

With or Without Covid by Phil Downs



1Phil Downs MBE, Estadio Accesible Board Member

In the mid-70s, last century:

I was desperate to get to see a match again following a catastrophic injury which left me in a wheelchair paralysed from the shoulders down. As a Manchester United fan my ambition to get a ticket to a match was thwarted for more than 5 years due to the exceedingly small number of available tickets to people using wheelchairs. When the breakthrough finally came, I was offered 3 tickets at the end of a season and then a season ticket arrived for the next season which felt like a lifetime of Christmases bundled together!

Although nervous on approaching Old Trafford for the first time, I was also feeling the excitement and the excitement just grew and grew the closer I got to the stadium. I didn't know what to expect as I had never noticed the facilities for supporters with disabilities when I was fully able bodied, like so many people, I felt that disabled supporters must be watching from somewhere but never thought anything more about it. Seeing the crowds from a different level was an experience I wasn't ready for; staring at peoples 'backsides' all the way down Warwick Rd (as it was then) wasn't the best view but the stadium came into view and there it was!

Being inside the stadium also involved a learning curve as I was led by a steward through a rabbit warren of corridors. All the nerves disappeared only to be overtaken by bewilderment as I realised the end of the journey was at the top of the players tunnel with the players dressing rooms to my left. I could hear the bustle of noise from behind the dressing room doors which soon opened with both teams starting to make their way towards the tunnel. It was an incredible experience to be within touching distance of my heroes!

Leap forward into the 21st century:

Manchester United had had 4 separate stadium expansions and with that the number of wheelchair spaces grew, likewise the seating for visually impaired supporters. I started the Manchester United Disabled Supporters Association (MUDSA) inaugurated in 1989, one of the first in Europe, if not the first. I then moved onto become one of the founders of the National Association of Disabled Supporters (NADS) which later had a name change to 'Level Playing Field'. The cries from supporters with disabilities suddenly had a much louder voice with the number of individual club associations growing annually. The National Association carried the debate to the higher echelons which, after years of campaigning, produced the Accessible Stadia Guide which amounted to a minimum standard for facilities for supporters with disabilities.



Phil Downes with some Manchester United players.

Implementing the minimum standards was a battle! In general, only new stadia benefitted from increasing numbers and better views but it was much more difficult to force the minimum standards to spread amongst the older and more 'historical' stadiums. Only time would tell whether the improved facilities would see the light of day however a massive shake-up in the English Premier League provided a promise that all clubs would reach the required standards by 2017. My hope became reality at last!



3Sir Alex Ferguson with Phil Downs MBE

It could be said that we have now reached the 'Covid era'. Fans no longer know what to expect once this period of matches played behind closed doors is over and fans are allowed back into stadiums. No doubt the reintroduction of fans to matches will be cautious and a slow process, stringent procedures will be in place but the ideal of 'universal design' will continue to be observed with more and more fans with disabilities enjoying the 'beautiful game'. At this point my focus has largely moved to thinking about the facilities for disabled people in other countries, in this case, Spain.

'Estadio Accesible' is the 'new kid on the block' and eager to make an impression on clubs, governing bodies and the Gobierno de España in order to negotiate introducing an acceptable level of facilities for supporters with disabilities living in Spain. So many currently find themselves devoid of any options and negligible levels of understanding and appreciation of the 'lonely' fans with disabilities who will be 'isolated' from the game long after Covid is over! When everyone else is restriction-free and back cheering their team as the '12th man' just as they were in 2019, fans with disabilities will still be watching the match on TV!