

Keane stands idle as mob rule shrouds stadium of darkness, writes James Lawton

So the beast has broken cover again. The stench of job anarchy is back on the terraces and the field. It is a time, you might think, for every football man of any genuine stature to take his hands from his eyes and exert some of the influence gained in all the years of growing reputation and wealth.

Someone like Roy Keane, certainly, someone to show that for all his own offences against discipline and decent order in his playing career, he knows now he cannot afford to pussyfoot on such a vital issue, not as the manager of a club whose fans had just spilt on to the pitch spitting their hatred.

Here, surely, was the chance for Keane to confirm his new status as a man of the future, fit to hold the highest office, perhaps at Old Trafford, and maybe even to atone for some of the atrocities of his past, and not least the cold-blooded assertion that he had attempted to ruin the career of an opponent against whom he held a grudge.

But then what did we hear from the scourge of prawn sandwich-munching in the corporate box? Did we get an urgent call to turn back another dark age of football, when the idea of taking your children to a stadium amounts to shocking irresponsibility? No, what we had was a statement so feeble, so self-serving, it made a mockery of what Keane, the man of hard and ferociously fashioned beliefs on how the game should be played and run, is supposed to represent.

Keane's reaction was so spineless it seemed to underwrite all those years of Clockwork Orange violence that made English football the pariah of world sport.

He said, "I hope they go easy on us. I hope it will not take away from what the players achieved. No one wants to see supporters on the pitch, trust me, and we will focus on security. I'm not really sure what went on at the end. If you think I'm going to sit here and criticise Sunderland supporters, then you are wrong."

It was a stunning abdication of responsibility and if the Football Association does not see it as an invitation to take some meaningful action, some attempt to lay down significant deterrents before the rabble take hold again, it too will be guilty of the most appalling complacency.

Keane may say that he is responsible solely for team affairs but that would be nonsense. He has been charged with remaking a football club, giving it new competitive values and setting a professional tone, and in many respects he has been doing a brilliant job.

But this was a test of his mettle as a significant figure in a game to which, as a player, he brought both great glory and disfigurement. What would the achievement of Keane's team in beating Newcastle United, of all teams, have meant if it had accompanied, as it could so easily have been, by the death or maiming of some kid caught in the chaos that came at the end of the game. Would Keane have kept his head so firmly rooted in the sand then? Would he not have been susceptible to the idea that he was completely out of step with all that had happened so sickeningly around him?

When he led a pack of Manchester United players in pursuit of a referee he displayed a shocking lack of control and leadership. After making his spine-chilling, premeditated assault on Alf Inge-Haaland, he wrote in his autobiography that he had experienced not a sliver of regret.

Sins of passion, his admirers might say, warrior sins, all washed away when the action was over and he could take his place as a statesman of the game that rewarded him so well.

Washed away? Certainly not at the weekend; no, it was as though those sins congealed around a failure to understand that decent behaviour on and off the field is not just desirable but lifeblood.

Joey Barton was the target of the Sunderland fans. They spat at him and threw bottles and coins when he warmed up on the touchline. Of course, he is not an admirable figure. But on this occasion who performed most despicably, the player who provocatively kissed his shirt in response to the jeers or the mob who baited him for behaviour which, at least to some extent, they were in the course of reproducing?

What happened at the Stadium of Darkness was that the fans of both Sunderland and Newcastle attempted to establish mob rule. They fought on the pitch after breaking through cordons of police and security men.

Roy Keane seemed to believe that the proper response was a review of security rather than anything that might just cloud a famous victory. He was utterly wrong. What is required now is something that will dig into the consciousness of the hooligans who for so long terrorised English football, something that will set a standard of reaction to all life-threatening mob behaviour. It needs to be quite unambiguous about the determination to fight a problem that still, after the dormant years, is a deadly threat to the national game.

The Stadium of Darkness should be closed down for two home games. It would send the right message into every corner of football. It might even make Roy Keane think about the immutable difference between right and wrong.

Keane

