

# Unruly Fans at Games Not Just Faces in Crowd

By [JOE LAPOINTE](#)

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — A quick search on the Internet will find amateur videos of fans in New York and Philadelphia taunting and cursing one another and fighting in the stands in recent seasons at games between the Mets and the Phillies.

Sometimes, similar rowdiness occurs at football games, when the [Giants](#) play the Eagles. “It happens all the time,” the Giants’ Mathias Kiwanuka said. “We’ve all got family. They travel down to Philly. They all say the same thing, ‘They’re crazy down there.’ I’m sure Philly fans say the same thing about us. We definitely hear a lot of stories.”

The teams meet Sunday afternoon in a National Football Conference divisional playoff game at Giants Stadium, with the winner to play Arizona next week for the right to go to the [Super Bowl](#). With New York and Philadelphia so close, the rivalry so historic and the stakes so great, the circumstances may portend unruly behavior with about 80,000 people confined in close quarters to watch an inherently violent competition for three hours.

Or perhaps not. The audience may remain peaceful in part because the [N.F.L.](#) has tried a new technique to correct what it decided was an intolerable increase in abusive behavior. Officials said although a minority of customers were at fault, they could spoil the mood for many around them. Most N.F.L. stadiums now post telephone numbers for fans to send [text messages](#) to summon security personnel.

But change comes slowly. “It’s a battleship to turn here,” said Milt Ahlerich, the N.F.L.’s vice president for security. “There’s a long way to go.” Ahlerich said for some fans the harassment of opposing fans was “a rite that a lot of them have engaged in” and “we’ve got to turn it off.”

By using text messages to summon security guards, offended fans do not have to confront fellow spectators who may react with verbal abuse or violence; they need not look obvious when seeking ushers or guards.

“Don’t sit there in silence,” Ahlerich said. “You can get help anonymously.” He said he wanted customers to realize, “Hey, I don’t have to put up with this.” The messages can include section, row, seat numbers and descriptions of the louts.

“We have security cameras in the stadiums,” Ahlerich said. “We can zoom right in and get facial recognition of someone who is acting inappropriately.”

Some cities have more offenders than others, Ahlerich said. Although he would not be specific, Ahlerich said, “Generally, the Midwest is more genteel.” Only a few stadiums had the system at the start of the season, he said, but the number quickly grew.

Now, he said, the system is in place in all but three stadiums: St. Louis, Tennessee and [Green Bay](#). But not all spread the word as well. Some stadiums post permanent signs and accept calls as well as text messages. Other stadiums, like Giants Stadium, merely flash the text-messaging instructions on the scoreboard.

George Tsougarakis, a lawyer who works in New York, said he was not aware of the program until he heard about it on the radio midway through the season.

Questions, challenges, connections, etc.

He said he takes his 10-year-old son to his \$110 season seats in the lower deck near midfield. When they hear shouted curses, he said he uses it as a lesson and tells the boy, “You don’t want to be like those jerks and drunks.”

Jim Minish, the executive vice president for facilities for the [New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority](#), said fans had not used the text-messaging system as much as expected. He said they got between 8 and 12 messages a game.

“Half of them are legitimate,” Minish said. And Minish has other concerns. When Carolina visited on Dec. 21, workers were unable to clear snow from some sections and some fans threw snowballs.

With snow arriving Saturday, he said, the primary attention is on its removal from seats near the Philadelphia bench.

Another recent crowd-control innovation, he said, was the installation of screens to block the views of fans on the spiral ramps behind the grandstands because male [Jets](#) fans were goading some female fans to expose their breasts at halftime.

One of the worst stadiums for fan behavior was Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, which housed the Eagles, the Phillies and a jail cell for abusive customers. Some fans there said behavior had improved in the new stadiums built for the two sports.

Ed Kelly, a construction sales manager who lives near Philadelphia, has season tickets that cost \$90 per game at Lincoln Financial Field. “The Vet was a lot more aggressive in behavior with throwing of beer and intense taunting,” he said.

Kelly said the Eagles now show a video about manners and inform fans clearly about the cellphone option, and people seem to use it to quell trouble. “At the Linc, the security guys in the yellow jackets usually get there to nip it in the bud,” Kelly said.

When Giants Stadium implemented a code of conduct last August, one of the sponsors was Jill Pepper, executive director of the Techniques for Effective Alcohol Management Coalition, a nonprofit group that conducts seminars at arenas for workers.

Pepper said she recently taught a session at the Palace of Auburn Hills, home of the [Detroit Pistons](#), the scene of an infamous beer-throwing and fight between fans and the [Indiana Pacers](#) in 2004.

Pepper said such melees made teams more receptive to learning how to avoid future problems. But sports, she said, still have “all the ingredients: fans, competition and, forgive me, testosterone.”

“When you put alcohol in the mix,” she said, “it’s hard to manage.” Pepper said she supported the N.F.L.’s phone initiative to help reverse a cycle in which fans and stadium workers came to expect bad behavior and “turned a blind eye” that led to “too many horror stories of fans falling backward off escalators.”

The recent mood in arena management has changed, she said, for the better. “People are more attuned and aware of the bad apples,” Pepper said.

#### **Instructions:**

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