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James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

POLICE

Policing frenzied fans

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The Stanley Cup Finals have featured a remarkable contrast between two very different municipalities different in terms of nationality, of course, but also in relation to geography, demography, climate, culture, and especially sports history. But one important similarity surrounds how the police in Vancouver and Boston are preparing for crowd control in the event of either victory or defeat in tonight's winner-takes-home-the-Cup rubber game.

Both these wonderful and proud cities have endured fan riots in the wake of major sporting events. Bostonians are all too familiar with the tragic death of Victoria Snelgrove, the 21-year-old Emerson College student who was killed by non-lethal weaponry used by Boston police officers who had been deployed outside of Fenway Park in anticipation of a World Series title.

Other Boston sporting events have sparked widespread rowdiness and vandalism, most notably the wild street celebration that erupted after the 2001 Super Bowl as the last-second field goal attempt sailed through the uprights to give the underdog Patriots an unexpected victory. Delirious and drunken fans set fires and tipped cars in several areas around town, overwhelming the limited ranks of the Boston Police working the late shift that evening.

Notwithstanding its reputation for civility, Vancouver has had its dark moments. A major riot after the Canucks fell to the New York Rangers in a hard-fought 7th game of the 1994 Stanley Cup Finals caused over a million (Canadian) dollars in property damage as well as injuries to dozens of disappointed fans.

That was 17 years ago, pointed out Constable Jana McGuinness, a spokesperson for the Vancouver Police Department. The population has changed dramatically. A more important change, however, is in Vancouver's approach to crowd control. Using a strategy known as Meet and Greet, the Vancouver Police Department will flood the downtown tonight with hundreds of officers given orders to mingle—to talk hockey and high-five pedestrians, just like the rest of the crowd. The officers will be in uniform along with a highly-visible green vest, but will neither wear nor display any special riot gear.

The proactive and friendly approach worked well during last year's Olympic Games despite the hundreds of thousands who converged upon the city. Vancouver police are confident that history surrounding the 1994 Stanley Cup defeat will not be repeated, both in fan response as well as in the game's outcome.

The Boston Police Department is taking a page from the same book. As it happens, representatives from both cities participated last year in a special get-together of police brass from far and wide to examine best practices for managing crowds associated with major sporting or political events.

As part of its Play it Safe□ plan, the Boston Police Department will follow a similar low-key approach. Officers dressed in the same green vests will gently explain to fans that certain restrictions concerning access to Causeway Street and Kenmore Square, the two major fan-frenzy hot-spots, will take effect at about 10 pm, beginning with the game's third period, and will last well beyond the final horn (or winning goal in the event of overtime). Getting the crowd on our side,□ said Superintendent-Chief Daniel Linskey,□ can be very powerful weapon.□

Four years ago, the BPD had officers dressed in riot gear, with helmets and batons, lined up along Boylston Street near Fenway Park, both as a deterrent and in readiness to squelch disorderly conduct following the 2007 World Series. This time, the police will be out in force, but with a different attitude and presence more approachable than combative. Riot gear will be available, but only as a contingency.

Serendipitously, tonight's post-game fan response will benefit from one significant advantage over the Super Bowl and World Series aftermaths: Area colleges are not in full session, minimizing the potential for hoards of young and inebriated fans to move from the dorm to the street in order to demonstrate their team support.

Boston fans, and Bruins fans in particular, are not especially well-liked in places far away from this hotbed of sports. Back in March, for example, Assistant Coach Wayne Fleming of the Tampa Bay Lightning remarked during a radio interview, The Bruins fans come for the fights first and the hockey second.

Win or lose, tonight will test our city's spirit and sportsmanship. We should hope for a victory, of course, but even more for tranquility.