to be put on me and I was escorted out quicker than I would have been had the game continued."

However, stoppages can create other issues within the stadium. Guidance issued by the Sports Ground Safety Authority (SGSA) states halting matches can result in unexpected, unsafe crowd surges, difficulties for disabled supporters and, particularly in relation to mid-week games, cause post-match public transport issues.

They can also hamper access to other medical emergencies. Something Dr Cosgrove has seen first hand.

"There were two simultaneous medical emergencies during the Newcastle Tottenham match," he says. "Had they occurred in reverse it could have been difficult to access the other emergency which was also life threatening."

There will be more clarity on the issue when the SGSA conducts their post-season review. Until then Dr Cosgrove believes the message should be one of reassurance.

"You can understand why people feel the game should be stopped out of respect for the person who has fallen ill but, generally, the game should continue with discussions ongoing between the fourth official and medical teams.

"It's about getting the message to officials and players that while they may feel under pressure to act they do not need to. There are experienced medics there to take the pressure off them."