

**'There are two things I worry about:  
a terrorist attack on an MLS stadium; and that  
we're going to have a riot in a stadium'**

DON GARBER, MLS COMMISSIONER

# America's football

Story by **ANDREW HANKINSON**

# factory

As football steadily gains popularity in America, a new breed of supporter is importing aggressive, European-style fanaticism to the placid stadia of Major League Soccer. GQ hits the road with Philadelphia's **SONS OF BEN** – civic-minded men in thrall to the fervent British supporters of yesteryear – to find out why they are trying to emulate a culture all but eradicated from the game back home. Photographs by **JAMES DIMMOCK**

Union City Sky Blues  
Sons of Ben Justin Lee and  
Lorenzo Rivera 'kick-off'  
against New York Red Bulls  
fans at the Union's PPL  
Park stadium, Chester City  
Philadelphia, October 2010

**THERE** is no visible police presence today on the railway platforms beneath Philadelphia's Gallery shopping centre. Nothing to prevent a gang of four skinheads, in bovver boots, bomber jackets and blue scarves indicating their allegiance to the Philadelphia Union, the city's Major League Soccer franchise, from indulging in a little bit of retro, English-style football hooliganism, should they wish. Nothing to protect a vulnerable-looking couple in New York Red Bulls tops from a vicious assault.

The Red Bulls are today's opponents, the same fans who smashed up Philadelphia's buses earlier this season. The skinheads are animated. They pogo and chant: "We hate Red Bull, we hate Red Bull." (They mean the team, not the energy drink.) But the train arrives and the New York couple scuttle to a distant carriage. The skinheads don't give chase.

The train rattles away from the cobbled streets and leafy squares surrounding Independence Hall, where Thomas Jefferson's declaration was once ratified, and out into the beige municipality of the suburbs – Robert Pires, the veteran Aston Villa winger, turned down the chance to play here because he said the city wasn't beautiful enough. The skinheads, in their late teens and

twenties, pass the time with a sing-along about the police (bad), Philadelphia (good) and David Beckham (libellous). They quieten when two big black men get on.

The train stops 30 minutes south of Philadelphia, in Chester City, near Pennsylvania's border with Delaware. Shops are boarded up and warehouses are abandoned. The once-busy shipyard is now a casino. Like other once-booming industrial cities of the northeast – Baltimore, Philadelphia, Cleveland – the work and money have gone elsewhere and so has half its population over the past 50 years. A lot of hope is being placed on the regenerative effect of PPL Park, Philadelphia Union's new 18,000-capacity stadium, which is flanked by wasteland and car parks, and the huge, cantilevered Commodore Barry Bridge.

Kick-off isn't for two hours yet. The skinheads slope along a dusty railway track and into the yard of the Chester Machine Works. This is their den, where hundreds of Philadelphia's official supporters, named the Sons of Ben, gather to drink Stella and wind themselves up with cries of: "If the New Yorkers throw punches, I'm not backin' away." Corey Furlan, a drug and alcohol counsellor ("five and a half years sober"), says he's so excited he feels like hitting someone, adding over a micro-

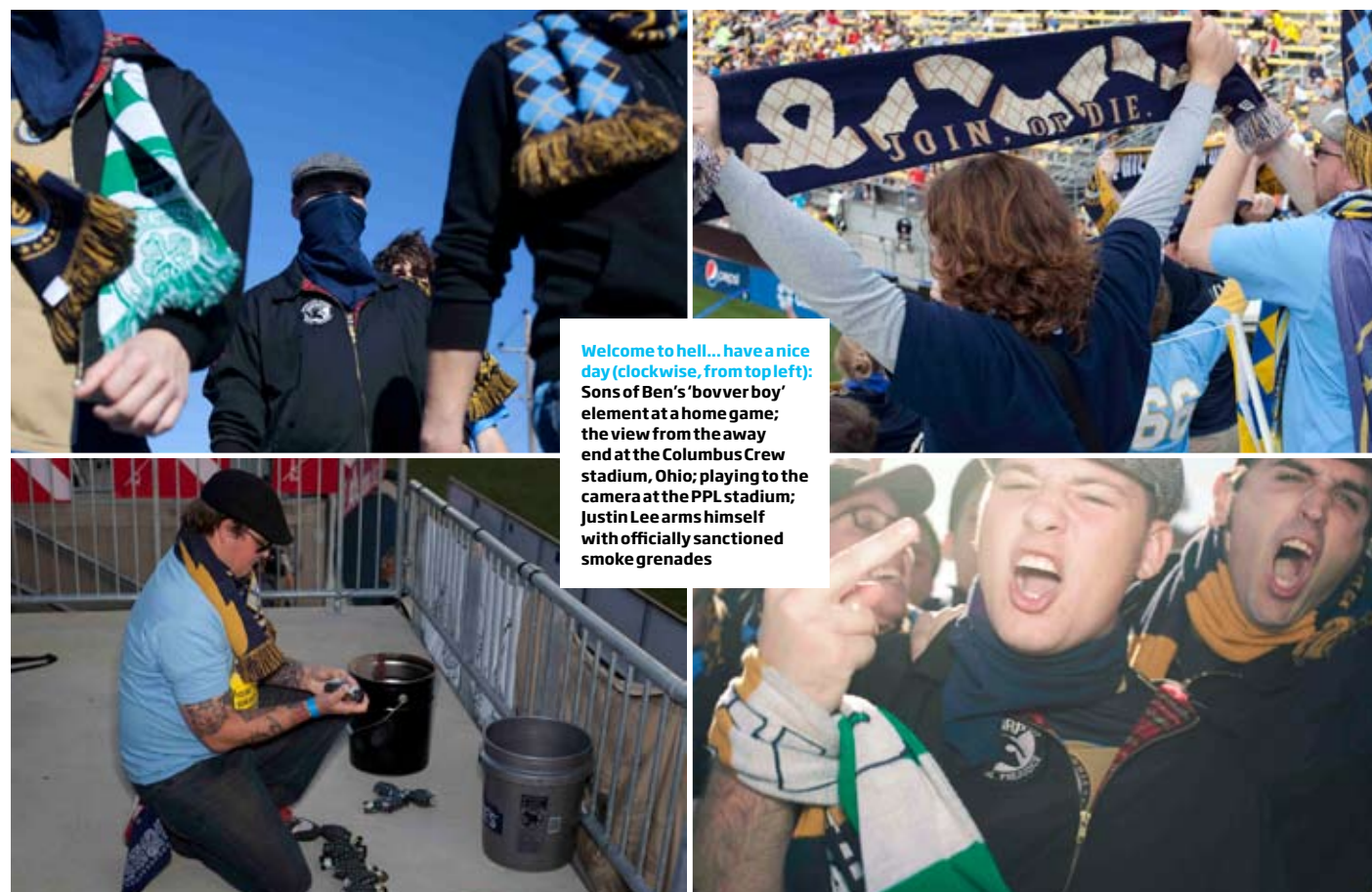
phone, "These New Yorkers think they're gonna come down here and run this situation?"

Furlan is a capo – basically, a cheerleader – and he hands out songsheets just before kick-off, as the 2,000 Sons of Ben march into the River End, a members-only section. Someone predicts "European-style segregation" due to the rivalry between today's fans, but a flight of steps and some stewards are the only divide. Sheriffs watch from pitch-level. The New Yorkers are loud, but Philadelphia are louder. David Beckham, who played against the Union for the LA Galaxy, said they're the closest to European fans he's experienced in America; they abused him for 90 minutes and held up prostitute cards.

The sun sets over a nearby power station. As the teams are announced, each New York player's name is followed by a loud "sucks". New York's Thierry Henry, the former Arsenal and Barcelona star, who travels from his £10m Manhattan apartment to his team's stadium in New Jersey on public transport without being recognised, is out injured. Drums boom. In the stands, Lorenzo Rivera, another capo, holds a scarf over his face as he pulls the pin from a smoke grenade. He looks like a perfect ultra (a hard-core Italian fan). The chemical fog chokes the first few rows. "Some people have



**Stadium rockers:** the River End of the Philadelphia Union's 18,000-capacity PPL Park, Chester City. Both the stadium and the Commodore Barry Bridge, in the background, are beacons of regeneration that, it is hoped, will help the city play its way into better times



Welcome to hell... have a nice day (clockwise, from top left): Sons of Ben's 'bovver boy' element at a home game; the view from the away end at the Columbus Crew stadium, Ohio; playing to the camera at the PPL stadium; Justin Lee arms himself with officially sanctioned smoke grenades

that ultra thing going on," says one of the skinheads, "but we like the English bovver boys thing. It's part of British culture I identify with. It's got bad connotations, but we're against racism. To me it's about culture and lifestyle. I am a skinhead. It's a way of life for me. And I love the fashion."

Rivera, like all the capos, is standing with his back to the game, as he has been since kick-off, conducting the chants. I ask him why he's not watching the match.

"Who cares about the match?" he says. "It's all about having fun."

This doesn't feel like football. It feels like role-play.

America's new soccer fans are noisy and desperate for legitimacy. But it's hard to take them seriously when they call themselves the Centennial Firm, the Hudson Street Hooligans, the District Ultras or the LA Riot Squad.

"I find it a bit laughable," says Reuters' reporter Simon Evans, a Brit who's covering MLS from Miami. "In Miami there's a 20-strong gang of ultras, but they're nice lads really. There's no hooliganism here. An MLS game is pretty tame. It's an interesting time for fan culture, though."

When Major League Soccer kicked off in 1996, Evans explains, it was marketed as a family sport for soccer mums and their kids. "The league realised that wasn't going to get them out of being a niche sport, so they've encouraged these new supporters' groups who are trying to

be edgier and differentiate themselves from other American sports fans. NFL [American football] fans don't really chant or sing, and at NBA [basketball] games there's a constant DJ. But if you go to a Seattle MLS match, with crowds of 35,000, and one end shouting to the other, it's like a proper soccer atmosphere."

The MLS needs this febrile atmosphere at games, says Evans, to persuade American soccer fans to abandon their televisions and actually go to the matches. "The league is saying, if you want an authentic soccer experience, instead of sitting at home in front of your telly pretending to be an Arsenal fan, why not come and support your local team."

But the fans, he thinks, are different from the base of young working-class men who traditionally have made up English football crowds. "I find them a bit studenty, to be honest," Evans says, "They're very active online and like to argue the toss with Liverpool fans or whatever. You get a lot of Anglophiles interested in it, like people from New Jersey who are really into New Order and support Man City. But the fakeness will be lost as the league grows up."

At the moment, the new fans rule. And as Evans points out, the league is marketing itself on the back of them, running television commercials that show the fans rather than the players.

"The supporters' groups are a key driver in the success of the sport," says Dan Courtemanche,

senior vice-president of marketing and communications for the MLS. "They provide a unique environment for North American professional sports. You're not going to hear people singing songs and organised chanting at any other sports [in America]."

"It's a sea change since the early days, when you had a lot of minivan families coming to MLS matches. We still welcome them, but our focus is towards the 18-34-year-old adults, because they're the vibrant and passionate supporters, like the Sons of Ben."

**THE** Sons of Ben have developed a reputation. Named after Benjamin Franklin, former Philadelphia resident and founding father, they were established in January 2007 by Andrew Dillon, Dave Flagler and Bryan James. At the time, Philadelphia didn't even have an MLS team – or franchise, as American sports teams are known. The Sons of Ben set about lobbying for one.

They designated McGillin's – a 150-year-old Irish bar in downtown Philadelphia – as their home ground. They created club colours – pinching the city's blue and yellow flag. They designed a crest – Benjamin Franklin's skull over a scythe-and-oar cross. And around 3,500 people joined. The fan power worked, the league gave the city a franchise and the Philadelphia Union became the 16th club in the MLS as of this season. >

'Everybody paints Philly sports fans as these crazed lunatics. The media makes

the Sons of Ben out to be degenerates and criminals'

MIKE NAIOTI, SONS OF BEN VICE-PRESIDENT

## America's football fans are desperate for legitimacy. But it's hard to take them

Seen from afar, the Sons of Ben have created the boisterous football culture that is often missing from the modern English game since compulsory seating, television and high-priced tickets changed its atmosphere and demographics. Before they got their team, the Sons of Ben would travel to other grounds just to boo, or sing. "We've won as many cups as you and we don't have a team." A YouTube video shows them singing "99 Bottles Of Beer On The Wall" from start to finish for 27 minutes after a rival coach was suspected of drink-driving.

"The Sons of Ben are as devoted as any Philadelphia sports fans," says Marc Narducci, a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the city's venerable newspaper. "In fact, there is no other supporters' group as large as the Sons of Ben. The Union is still down Philadelphia's sporting ladder, behind the local NFL and baseball teams, and probably the local hockey team, in terms of number of fans, but it's impressive what they did with attendance in their first year."

With other aspects of the Sons of Ben, Narducci is less impressed. "I don't like the swearing," he says. "The Sons of Ben use the lame excuse that it's done in other MLS stadiums. I think it's classless and they should be above that. They are clever and creative with their chants, and the swearing detracts from all they add. I could do without the skinheads, too."

Don Garber, the league's commissioner, is also worried about the swearing. In fact, having originally praised the Sons of Ben's valour in campaigning for a team, during a recent Q&A with MLS fans he said he was worried about a "lunatic fringe" among MLS supporters, and about the "dynamic" of travelling fans. He singled Philadelphia out twice, citing their habit of shouting "You suck asshole" when the opposition keeper takes a goal kick, and the fact that fans had to be escorted into PPL Park. "There are two things I worry about," he said. "One is that we're going to have a terrorist attack in an MLS stadium. The second is that we're going to have a riot in a stadium."

A Portland fan at the Q&A session offered Garber a reply: "[In Seattle] you have 30,000 customers who want to be hard. They've read *Among The Thugs* [American journalist Bill Buford's investigation into English football hooligans] and they've seen *Green Street* twice, and they think that's how to be a football supporter. That's what you're dealing with in Philly."

**LAST** October, I joined the Sons of Ben for the final two matches of the MLS season. They won the first, against New York, 2-1. The final match was to be against Columbus Crew in Ohio.

On the morning before match day, the Sons of Ben vice-president, Mike Naioti, picks me up in his wife's Toyota Corolla. I'd been expecting a bus.



## seriously when they call themselves the District Ultras or the LA Riot Squad

"The Phillies are in the play-offs," he says, "so a few people aren't coming." The Phillies are the hallowed local Major League Baseball team, which has been playing in the city since 1883.

Sons of Ben founder and president, Bryan James, is watching the baseball; capo Rivera is watching the baseball; capo Furlan is watching the baseball along with who knows how many others. Naioti isn't watching it because he's from upstate New York and supports the Boston Red Sox.

Naioti is a 27-year-old photocopier salesman with dark hair and hamster cheeks. He's wearing a USA international team replica top. He joined the Sons of Ben in 2007 and more or less manages them. His role includes negotiating discounted beers for the tailgate parties (like the one in the Chester Machine Works yard), gaining permission for smoke grenades – Celtic fans didn't get permission for flares when the Scottish club played a pre-season friendly in Philadelphia, so they spent three nights in jail – negotiating over swearing (broadcasters and families are opposed),

and upholding the code of conduct (no racism, thugs or idiocy, and always respect the team).

"E v e r y b o d y paints Philly sports fans as these crazed lunatics," he says. "But New York has fashion and arts, LA has Hollywood, DC has politics and Philly has sports. But because the city has a reputation [the baseball contingent throwing

**Firm foundations:** Sons of Ben vice-president Mike Naioti has a pre-match team talk with the Hudson Street Hooligans – the subtly named supporters group of Ohio's Columbus Crew – outside Hooligans, one of their downtown haunts

snowballs at Father Christmas is frequently quoted as evidence] the media makes the Sons of Ben out to be degenerates and criminals."

We pick up Dave Remm at his office near Harrisburg, two hours from Philadelphia. Remm is a 30-year-old haulage-services salesman. He plays football with Naioti at weekends (they tell me not to call it soccer, as they're very conscious of being proper football supporters, no matter how confusing it gets). He looks like an overgrown boy and he chews tobacco. I help him lift two crates of beer into the boot. He says someone is bringing a drum. I ask if they're ever discreet.

"You've got to be as obnoxious as possible," he says.

In the car they talk about football. Remm has never been to Europe, but he played in an "elite team" when he was younger – "We thought we were hot shit." Naioti has been to see a couple of Basel matches in Switzerland. He likes watching football because it offers more "intimacy" than other American sports.

After eight hours of trees and awful music (including some Puerto Rican rap), we arrive at the hotel in Columbus. It's dark outside. The hotel is near, rather than in, Columbus. It's on a highway just past a stinking oil refinery. Remm immediately takes charge.

"Where can we go drink our faces off?" he asks the receptionist.

She draws us a map. While drinking a couple of beers in the hotel, Remm shows me the tattoo on his chest. It's an outline of a shirt pocket with a pen in it. We get a taxi to town and drink enormous cans of Bud Light in grim bars while watching the Phillies get knocked out of the play-offs. Remm negotiates a taxi – he shouts at a cab driver, slams a door, shouts at a cab driver, slams a door – and we go back to the hotel. I'm so tired I'm almost asleep in the lift. Naioti and Remm go and find burgers. (They end up eating five each.)

"We'll bring you some," says Remm. "What room are you in?"

"32," I say.

I go to bed in room 24.

The next morning they skip breakfast and ask the receptionist what's worth seeing.

"There's the pumpkin festival," she says.

Instead we drive around with Flogging Molly, a Celtic punk band, turned up painfully loud. Naioti and Remm are wearing Philadelphia Union tops with the name of the club captain, (Danny) Califf, on the back. I'm wearing a Sons of Ben scarf Naioti gave me. Nobody knows where to put the Sons of Ben flag he brought, so I keep it folded in my lap.

"It's match day, boys!" shouts Naioti.

"Let's do it!" says Remm.

**THE** city is a mess. Last night the local college football team, Ohio State, celebrated homecoming. We drive past their 102,000-capacity stadium and Naioti and Remm gasp. The nearby frat houses look like blast-zones of empty beer cups and pizza boxes. Girls sneak around in last night's clothes. Men cling to cartons of breakfast fries. Remm says he can smell white pizza and broccoli.

"I miss college, dude," says Naioti.

"Me too," says Remm.

We drive past Hooligans bar, which is owned by the Hudson Street Hooligans, the Columbus Crew's supporters group. Naioti tried to contact them a few weeks ago, but New York fans sabotaged his Facebook. He dismisses my suggestion that we just walk in.

"It's their turf," he says.

We debate it for an hour, before a barman in another pub tells us we'll be fine. Naioti parks and asks a man barbecuing sausages if it's OK to go in. It is. Naioti and Remm look nervous. Loud heavy metal plays inside. The owners have tattoos. They give us free beer. There's an Arsenal flag on the wall.

The rest of the Sons of Ben are tailgating at the 20,000-capacity Columbus Crew stadium. The car park is vast and almost empty. I recognise one of the skinheads from last week's game. He's wearing chinos and bover boots and says he's so focused on singing at matches that he has to record them to find out what happened later. Another Son of Ben, who's wearing a kilt, plays music while we kick a ball around and drink beer. Nobody talks about the match, but rather about singing and road trips.

I say hello to another Brit, Doug, from Reading. He supports West Ham, but has lived in Philadelphia for 12 years. He's not a typical West Ham fan. He's quite nerdy. In fact everyone here is quite nerdy. (An American friend tells me, "That's because they're nerds.") The atmosphere is very flat. I had expected more. When Bill Buford wrote about British soccer culture in *Among The Thugs*, he described the experience as euphoric. Here I am, among the Dougs, and it feels as if everyone's on Ritalin.

Inside the ground I count 38 Philadelphia fans. A couple of them squabble over singing protocol. Others just sing: "Come on Union score a goal, it's really very simple, put the ball into the net and we'll go f\*\*\*ing mental!" Most of Columbus fans don't respond. Two older fans tell us we suck.

"Say that as you're walking away, pussies," shouts a chubby Son of Ben, before stumbling and falling off his bench.

There is no segregation. I see a dad wander into a neighbouring section with his son. A security guard stops him and warns him about swearing. I ask the guard if it's a problem.

"We told them they couldn't curse," he says. "But they don't listen."

"Can't you kick them out?" I ask.

"I would, but I'm not in charge. And they spend more money in here than out there."

The match is awful, with the players chasing the ball like children in a playground. Philadelphia lose 3-1. Afterwards I ask club captain Danny Califf about the Sons of Ben. He says the crowd at home is very different to away and describes them as "a very in-your-face crew" and "very Philly". Naioti says he was disappointed with the turnout.

"I didn't recognise a lot of them today," he says. "It was an odd crowd."

We get in the car. We won't be back until 3am and Naioti has work in the morning. He talks to Remm about tactics and future signings. Halfway home we stop for fried chicken and bump into the skinhead in chinos. He tells us a female Son of Ben had her scarf stolen by Columbus supporters. He's furious. Security did nothing when he reported it.

"I'd have kicked their f\*\*\*ing heads in if I'd been there," he says.

Remm and Naioti blank him. As he walks away, Remm shakes his head: "Why's he wearing those f\*\*\*ing boots?"