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HILLSBOROUGH DISASTER: 25 YEARS LATER

OUT FOR JUSTICE, A CHAMPIONSHIP



Scarves donated by fans of the Liverpool Football Club and teams across the world are placed on seats during a memorial service at Liverpool's Anfield stadium marking the 25th anniversary of the Hillsborough Disaster on April 15. Ninety-six Liverpool supporters died in a stadium crush in Sheffield, England. CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/GETTY IMAGES

25 years after 96 Liverpool FC supporters were crushed to death, bereaved families, survivors and fans seek vindication and a title.

Sean Holstege

The Republic | azcentral.com

LIVERPOOL, England — The quest to correct a lingering injustice and capture a long-pursued soccer championship have come to redefine this gritty port city. Together both dreams appear within reach after a quarter-century of prayers and despite enormous obstacles.

The longing is heard in the words of fans and residents, players and coaches, priests and parishioners, campaigners and politicians. It's evident in the songs and the banners and flags. And it's felt in the streets of this fabled but long-sighted city of around 600,000 perhaps best known to Americans as the home of the Beatles.

This sense of common

purpose drifted on the warm breezes of two perfect afternoons earlier this month, when fans twice flocked to Anfield, home of the Liverpool Football Club. On Sunday, April 13, they amassed to see a key match against the English Premier League's best team, Manchester City. Liverpool, a once-dominant club, is close-

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Fans pay their respects on April 12 at the Liverpool Memorial wall honoring the 96 team supporters who died on April 15, 1989. SEAN HOLSTEGE/AZCENTRAL SPORTS

DAN BICKLEY ON THE NBA

Playoffs start to reveal new league stories

The NBA playoffs are an education. Players compete against Pressure, the upper-case version. Referees learn they have the most thankless job in sports, with the possible exception of stable cleaner at Churchill Downs or caddie for Tiger Woods. Here's what we're learning:

» 1. There's a new generation of ascending stars that reflects well on the state of the NBA. Portland's LaMarcus Aldridge scored 89 points in two games, and was the second-best player on his team, ranking behind the fabulous Damian Lillard, whose poise and ability are off the charts. There are dynamic young

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INSIDE

NASCAR Sprint Cup: Logano uses late push for 1st career Richmond win. C4

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USA TODAY SPORTS

Ban Sterling: The controversy surrounding Donald Sterling has an easy fix. **Nancy Armour, C12**

SWIMMING

Next wave hits in battle between Michael, Ryan

Jeff Metcalfe
azcentral sports

Even as the Michael and Ryan era in U.S. swimming is drawing to a close, another is beginning. Fifteen-year-olds Michael Andrew and Ryan Hoffer are leading a new wave of age-group record smashers into the senior level to eventually replace their role models Mi-

chael Phelps and Ryan Lochte. The two generations overlapped at the Arena Grand Prix in Mesa, where 22-time Olympic medalist Phelps swam for the first time since the 2012 London Olympics. "It's been one of my dreams to compete with him," said Andrew, who missed out when he was 13 and didn't make the field in time for a Grand Prix. See **SWIMMING**, Page C14

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Liverpool fans in Anfield stadium hold aloft cards to make a mosaic commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Hillsborough Disaster, before a match on April 13. CLINT HUGHES/AP

Liverpool

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ing in on a championship not seen in a quarter-century.

Two days later, they returned for the 25th anniversary memorial of the Hillsborough football disaster, to honor 96 fans who died in a crush of bodies and metal.

On April 15, 1989, under similar blue skies, tens of thousands of Liverpool fans descended on a stadium in Sheffield called Hillsborough. They went, expectant their "Reds" would prevail in the Football Association Cup semifinal, the oldest knockout competition in sports.

But overcrowding inside and outside the grounds led to the fatal crush. Fans were herded into terraced, standing-room-only pens, constructed as a barrier to curb hooliganism that poisoned English soccer in those days.

Inside one Hillsborough pen, the air was squeezed out of bodies as they were pinned against the steel fence — and each other.

Magnifying the horror, the people of Liverpool had to hear that drunken soccer fans themselves were to blame. That's what the government, newspapers, and police said.

It just wasn't true. Liverpoolians never believed it, and said so from the start. The long campaign for truth, then justice, took root. These days, some prefer the word accountability.

Even in a year like this, with a World Cup around the corner and the first U.S. network broadcasts of live English league games, many Americans tune out international soccer. Few likely had heard of Hillsborough before ESPN aired a 90-minute documentary as part of its "30 for 30" series. There's never been a sporting disaster quite like it here. But events that day, and the reaction to them, redefined soccer safety around the world and exposed some universal truths.

Any mother's son or daughter could die, needlessly, at any large public event. The eventual recognition that what happened was done to fans, and not by them, began the slow thaw of the prevailing attitude in Britain at the time — that soccer fans were animals and should be treated as such.

This month, with all the pent-up aspirations, the twin events in Liverpool collided with a torrent of anxiety and relief, sadness and elation, on and off the field. For maybe the first time, fans see each goal — justice and a championship — as obtainable, even as they remain tantalizingly beyond immediate reach. It was clear the two go hand-in-hand.

"There's a lot of the truth that's out now. And there's been a lot of lying. I've always understood that you'll find out everything eventually," said Tracy Connah, 29, who lives a few blocks from the stadium. "I have never seen a city come together as Liverpool did. You'll never see that in any city anywhere."

A day of excitement turns tragic

April 15, 1989 dawned a sunny spring day in Liverpool. Both of the city's teams, Liver-



Liverpool supporters are crushed against a barrier at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, England, on April 15, 1989. Ninety-six Liverpool fans died in the crush. DAVID CANNON/GETTY IMAGES

pool and Everton, were playing separately in cup semifinals. It was a day of hope, of excitement.

Musician Paul Kappa, now 47, had just bought a Ford with a powerful engine and was eager to give it a run on the roughly 60-mile trip to Sheffield. He and two bandmates had tickets for the Leppings Lane pen behind one of the goals at Hillsborough.

Alan Dixon, 15 that day, got on a bus with four friends. All had tickets. Kids on Christmas Day.

Ian Hanlon, 48, went, too. He arrived early, about 40 minutes before kickoff. He got that familiar tingle of excitement when he saw his first patch of green grass through the tunnel onto the terraces. He was in "the middle of the middle" of the pen, an "absolutely perfect" spot to soak up the electric energy of the crowd.

Fifteen minutes before kickoff, the stands were packed. Hanlon realized this wasn't the ordinary press of flesh. He'd been used to that on Liverpool's famous Kop, the stand where thousands of fans massed on terraces. It was common for the excitement of a goal to carry fans off their feet and cascading forward several rows. Hanlon knew from experience he could step sideways to safety if things got bad.

This was different. Scary. Hanlon clambered over a metal fence into the adjacent pen where bare concrete terrace steps were visible.

Kappa didn't get that choice. He arrived minutes before kickoff, with thousands of others. The roads had been busier than he thought.

The turnstiles couldn't handle a crowd backup that filled a corral area and spilled far down the street. Police worried there might be trouble. Expected it.

Alcohol-fueled violence was common at football matches in those days. Only four years earlier Liverpool fans were blamed for killing 39 Italian fans in a brawl at a European Cup Final, resulting in English teams being banned from tournaments on the continent.

"If you told people you were a football fan, you were a bit of a social pariah," said Daniel Gordon, director of the

ESPN documentary "Hillsborough."

David Duckenfield, a police superintendent and the man in charge that day, had been promoted only weeks earlier. He'd never overseen a football match. Now he was responsible for maintaining order at one of the biggest of the season, with a eager mob wanting in. He ordered the barn-door style exit gates opened to avoid a crush outside the ground.

Kappa reached that gate. "A guy with a high-ranking police cap, said, 'Get in here, lad.' I tried to show him my ticket. He just waved us through," Kappa said.

In the tunnel he saw the game had started. Liverpool crashed a shot off the crossbar.

Kappa was swept forward by the tide of people.

"You were absolutely pinned. You couldn't move. I was breathing like this," he said, tilting his face up and mimicking a fish gasping for air.

Somebody next to him screamed for his life. "I don't know what happened to him," Kappa said. All around him people were turning colors, becoming motionless. The man next to him had been dead some time.

"I thought I was going to die. I went into this strange spiritual realm. It was: 'This is OK. I can do this.' It was the oddest feeling," Kappa said.

As Kappa accepted death, a gap suddenly emerged in the crowd behind him. He walked out, dazed.

Kappa and Hanlon, friends for a decade, never talked to each other about Hillsborough. On the day of the 25th anniversary, standing about 20 feet from the memorial wall, they recounted their ordeal. Hanlon was wearing the same hat he did 25 years before.

Hanlon remembered watching fans being pulled out of the pen by those in the second tier above them.

"Nothing registered," Hanlon said.

"There was a guy on the pitch and I didn't know if he was dead or alive. I did nothing," he said, then, clenching his jaw, stopped talking for a while.

Nearby on the field, two of Alan Dixon's friends were ly-

"There's a lot of the truth that's out now. And there's been a lot of lying. I've always understood that you'll find out everything eventually. I have never seen a city come together as Liverpool did. You'll never see that in any city anywhere."

TRACY CONNAH

Liverpool resident, on information surrounding the circumstances that led to the deaths of 96 Liverpool supporters

ing dead. Another was unconscious. Five boys went to Hillsborough together but only two came back, said Alan's uncle, Roy Dixon, 56, while standing under a "96" banner at the memorial.

Kappa wandered into the deserted street in a daze. It was empty. No ambulances. No police.

He came upon a row of bodies, with coats thrown over them.

"The enormity of what happened dawned on me then," Kappa said.

Almost immediately, the South Yorkshire Police blamed drunken hooligans

pressing their way into the stadium for the catastrophe, even though the police ordered the gates opened. Local members of Parliament repeated the official version.

Within days *The Sun*, a popular tabloid, published a shocking story under the headline "The Truth." It depicted Liverpool fans robbing the dead, urinating on police and assaulting medical emergency workers as they tended to the stricken.

In Liverpool a boycott of the paper began and the *Sun's* circulation fell by half. The boycott continues.

"The city knew it had been wronged," said Christian Spooner, news editor for BBC Radio Merseyside, who has covered the Hillsborough saga for 10 years.

Liverpool was now burying its dead. The team's manager, Kenny Dalglish, attended every funeral. One day he attended four, amid the climactic stages of two tournaments.

Dozens of fans remained hospitalized. Some were in comas. One comatose boy opened his eyes when he heard Dalglish's voice in his hospital room.

A year later, the first official report came out. It blamed the deaths on police failings and stadium design, and found that drunkenness and hooliganism had nothing to do with the Hillsborough deaths.

But autopsies concluded the fans died of accidental death and misadventure. No one was held accountable.

The justice campaign was born. Around the country, though, others labeled Liverpool a "self-pity city," and the moniker stuck.

Years passed. Local professor Phil Scraton published a book detailing police cover-ups, but a new government report concluded there was no new evidence to warrant a new investigation.

Families banded together, passed the hat to pay lawyers to seek criminal convictions against two top police officers at Hillsborough. One was acquitted, the other got a hung jury.

Justice seemed a million years away.

Defining a season

Liverpool went on to beat Everton in the 1989 FA Cup final. The following year, Liverpool won the English Premier League title for the last time.

Hillsborough had leveled a blow. Drained, Dalglish resigned. Players talked about wanting to never play again. The club reacted slowly to dramatic changes in the sport and its greats were aging. Liverpool slid into a long decline and was never again the force it was.

When the current season began in August, expectations were low. A young manager had taken over a year before and in a rebuilding year guided the team to seventh place. Yet two days before the anniversary, Liverpool sat in first place, having scored more goals than any team. It hosted third-place Manchester City, which has the highest-salaried roster in world sports, and had obliterated teams all season. This would be the sternest test yet of whether the surprising Liverpool deserved a title.

About 50 yards from the Kop, ticketless fans crammed into the Sandon, an enormous

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Liverpool

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pub with a big screen TV in the largest of its five bars. Strangers clasped each other's shoulders, looked one another in the eye and said, "We're gonna do this."

Liverpool started well. Excitement grew. Then, after just six minutes, the Reds carved the City defense open and went up 1-0. The Sandon erupted. Beer flew up to the ceiling and dripped on the heads of hundreds of jubilant fans. More knowing looks: We could do this.

Liverpool pressed on in the fashion that had led them to the top of the league. The second goal flew in 20 minutes later. Huge roar. Glasses broke underfoot and men danced in circles. Now the looks said: We will do this.

Liverpool fans knew even with a 2-0 lead the second half would be tough and would define the season. Sure enough, City cut through Liverpool's creaking rearguard and scored twice in 17 minutes to tie the match.

Fans comforted each other with accounts of historic comebacks and trademark wit. The next 30 minutes would become excruciating for some. Now the looks said: No, not again. Not this year.

20th anniversary pivotal

The turning point in the justice campaign came five years ago, at the 20th anniversary event.

Contrary to its standing "no-politicians" policy, the Hillsborough Family Support Group invited local Member of Parliament Andy Burnham to speak.

No sooner had he introduced himself as an agent of the government than 30,000 fans booed him into submission. Then, a lone chant: "Justice for the 96."

It came from Roy Dixon. The entire stadium chanted it.

Burnham promised change. He convinced Prime Minister Gordon Brown to release classified documents early and reopen the case. The Hillsborough Independent Panel was commissioned to get the full truth out.

"The 20th anniversary was pivotal," BBC's Spooner said.

After working for two and a half years, the panel reported its findings in the fall of 2012 to a skeptical public. Three people fainted when they heard the results from the 395-page report, based on 450,000 pages of documents.

Some were shocked but few in Liverpool were surprised when the panel reported:

» 116 police reports were altered to remove statements critical of the response.

» 41 of the dead might have survived, including one boy who opened up his eyes as a policewoman tended to him 45 minutes after the crush. He said, "Mum?" and died.

» Coroners erred by refusing evidence collected after 15 minutes had elapsed into the tragedy.

» Authorities deliberately tried to blame fans to cover up their own deficiencies.

» Police ran criminal background checks and tested blood samples from all the dead for alcohol.

» Operation plans were insufficient.

» No safety improvements were made at Hillsborough, despite similar crushes at semifinals twice there in the previous eight years.

In the House of Commons David Cameron—the fifth British prime minister since the tragedy occurred—apologized.

"What happened that day and since was wrong. It was wrong that the families have had to wait so long and fight so hard to get the truth. On behalf of the Government—and indeed our country—I am profoundly sorry for this double injustice that has been left uncorrected for so long," he said.

The report set in motion a chain reaction.

A police misconduct probe was launched. It became the largest in United Kingdom history, government officials said.

A separate criminal investigation started looking into whether anyone in uniform broke the law.

The coroners' inquests, the longest in UK history, were quashed.

To Liverpoolians, the truth was out, but justice still had to wait.

"When you talk to some of the families, some don't like the word justice. They prefer accountability," Spooner said.

"All any one of us ever wanted was for somebody to hold their hand up and say, 'I messed up.' We've always known the truth," Hanlon said.

'You'll Never Walk Alone'

Inside the Sandon, the air was thick with sweat and beer and nerves.

With 15 minutes remaining, Manchester City was outplaying Liverpool, which needed a win to maintain the momentum toward its first championship since 1990. City came within inches of going in front for the first time.

Then, Liverpool won a corner. City's captain Vincent Kompany, a rock of a defender, scuffed a clearance.

From nothing — bang! 3-2, Liverpool.

The Sandon erupted again. Full pints sprayed over the crowd like champagne. Somebody's keys flew. Somebody else's neck chain snapped. The entire crowd bounced up and down in unison. It is going to happen. It really is.

The fans cycled through the repertoire of songs that lasted to the final whistle. It started with "We're gonna win the league," and through the anthem of 50 years, "You'll Never Walk Alone," borrowed from the musical "Carousel" and sung with deep, firm, unwavering voices in perfect time:

"When you walk through a storm hold your head up high, and don't be afraid of the dark.

At the end of the storm, there's a golden sky and the sweet silver song of a lark.

Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain, tho' your dreams be tossed and blown."

But when the final whistle blew, the last song, louder than any that day, was "Justice for the 96."

The big screen showed what became the iconic image of the day, splashed across every newspaper the next day.

Liverpool's captain, Steven Gerrard, lifted his face, wracked with emotion, to the sky. Tears rolled. Teammates huddled around and sheltered him. This is a man who joined Liverpool's academy when he was nine. For whom songs are sung about how tough he is. A man who had offers to go to better clubs and win greater glory but who refused. Who had won every club trophy except one: the league championship.

But his tears weren't from relief in the outcome. They were for his cousin, the 10-year-old Jon-Paul Gihoooley, the youngest to die at Hillsborough.

The biggest inspiration

Two days after the victory over Manchester City, Anfield hosted the Hillsborough anniversary.

Hours before the ceremony, the crowd lined up, waited 10, 15 minutes to lay hands on the brown marble wall where an eternal flame burns and the names of the 96 are etched. They are Liverpool names: Hicks, Thompson, McCarthy, Hughes, Jones, Harrison, Whelan and Shah.

There were few sounds. Shuffling of feet. Birds whistling overhead.

Fans silently tied their scarves on the Shankly Gates. Others laid flowers before the wall.

One was Jamie Carragher Connah. He is 3, and named for one of Liverpool's longest serving players, defender Jamie Carragher, who retired last year.

His mother, Tracy Connah, dimly remembers Hillsborough, huddled around the TV to watch the match with her parents. She didn't know anybody who died, but she's been coming to the memorial every year.

"They are still family," she explained. "No words can explain this. I'm speechless with the amount of generosity from everybody."

Inside the stadium an enormous metal ring, perhaps 30 feet in diameter, stood. It was studded with 96 lights, each with a name etched next to it. Scarves from around the world were arranged in the center circle in the shape of a 96.



Liverpool fans Ian Hanlon, 48, (left) and Paul Kappa, 49, in front of the Shankly Gates at Anfield stadium before a 25th anniversary memorial commemorating the deaths of 96 Liverpool supporters at a soccer match at Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield, England. Both men survived the fatal stadium crush. Hanlon sensed danger and worked his way into a less-crowded section. Kappa was being crushed but found a gap and escaped.

SEAN HOLSTEGE/
AZCENTRAL SPORTS

It took eight minutes to read all the names. Then at exactly 3:06 p.m., the time the game at Hillsborough was called off, Liverpool's cathedrals tolled 96 bells. Cars and pedestrians stopped. At Anfield the only sound was the occasional crying baby or cough.

"You don't struggle for inspiration when you are the manager of Liverpool Football Club," manager Brendan Rodgers said, telling families in his northern Irish brogue: "Youse are the biggest inspiration."

Politician Burnham returned to the podium after five years. He said things changed because the fans raised their voices to him. He thanked Roy Dixon by name.

"How can it be that an entire city can cry injustice and no one was listening?" Burnham asked. "But the shadows are lifting. Your fight will make our country better and you have given hope to people the world over."

One of the first names on the wall belongs to James Aspinall, dead at 18 at Hillsborough. His mother, Margaret, came to lead the family group and have the last word at the anniversary.

She addressed the players. "Stress is bad. But stress can also be good. It gives you determination to fight, to go on and win us the league."

An emotional charge

Over the next six days, results fell in Liverpool's favor.

Manchester City tied the last-place team Sunderland, which then beat second-place Chelsea, whose coach had never lost a league game at home.

The next day Liverpool won its 11th game in a row and opened a gap on its title rivals.

After that game, Rodgers told reporters he'd used the inspiration from the anniversary to spur on his players. Gerrard told reporters he'd dedicated the City victory to the 96. The names had been published in the official program and from April 12 onward, the players have worn a special Hillsborough badge on their jerseys.

"There's definitely an emotional charge to this championship and definitely a connection to Hillsborough," Hanlon said. He'd been to a couple of memorials, but noted of the City match, "I've never been as choked up as on Sunday."

It's not just fans who notice.

"There is no doubt Hillsborough fuels Liverpool at the moment," Spooner said.

Perseverance, faith, justice

Liverpool has never been closer to its elusive league championship or its equally elusive quest for justice. Both are still out of grasp and could still slip away.

Today, Liverpool plays Chelsea, which looks to derail the title bid. Liverpool needs two wins and a tie from its final three games to guarantee a title.

At the end of March, a court near Liverpool reopened the coroner's inquests from Hillsborough. The families are hoping that negligent manslaughter will become the official cause of deaths. Spooner said it could be another year before verdicts are reached.

It remains unclear where the probes into police misconduct will end. New disclosures have been emerging ever since the 2012 panel's report, including a recent revelation that police falsified and withheld witness statements after Hillsborough. It could be up to five years, Spooner said, before the legal system is done with its re-examination. Hillsborough transcended soccer and sport. It became a story about perseverance, truth, faith, dignity and justice.

The tragedy placed "more emphasis on the rights of football supporters everywhere," Spooner said. "There was a recognition that you don't treat them like animals. You don't put them in pens. There was a sea change in attitude. There had to be a sea change in policy."

There was. The pens that proved so deadly at Hillsborough are gone. The high fences have been torn down. In 1994 the law changed to eliminate standing-room areas in England's top two divisions. And police no longer walk fans from trains to stadiums.

ESPN filmmaker Gordon said there are lessons for everyone.

"How do you kill that many people and how do you endure those conditions? How could the authorities do that for so long and get away with it?" Gordon asked. "The lesson for the campaign is to never give up."

"Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart and you'll never walk alone. You'll never walk alone."



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