

In many trading centres and urban areas, football nights are now associated with chaos, especially during major matches involving rival clubs.

BY YAHUDU KITUNZI

Every weekend, millions of fans across Uganda and the world gather around television screens, in bars, restaurants, betting centres, and video halls to support their favourite clubs in the English Premier League (EPL) and other European leagues. For many people, football is more than just a sport. It is a source of joy, identity, friendship, and entertainment.

Supporters proudly wear jerseys of major European clubs. But behind the excitement, celebrations, and entertainment lies a growing problem that is silently affecting many communities—football-related violence, gambling addiction, depression, crime, and even death.

In recent years, cases linked to football rivalries and sports betting have become increasingly worrying. What should simply be a game is now pushing some people into dangerous behaviour. Fans have fought in bars after matches, friendships have broken down, families have disagreed, and in extreme cases, lives have been lost because of football arguments.

Law enforcement officers in Uganda have handled cases where football fans attacked one another after their teams lost. Simple arguments over penalties, refereeing decisions, or missed chances sometimes turn violent. In many trading centres and urban areas, football nights are now associated with chaos, especially during major matches involving rival clubs.

For instance, on May 24, at approximately 6.30pm in Bakuli, Kampala Central Division, Kampala District, an alleged supporter of Manchester United FC reportedly killed a supporter of Arsenal. The incident occurred on the day the EPL season concluded, with Arsenal securing the league trophy.

Police at Old Kampala confirmed the incident and stated that they were actively investigating the incident. Superintendent of Police (SP) Racheal Kawala, the Kampala Metropolitan Police spokesperson, identified the deceased only as Denis, a 34-year-old boda boda rider and resident of Bakuli.

"It is alleged that Denis, who was an Arsenal supporter, got into a misunderstanding with the suspect, identified only as Musiramu, a supporter of Manchester United. The disagreement reportedly escalated into a physical altercation during which the suspect struck Denis on the head, causing him to fall to the ground and die instantly," SP Kawala said, adding that efforts to arrest the suspect were currently ongoing.

Toxic mix

This newspaper understands that some fans bring alcohol and drugs into video halls, which are found almost everywhere nationwide. In certain halls, alcoholic beverages—and in some cases drugs—are openly sold, giving attendees easy access to substances that can impair their judgment and actions. The impairments have driven some to kill in the name of their clubs.

This was precisely the case on October 27, 2024, when an alleged Arsenal fan reportedly killed a Manchester United fan in Kabale District, western Uganda.



Law enforcement officers in Uganda have handled cases where football fans attacked one another after their teams lost. PHOTO/FILE

Killing in the name of my football club

The two were watching the EPL match between Arsenal and Liverpool at Kyogombe Trading Centre in Kaharo Sub-county. The game ended in a 2-2 draw at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium.

Shortly after the match, a fight broke out, leaving Benjamin Ndyamuhaki, only 36 then, dead.

On September 3, 2023, a 22-year-old man allegedly killed a 21-year-old Arsenal fan following a disagreement over the EPL match between Arsenal and Manchester United. Jackson Aineruhanga, a peasant from Sheema District, was stabbed to death after Arsenal's 3-1 victory.

Police reported that the argument began when Manchester United's Alejandro Garnacho's late goal was ruled out for offside by the video assistant referee (VAR). The quarrel continued in a bar, where the suspect later chased and fatally stabbed Aineruhanga.

In March 2023, an alleged Manchester United fan in Lira City died mysteriously after his team suffered a humiliating 7-0 defeat to Liverpool. Eddy Okello, a driver from Lira East Division, was found dead in his bedroom the following day.

In January 2023, Richard Ukuyo, said to be an Arsenal fan, was reportedly killed in Adjumani District following an argument with a Manchester United supporter. Arsenal had beaten Manchester United 3-2 in a close encounter.

Hedging bets

Betting and gambling technology has complicated matters, with police spokesperson Kituuma Rusoke recently revealing that the two have partly increased domestic violence in Uganda. While lawful, betting often leads to addiction.

"Many youth never leave betting houses. Because of addiction, they spend to a tune that creates stress. A person filled with stress is prone to crimes such as stealing or even selling a matrimonial home. Domestic violence comes in," Mr Kituuma explained.

He added that some people sell fami-

“
Issue.
Many youth never leave betting houses. Because of addiction, they spend to a tune that creates stress. A person filled with stress is prone to crimes such as stealing or even selling a matrimonial home. Domestic violence comes in.”

ACP Kituuma Rusoke, police spokesperson.

“
Burden.
The burden of responsibility and lack of opportunities have left many feeling hopeless. Football becomes more than entertainment—it becomes a distraction from the harsh realities of unemployment and uncertainty.”

Mr Abdullah Magambo, executive member of Mbale Heroes FC.

ly property to fund gambling, while students even gamble away school fees. In some cases, university students who lose their fees resort to forging results from places like Nasser Road to deceive their parents.

Globally, the gambling sector is projected to grow to \$153.57b (Shs576.6 trillion) by 2030, per Grand View Research. In Uganda, betting and gaming are increasingly popular, driven by the rise of European football among the youth.

The government collects significant revenue from the sector—Shs110b in the Financial Year (FY) 2021/2022, Shs151.9b in FY2022/2023 and Shs193b in FY2023/2024.

Currently, there are about 59 licensed gaming operators in Uganda, holding about 87 licenses. Fans of football clubs like Arsenal usually squeeze into betting houses every matchday to place bets in hopes of landing a big payday.

Speaking during the opening of Ugan-

da's 12th Parliament at Kololo Ceremonial Grounds this week, President Museveni said ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party leaders must focus less on foreign football excitement and more on ensuring government wealth creation funds reach ordinary citizens.

"Somebody...one of my people...was writing to me that I go and celebrate Arsenal. Me, Yoweri Museveni? [...] How can you celebrate European clubs when your people do not have money? You can have Arsenal, but first solve poverty if you are a leader," Mr Museveni said in reference to celebrations that greeted Arsenal's win of its first English title in 22 years.

Extreme fanaticism

Mr Abdullah Magambo, an executive member of Mbale Heroes Football Club, believes the allure of the EPL is not about to wane, thanks in no small part to "its high-quality entertainment."

The attendant problems resulting from extreme fanaticism should be treated seriously. He criticised the lack of proper sensitisation programmes to address the said problems, noting that stakeholders often prioritise profit over responsibility, neglecting the damage caused by addiction to betting and fanaticism.

"The burden of responsibility and lack of opportunities have left many feeling hopeless. In response, some turn to football, alcohol, and betting as temporary escapes. Football becomes more than entertainment—it becomes a distraction from the harsh realities of unemployment and uncertainty. Betting, in particular, appears too much as a form of temporary employment or a shortcut to survival," Mr Micheal Woniata, a sports lover and former communications officer of Mbale Heroes FC, said.

Former NRM party vice chairperson for eastern Uganda Mike Mukula, a sports fan, said: "Some fans view their clubs as part of their personal lives, making defeat feel like a personal loss. Social media has further intensified tensions by instantly spreading insults, rivalry, and

pressure."

Ms Sarah Chemutai, a sports lover, said to many unemployed youth, betting is treated like a shortcut to wealth. Some believe correctly predicting European football matches can change their lives overnight. Unfortunately, the reality is often different.

"Many bettors lose large amounts of money every week. Some use school fees, rent money, transport money, or business capital to gamble. Others get loans, hoping to recover previous losses. Instead of improving their lives, betting pushes many into debt and financial stress," she said.

"Sports betting has grown rapidly in Uganda over the last decade. Betting shops are now found in many towns, trading centres, and even villages. Young people, especially, are spending hours analysing football matches, predicting scores, and placing bets in the hope of winning money," she said.

What needs to be done

There have been disturbing reports of people becoming depressed after losing huge bets. Counsellors and community leaders say gambling addiction is now affecting mental health, especially among young men who spend most of their time following European football.

In some tragic cases, people have reportedly taken their own lives after losing money through betting. Others isolate themselves from family and friends because of shame and pressure from debts. Mental health experts warn that gambling addiction can create feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and emotional breakdown.

Football-related betting has also been linked to theft and criminal behaviour. Police and local leaders have reported cases where individuals steal money, phones, household items, or business funds to finance gambling. Some employees secretly take money from workplaces, hoping to return it after winning bets. However, when they lose again, the situation becomes even worse.

Parents are increasingly complaining about young people who no longer focus on education, work, or business because they spend most of their time analysing football statistics and betting odds. Some youth wake up early to study fixtures from Europe's major football competitions instead of searching for jobs or engaging in productive work.

Police reports show that the influence of football fanaticism is also affecting relationships and families. Couples argue over betting losses. Some parents fail to provide necessities at home because money is spent on gambling. Domestic violence cases linked to financial stress from betting are also quietly increasing in some communities.

Experts say there is a need for awareness campaigns about responsible betting and healthy football fandom. Schools, parents, religious institutions, and the media can play an important role in educating young people about the dangers of gambling addiction and violence.

Counsellors also encourage people to seek help whenever betting starts affecting their finances, emotions, relationships, or mental health. Friends and family members should support individuals struggling with gambling addiction instead of mocking them.

The government and betting companies are also being challenged to strengthen regulations and promote responsible gambling messages. Some experts argue that betting advertisements should clearly warn people about the risks involved.