



# Adelman on Venues

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October 3, 2022

## HOW WE LEARN

I am dismayed at the [news from Indonesia](#), where current reports indicate that at least 125 people were killed during a fan intrusion of the pitch after a soccer match. Accounts so far say that police used tear gas on fans, and that many people suffered compressive asphyxia as they were trampled trying to flee.

In so many respects, this scenario should not happen. The venue security force should not have been carrying tear gas, as firearms and “crowd control gas” are prohibited at page 32 of the [Stadium Safety and Security Regulations](#) of FIFA, the international soccer authority. Moreover, my understanding is that tear gas is generally used to disperse a crowd, which makes it ill-suited against people who are already on the pitch and don’t have anywhere to disperse to. And although I appreciate that no one wants fans to destroy club property or police vehicles, those are easier to replace than human lives.

This is what I’ve read since Saturday night in the U.S. We will doubtless learn more over the coming days and weeks. Some of the news may deepen our understanding of the facts – some may prove that initial accounts were wrong, incomplete, or misleading – some analysts may reflexively blame all soccer fans for these injuries and deaths, or [blame all police for overreacting](#). Time will tell. Hopefully there will be an official safety investigation that is less of a whitewash than the one released just a week after the [last international soccer crowd disaster](#) in Cameroon this past Spring.

I am upset at the loss of life. But as an event industry professional, I am angrier at the apparent lack of a crowd management learning curve. A former coach for Indonesia’s national team is quoted that fans there enter the pitch “almost every weekend,” and such disturbances have been going on for years.

How can this happen? How can “leaders” watch things repeatedly go wrong without initiating changes? Isn’t this the definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results?

A related story may offer part of the explanation. I recently delivered crowd manager training to a large group of public safety professionals. Most seemed to pay close attention, and I received some gratifying feedback. But early the next morning, I got a call from someone who complained that he and his group from the city’s special events



Created by Lego master Barlow Grant.

team had gotten “nothing of value” from my three-hour training. Then he said he had worked “thousands” of events, and he demanded to know how my experience stacked up to his. I reiterated what I told the group the day before, that I work events as a consultant, so I don’t have the operational duties of a municipal employee. This means, as I had also explained previously, that I have the luxury of what the legendary Ray Ward taught me was “management by walking around.” I have lots of photos of things like signs and barricades and ingress security precisely because I don’t have operational responsibility. My job lets me see what I want and talk to whoever I want.

I wouldn’t say my perspective is *better* than his, but it is no less valid. While he prepares for his next event by doing many of the same things as the last one, I will be reviewing someone else’s operational documents, often from an event where something went very wrong. Through experience (and an open mind), my observation is that problems frequently arise from incomplete event plans or poor communication among organizers, but mishaps occur even where the plans are robust and activated by capable professionals. By spending a lot of time figuring out why bad things happen at other people’s events, I can help my clients make good things happen at theirs.

This may not be the way for everyone to gain insight, but it works for me. Incidentally, American legal education has been premised on learning from other people’s disputes since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. We lawyers may all be wrong, but I doubt it.

When I recovered from being insulted the day after I poured my heart out for this man and his colleagues, I considered the consequences of his point of view. If I understood his challenge correctly, anyone who had not worked thousands of special events was unqualified to tell him *anything* about crowd management. I gave this some thought, then I got sad for him. What a lonely and confusing world he must live in. Imagine ...

- Never reading instructions for anything, because only experience yields wisdom.
- Never watching Youtube videos to learn a new skill.
- Never gaining insight from a friend or co-worker.
- Never reading a book or article describing someone else’s experience.
- Never participating in any peer-review project, like the development of American National Standards or NFPA code guidance.
- Never joining an industry association like the Event Safety Alliance to learn from smart friends.



I write this on the five-year anniversary of the Route 91 Harvest Festival shooting, the deadliest active shooter incident in U.S. history. I stood on the stage when it was still a crime scene; I read the detailed event safety plan; I talked to people who tried to save lives that night. Based on twenty years of studying safety issues at live events, I continue to believe that [no amount of planning](#) for reasonably foreseeable safety and health issues at that festival could have prepared its organizers for a 64-year-old accountant using an arsenal he assembled 32 stories above the Las Vegas Strip.

We live in a complicated world. At most, we will understand only part of anyone's motivation and mindset when they attend mass gatherings. But tragedies like this weekend in Indonesia, and five years ago in Las Vegas, remind us that the work is never done, and it remains our task to learn from whomever, wherever, however we can. I write *Adelman on Venues* as much for myself – to help me process the incomprehensible – as for you.

A little humility about our own wisdom and self-sufficiency can go a long way.

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