

REFLECTIONS

BLUES AND GREENS

Robert Silverberg

I was born and grew up in Brooklyn, and when I was a boy I lived and died by the ups and downs of the Brooklyn Dodgers, a long-vanished baseball team whose modern successor plays the game in Los Angeles. When the St. Louis Cardinals defeated the Dodgers in a playoff for the 1946 league championship I was disconsolate; when the New York Yankees defeated them in seven games in the 1947 World Series, despite some astonishing heroics by hitherto obscure Dodger players like Cookie Lavagetto and Al Gionfriddo, I mourned bitterly. Whenever I could manage it, I went to games at Ebbets Field, the Dodger stadium, antiquated even then and surviving now only as a plaque on the wall of the apartment house that occupies its site. In my adolescent days I went to the occasional basketball game, too, and some football games, and even a hockey game or two.

In the course of time I lost interest in the doings of the Dodgers and the other local sports teams, mainly because other things (science fiction, girls, college) came to occupy my attention. I could not tell you, now, which teams played in last year's World Series, though I know plenty about the contests of 1945–55. And it is fifty years or more since I attended any sort of professional sports event. This has something to do with my modern-day lack of interest in professional sports, of course, but there is also an element of fear involved, since I have begun to think of sports arenas as dangerous places where drunken fans engage in murderous riots at the slightest provocation. I am an Elderly Person now, and one way I got to be an Elderly Person was to stay away from places where murderous riots are likely to occur.

You may think I am just a timid geezer and that I am exaggerating the risks of turning out to see the hometown team play. Maybe so. But the Wikipedia entry on Violence in Sports provides me with all too many examples of sports events that I am glad I missed. The Heysel Stadium disaster of 1985, a brawl between soccer fans, took thirty-nine lives and injured six hundred. In 1990, a football match between Red Star Belgrade and Dinamo Zagreb was called off after ten minutes when thousands of fans began to fight each other, and soon afterward the stadium was set on fire. Three hundred twenty died at a soccer riot in Peru in 1994. In July 2000, thirteen people were trampled to death in a riot at a soccer game in Zimbabwe. There were 126 fatalities at a game in Ghana in 2001. In Los Angeles in 2011, a visiting San Francisco Giants fan was beaten nearly to death by irate Dodger fans. And so it goes.

I was about to deplore all this as one more example of modern decadence, and to compare it to the peaceful days of 1948 when, as a mere boy, I went fearlessly to see Brooklyn Dodger games at Ebbets Field and New York Knick games at the now vanished predecessor of today's Madison Square Garden. But then I remembered my Byzantine history—I have made quite a study of Byzantine history in the course of sending various time travelers back to that gaudy empire—and reminded myself that the worst sports riot of all time took place not in Liverpool nor in Detroit but in splendid Constantinople, the magnificent capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. It happened fourteen hundred years ago in the reign of Justinian the Great, when fans of chariot-racing, Byzantium's favorite sport, went after each other so fiercely they nearly brought the Empire down.

Byzantine chariot races took place in the Hippodrome, a stadium four hundred yards long and seventy feet broad, with thirty or forty tiers of marble seats that could

hold more than forty thousand spectators. Each chariot was drawn by a team of four horses; four chariots competed in each race, jostling wheel against wheel for the best position. The top charioteers were admired more passionately in Byzantium than movie stars and baseball heroes are in our own society.

Powerful factions of sportsmen sponsored the teams, loudly proclaiming their own side's superiority and casting scorn on their competitors. In the sixth century A.D. there were two such factions, the Blues and the Greens, each comprising about a thousand hot-blooded young men who paid the costs of training and outfitting charioteers. Their role in Byzantine life went far beyond the world of sports, though. The factions actually were political parties—the Blues being landowning aristocrats of ancient Roman or Greek origin, and the Greens social upstarts—businessmen, industrialists, civil servants. Each faction had a distinctive style of dress, followed its own form of Christianity, lived in certain districts of the city. The night before a race, Blues and Greens roamed the streets looking for members of the opposite faction; skulls might be cracked, faction members might get a ducking in the Bosphorus, there might even be a few stabbings. At dawn they took their positions in the stands, shouted insults at one another, waved the banners of their colors; there were frequent brawls during the races themselves, leading, not uncommonly, to injuries and deaths.

The rivalry became particularly intense under Justinian, who came to the throne in 527 A.D. A biography of him by Procopius, one of his key officials, shows Justinian to have been one of the greatest of Byzantine emperors, the architect of significant military victories and a major makeover of the systems of government; but Procopius has also left us a second, secretly published biography, hostile in the extreme, that calls him “dissembling, crafty, hypocritical, two-faced,” and many another uncomplimentary thing.

In the early years of his reign Justinian unwisely displayed open preference for the Blues. This, of course, produced outrage among the Greens, who vented it in lawlessness. Soon, Procopius tells us, each faction would “collect in gangs at nightfall and rob members of the upper class, despoiling any they met of cloaks, belts, gold brooches, and anything else they had with them. Some they thought it better to murder as well as rob, since dead men told no tales. . . . Constant fear made everyone suspect that death was just round the corner: no places seemed safe, no time could guarantee security, since even in the most revered churches and at public festivals people were being senselessly murdered. . . .”

In 532, Justinian issued a decree intended to bring the unruly sports fans under control. Greens and Blues responded with riots, and many lives were lost. Seven faction leaders were arrested and condemned to death. Both sides appealed for mercy, but got no answer from the Emperor.

As January 11 approached, the traditional date for the start of three days of racing to mark the new year, the Blues and Greens met to negotiate a truce, hoping thus to win freedom for their leaders. Justinian paid no heed. On the third day of the races, with the prisoners still in the dungeons, a strange cry suddenly went up from the Blue side of the Hippodrome—“Long live the Greens and Blues!”—and from the Green side came an equally surprising reply, “Long Live the Blues and Greens!” It was the signal for an uprising against the Imperial government.

Shouting *Nika! Nika!* (“Victory! Victory!”), the Blues and Greens marched together from the Hippodrome, with a wild mob accumulating behind them. Torches flared in the streets. The rioters freed the imprisoned leaders and set the Imperial prison on fire. Then they moved on to Justinian's palace and built huge bonfires that destroyed some of its outbuildings. The flames spread to the nearby cathedral of Hagia Sophia, causing its walls to collapse, and to the Senate house. Constantinople's sky

turned black with oily smoke. If it had not been a windless day, the whole city would have burned. Terrified citizens streamed toward the docks and tried to escape to the far shore of the Bosphorus. The fire brigades, after a while, lost interest in their work and began to loot empty houses and shops. Blues and Greens used this moment for settling old grudges, attacking each other, setting their houses on fire.

Justinian's attempts to calm things achieved nothing. The rioting continued into a third day, and a fourth. When the Emperor went to the Hippodrome to make a public appeal for order, he was shouted down by the Greens and forced to flee through a hidden passageway into his palace. When the Greens came upon a nephew of the former Emperor Anastasius they proclaimed him Emperor and crowned him with a golden collar that had been stolen from the palace.

This was an ominous new development. The mob now had a symbolic figure about whom to rally, and Justinian began to make preparations to flee from the capital, only to be thwarted by his wife, the fiery Empress Theodora, who mocked him for his cowardice, declaring that she would not leave the city. Her words shamed him into taking a step he had hesitated to use until then: he turned the Imperial army loose on the rioting citizens. The rioters panicked and a terrible slaughter followed. Thirty thousand of the rebels, Procopius says, were butchered and thrown into the sea.

The *Nika* revolt, as it was called, came to its end after six frightful days. At dawn a shaken Justinian rode through the charred city, where clouds of ash still danced on the air. Having somehow survived the crisis, though, he began at once the task of regaining control of the city, and before long a new cathedral of Hagia Sophia was rising from the ruins—it is still there, in the heart of the city that is now called Istanbul—and he was making plans for an invasion of the European territories that had been lost to the barbarians after the fall of the western half of the Roman Empire. The power of the Blues and Greens had been broken by the massacre that followed the riots, and thenceforth things were quieter in the Hippodrome.

Today's sports riots have, at least so far, imperiled only fans of opposing teams, never—so far—threatening to bring down an entire government. (Although the Belgrade-Zagreb football riot of 1990 is sometimes credited with having touched off the Croatian War of Independence.) Nor has the death toll from any one riot even remotely approached that which followed the Blue-Green events of January 532. But, as George Santayana so memorably said, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. And so, mindful as I am of ancient historical precedent, I think I'll continue to keep away from any sporting event where emotion is likely to run high.

