

## **Stormy Courts**

**By Prof. Gil Fried, The Crowd Management Doctor, University of West Florida**

**© 2024 Pensacola**

Court storming is a right of passage. So was paddling, wedgies, and other antics that we have decided as a society need to end. Maybe it is time to stop court/field storming. The following represent some insight from Professor Gil Fried of the University of West Florida (Professor and Interim Assistant Dean of the College of Business) who is often referred to as the Crowd Management Doctor. Prof. Fried has written extensively on the topic and has been educating security personnel for many years. He also has been an expert witness in some of the largest United States crowd management cases in the past 30 years, including crowds storming fields at college football games and a high school basketball game often mentioned in many articles (the Kay case from 2024 in Arizona). Kay was injured during a court storming by fans after a high school basketball game and suffered a torn carotid artery (and a stroke) that left him paralyzed on his right side. He was going to be a volleyball player at Stanford University before the injury changed his life.

[https://www.espn.com/mens-college-basketball/story/\\_/id/9019013/joe-kay-so-bering-rushing-court-story](https://www.espn.com/mens-college-basketball/story/_/id/9019013/joe-kay-so-bering-rushing-court-story))

The following represent some ideas to consider related to court storming.

There have been numerous ideas presented, but some of the easiest solutions really have not been promoted for fear of alienating fans. The positive and negative to various solutions will be considered along with the historical backdrop of what is now front and center for many sport fans.

### **Storming Incident**

Early 2024 was a tough month for basketball fans and their celebration around basketball games. On February 24<sup>th</sup>, Duke's star player Kyle Filipowski was injured when fans collided with him when they stormed the court after a victory by Wake Forest against the Blue Devils. The students came so fast onto the court that Filipowski had no time to protect himself.

(<https://www.cbssports.com/college-basketball/news/kyle-filipowski-injury-breaking-down-the-film-on-duke-stars-run-in-with-court-storming-wake-forest-fans/>)

That incident came shortly after Iowa star basketball player Caitlin Clark avoided serious injury when a fan rushed onto the court after Ohio State beat the Hawkeyes. The fan can be seen on video running onto the court with her phone in the air taking a picture or video. The fan was oblivious to arguably the best college basketball player in the country and easily could have seriously injured her. While Caitlin was knocked down, she was able to get off the court and was not seriously injured.

(<https://apnews.com/article/caitlin-clark-fans-storming-court-7f226a252df600432734db409d3b5b3e>)

In December, Purdue men's coach Matt Painter and his top-ranked Boilermakers lost at Northwestern. A month later, his No. 1-ranked team lost at Nebraska. A month after that, Purdue lost at Ohio State. Home-team fans stormed the court each time. In his postgame comments in Lincoln, Painter called for improved preparatory safety measures. In anticipation of a possible court storming at the Northwestern game some of the Purdue players and staff were seen exiting the court while time was still on the clock and Northwestern was shooting free throws. In fact, students started rushing the court with 0.3 seconds left on the clock and had to be ushered back for the free throws to take place. (

<https://ftw.usatoday.com/2023/12/northwestern-fans-nearly-stormed-the-court-too-early-in-upset-of-no-1-purdue>)

Since the start of 2024, there have been three court storms after Big Ten basketball games at Nebraska: January 9- when the Cornhuskers routed top-ranked Purdue; February 1, when the Cornhuskers came back from 19 points down to beat No. 6 Wisconsin in overtime; and February 11, when the Nebraska women's team overcame a 14-point deficit to defeat Clark and No. 2 Iowa.

## **What are the possible solutions, and do they work?**

The following are various solutions that have been undertaken or suggested to deal with court/field storming.

### **Fines**

SEC imposes a fine of \$100,000 for the first storming of a basketball or football game. The next occurrence results in a \$250,000 fine and the third instance results in a \$500,000 fine. The fines have been around for years and have no real impact. In fact, many schools and alumni raise the funds through online sites such as Go Fund Me to get fans to contribute to pay a fine. Other conferences or leagues also have fines, but some of them are token fines with no real bite. The following represent some fines since 2023.

- \$100,000: LSU basketball (beat Kentucky on Feb. 21)
- \$100,000: South Carolina basketball (beat Kentucky on Jan. 23)
- \$5,000: Santa Clara basketball (beat Gonzaga on Jan. 11)
- \$25,000: UCF basketball (beat Kansas on Jan. 10)
- \$100,000: Ole Miss football (beat LSU on Sept. 30, 2023)
- \$100,000: Missouri football (beat Kansas State on Sept. 16, 2023)

While fines might appear to generate some publicity they really do not change conduct. The best example entails fines for speeding. Many drivers are speeding and only slow down when they see an officer. They know the

cost, but they are thinking about the odds and feel they are likely to get away with it. Others might feel storming is worth it to generate enthusiasm and excitement for a program. In fact, paying a fine might well be worth the recruiting cache that could be generated when prospects see the enthusiasm on campus.

### **Have a plan**

Many pundits say that venues need a plan. As someone who has been involved in this space for years. They all have plans. Some plans are in a three-inch-thick binder for each game which highlights the potential detail. I am sure that plans also contain elements associated with a possible crowd rush or court/field storming. Other emergency action plans focus on active shooters, bomb threats, fires, medical emergencies, weather related emergencies, and other concerns. The problem is that it is impossible to prevent all incidents just like it is impossible to eliminate all crime. Steps can be taken to minimize potential issues and that is why many plans specifically call for allowing fans to storm a field or court as the alternative could possibly lead to more injuries. In one case involving a major Pac-10 University who beat an undefeated nationally ranked football team, the plan specifically provided for opening gates to allow fans to rush the field rather than having them possibly asphyxiated by being crushed by fans interested in pushing forward. Even with a plan that worked well, one student fell over a wall and broke their arm. The court examined the plan and held that the university executed the plan, but this injury still arose. It is impossible to hold a major event with possibly 100,000 people and not have any possible injuries. The plan is designed to address the most significant and likely injuries. A venue can only do what is reasonable under the circumstances and to follow industry best practices or government safety mandates.

## **More Security**

Some pundits claim that if more security is present there would not be any storming incidents. That is pure speculation and contradicted by so many years of examples. Security, whether ushers, security, non-uniformed officers, or uniformed police can have a possible impact on some individuals and what they might do, but they cannot have a measurable impact on a mob of thousands intent on storming. Imagine if an officer tries to arrest a person in the middle of this mayhem. The officer and the suspect both risk being injured, especially if they are on steps, stairs, or on bleachers. The downward momentum of thousands of people descending down stairs/bleachers cannot be stopped by several officer. The industry standard is roughly one trained crowd manager for every 250 people in attendance. Even if there was one trained crowd manager for every 50 fans, that would not stop a crowd intent on storming a court.

## **Barriers**

One suggestion raised by some is to have some type of barrier between the court and the fans. South Carolina women's basketball team has a yellow rope around the court. This could be problematic for high end donors who have donated lots of money for courtside seats. There are many fans at NBA games who have courtside seats and the culture in professional sports is to not go onto the court, even with the most exciting games. Thus, it is not barriers, but fan behavior that is the problem.

Another major concern is the type of barrier that could possibly be utilized. If it is just a rope or stanchion, then it would not really do anything and could possibly be a tripping hazard. If the barrier was tubular steel or barricades, they represent an enhanced risk of people being pinned against them from

people behind pushing forward. This is sometimes seen at concerts or other events where someone is injured or crushed. This was seen at the Camp Randall stampede in 1993 after the Badgers win against Michigan. The metal barriers were twisted like they were rubber by human bodies...when in fact they could withstand more than 1,000 pounds pressure per square foot. That shows how much force was exerted by the crowd pushing forward and twisting and mangling bodies down by the barrier that circled the field at the time. (<https://www.workingwithcrowds.com/the-camp-randall-crush-1993/>)

### **Announcement by Stars/Coaches/Athletic Directors**

One strategy that some venues use to some success entails announcement made over the public address (PA) system or the scoreboard video by coaches, player, and athletic directors imploring fans to not violate rules or descend on the court/field. Sometimes these strategies work. There has never be a study on their effectiveness. However, it is assumed that a star player or coach would have a greater impact on a crowd then a regular announcer. These videos have successfully been used to educate fans on code of conduct behaviors or emergency exits at venues. Thus, they cannot hurt.

### **Announcements Over Loudspeakers**

Announcement made by the PA have limited effect. Sometimes inappropriate comments by a PA announcer can contribute to an issue. In one incident involving a field storming after a Ball State football game years ago, someone from the communication booth posted on the scoreboard that the goal posts looked lonely. The resulting field storming resulted in fans trying to take down the goal posts and during the ensuing mayhem the goal posts hit someone in the head and rendered him paraplegic. The fan had climbed over a three-foot

barrier(another example that barriers often don't work) but the folks in the communication booth thought it would be fun to encourage inappropriate student behavior. The better option is to convey to students the need to be safe and to not undertake dangerous activities.

### **Alcohol Sales**

One concern raised by many is whether students and others are possible impaired by alcohol. Some have advocated for discontinuing alcohol sales after a given time. Alcohol sales are often stopped after the half at football games and around the 12:00 media timeout in the 2nd half for men's basketball and end of the 3rd quarter for women's basketball. While this might seem to be an easy solution, it is not. Alcohol sales are relatively new for college sports and crowds storming courts/fields has happened for years before alcohol sales were approved at the college level. Many students are also cost conscious and they sneak in alcohol or partake in drinking before heading to a venue. Furthermore, there are similar alcohol sales issues with professional sports and there are rarely any storming incidents in professional sports. That does not mean there are no streakers or individual who try to enter the field/court in professional sports (remember Morgana the Kissing Bandit- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHuICk7VOFc>) but they are the exception rather than the rule.

### **Alternative Celebrations**

Some have suggested holding a separate celebration or delaying the rush onto the field/court until officials and opponents have left. While these might seem like reasonable approaches, they would not work when students want to celebrate the moment a victory is achieved and not wait around ten minutes for the field/court to empty out. Similarly, many students think it is a tradition

and want to be involved in the moment. That is especially accurate in the new social media age where they are looking for a viral moment immediately rather than waiting for some future time/date when the news might not be as newsworthy.

## **Other Options**

Some of the other options that have been discussed include:

- Playing without fans
- Playing on neutral courts
- Playing at odd hours so fans might not be as excited (such as an early morning game)
- Having dedicated student sections behind a basket or some other location to minimize the distance needed to travel and avoid harm to those not interested in possibly storming the court/field.

Each option has possible concerns or can be considered a last resort option.

## **Why is this an issue?**

Field and court storming can result in injuries. Numerous videos show people falling, tripping, colliding with each other, and epic celebrations going wrong (remember Edwin Diaz's celebration injury in 2023 during the World Baseball Classic-

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/16/sport/edwin-diaz-world-baseball-classic-injury-spt-intl/index.html>).

There is a very interesting journal article examining 62 athletes injured while celebrating in sports from 1993-2015 including one death. (Momaya A, Read C, Estes R. When celebrations go wrong: a case series of injuries after celebrating in sports. J Sports Med Phys Fitness. 2017 Mar;57(3):267-271. doi: 10.23736/S0022-4707.16.06042-4. Epub 2015 Nov 12. PMID: 26564273.

<https://www.minervamedica.it/en/journals/sports-med-physical-fitness/article.p>

[hp?cod=R40Y2017N03A0267](http://hp?cod=R40Y2017N03A0267)) If athletes can be injured while celebrating, the average fan can likewise face serious injuries, especially when being jostled, bumped, and trampled by others. While most injuries might be minor, they are injuries none-the-less. There is no way to eliminate all these injuries and some can escalate into serious injuries, even when unintentional. The issue with court/field storming entails the risk of injury to fans and players alike. The risk of injury can also impact those who are not interested in going onto the field or court. Many fans have been caught-up in the movement of others and were injured on no fault of their own.

One of the interesting areas of possible concerns entails litigation. There can be claims by those injured in a rush. These claims can and normally include the athletic department, university, athletic personnel, security companies, the venue, and other parties. Besides possible suits from those injured, there can also be claims by athletes, coaches, and officials. They can sue someone who injured them as well. In fact, there are laws in many states that says attacking an official can result in an enhanced criminal penalty. Even though those laws apply to battery, running into an official is actually a battery. Thus, there is a possible criminal law element besides possible civil liability.

## **So, what are solutions that can really work?**

The following represent some potential options to address the issue of court/field storming.

### **Game Forfeiture**

Some have advocated for a home team to forfeit the game they had just won if there is a storming. That might encourage some to avoid such a harsh penalty for a program. Such a plan would appear to have much more clout than the current financial penalties. Imagine if a team wins their conference tournament and would go to the big dance, but they get disqualified from the

tournament. That would be a huge incentive for fans to police themselves and not storm a court.

### **Loss of a Home Game**

Another option is to have the next home game for a school cancelled. This could lose the school a lot of money in ticket sales and concession revenue. It can also serve as a warning that future actions could result in even more game cancellations for the home team. This might result in some contractual issues, but it would put pressure on administrators to change behavior.

### **Change Culture**

All the various solutions suggested fail to address the primary issue which is fans themselves and how they behave. Years ago, there were no fan codes of conduct. People were expected to behave in a certain manner. Civility has been lost, often more so on college campuses. This can be seen in the anti-Israel rhetoric on college campuses where any dissenting opinions are shot down. This lack of civility needs to change and that is where University officials can educate their students as to what is appropriate behavior. It might require a carrot and stick approach, but all the risk management efforts discussed are only Band-Aid solutions when the underlying condition is not addressed.

### **Utilize the Legal System**

Those who want to storm a court/field should be informed that such efforts are a violation of trespass laws and individuals would be fully prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Professional sport venues issue trespass bars for those who try to enter the field of play or otherwise violate venue rules. Those who storm a court/field could be prosecuted and barred from attending future

events at the venue. Some might wonder how this could be accomplished when thousands of people might storm a court/field? The answer is very easy and that is facial recognition software. Every university already has a copy of a student's face from issuing ID cards for students. These photos can easily be uploaded to a facial recognition software system and students can be told in advance that their photos will be utilized for security and safety purposes. Video images can quickly be scanned by AI enabled software to identify students and then they can be processed through the system.

The second element of the legal system is to hold people liable for their actions. If they help destroy property or injure people, they should be held accountable through prosecution for criminal offenses (vandalism or battery as examples) and face possible civil penalties for harm they might have caused. If people know they will be hit in the pocketbook (as well as possible legal bills and fines), they might quickly change their behavior.

### **Develop New Policies/Procedures**

Possibly the most viable options for addressing storming is to develop new policies and procedures that have teeth and are enforced. The most effective risk management tools are associated with the layering approach. This entails multiple levels of protection efforts rather than one simple solution. For example, a robust program could include the following:

- New policies such as student code of conduct violation for one to storm a field/court and that someone can be punished such as fines up to expulsion
- Communicate the policies to all students in the student code of conduct, university web page, ticket buying plans, student government, student clubs, Greek life, etc...
- Post the policies around the venue and on the venue's web page
- Hang posters around the venue similar to fan code of conduct posters
- Have warning on the back of tickets

- Shoot public service announcements with star players, campus leaders, and coaches
- Have warning show on the video screen
- Have warning aired on the PA system
- Have officials make statements as to the possible penalty for such behavior before a close game ends
- Broadcast footage of the storming around campus and indicate what penalties were imposed for those who engaged in the conduct
- Have public hearing for those caught violating the rule
- Promote what punishments were meted out to discourage future potential issues.

There is no perfect solution, but efforts need to be taken to minimize the risks associated with such behavior before someone unfortunately dies. The same type of concern was seen in Major League Baseball (MLB) with foul ball netting. It took several serious injuries publicized on social media and the death of a Dodgers fan for MLB to take serious efforts to better protect fans with more netting. We are at the point with field/court storming. Now is the time for change rather than waiting for more serious injuries.

Prof Fried can be reached at [gfried@uwf.edu](mailto:gfried@uwf.edu) or 850-474-3426. His Crowd Management Doctor Videos can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/@crowdmanagementdoctor/playlists> His free sport facility law newsletter can be accessed at <https://sportsfacilitieslaw.com/>.