**Baroness Grey-Thompson (CB):** My Lords, I warmly welcome the Bill proposed by the noble Lord, Lord Faulkner. It is indeed shameful that we have to have this debate today.

I have been a wheelchair user since I was seven and have a lot of experience as a spectator, admittedly quite mixed. I have experienced all the things that the noble Lord, Lord Faulkner, mentioned. For any fan it can be hard to get a ticket, but, for a disabled fan, even if there happens to be an open purchasing policy, it is more challenging because tickets are sold or given away in a pair as a wheelchair user and companion or carer. Imagine the difficulty of having a husband who is a part-time wheelchair user and a daughter, and trying to obtain three tickets for us to sit together, or going with a friend in a wheelchair, as the stewards desperately try to figure out who is caring for whom. When my daughter was very young, we went to a sports venue and I was told that, as my five year-old was not my carer, she could not sit with me. It was suggested that she might like to go and sit in a bank of seats at least 10 rows away from where I was, where I had no access to her.

The issue about the number of seats also hides a wider problem of sight lines, accessible toilets, access to food and drink, and, in the case of football, home and away fans being able to sit together, which are compounded by the lack of seats and the understanding of disabled people. This is about respect for disabled fans. I think the Bill is making a reasonable request and is not asking for special treatment. The Sports Grounds Safety Authority is best placed to take on this challenge. I completely understand that you cannot have totally flexible seating with no limit on the number of wheelchair spaces However, disabled people should not be fighting for something approaching equality. This is dreadful. Is it too much to ask? I do not think so. It may take some imagination, perhaps some money, but we have the richest clubs in the world. I do wonder what message these stadia are sending out to supporters. Is it that wheelchair users are welcome to attend as long as there are not too many of them? What message do wheelchair users hear? Is it that they have to be grateful for what they receive? Is it that they are not good enough to be part of the fan experience?

I have been disappointed by the attitude of the larger football clubs. It is great that they support educational programmes and most of the big clubs support wheelchair football, but I wonder how many of those players can actually get in to watch a first team game. When I started looking at the statistics for accessibility, I was shocked. They are all available on the Level Playing Field website. In previous debates, I have pointed out issues around Manchester United, which has been in touch with me and asked me to visit, and we are, indeed, trying to find a suitable date. I quote directly from the email I received:

“Your exchange on Twitter, as attached, could be seen by some as indulging in matters which you remain uninformed of and accepting our invitation could be the beginning of an understanding which brings to the fore the many operational features that come together on a match day in a stadium capable of holding upwards of 75,000 people”.

I have been privileged to be at a lot of very big sporting events—six Olympics, seven Paralympics, 11 World Championships, Europeans, Commonwealth Games, plus individual events at venues with far more than 75,000 seats. I have had some great experiences at Wembley, but Trailblazers has found that other people have not. The fan experience will vary. In the lead-up to 2012, this is one of the things that I worked on with LOCOG, when the whole of the Olympic Park was in operational mode. I am delighted that the noble Lord, Lord Holmes, is in his place and thank him for his contribution on many areas. The fact that you could go into the Olympic Park and have no worry whatever that you could sit with the people that you went with was incredible. You cannot underestimate the power of being able to sit with your friends and family. Until you have experienced exclusion, it is hard to imagine what it feels like. I do hope that the Equality and Human Rights Commission will look at this further. Surely what is happening here is discrimination, but are we too afraid to call it such? Surely this has to be on the same page as racism, homophobia and all other forms of discrimination. When you exclude disabled people, you are being discriminatory.

It is a shame that those who run the stadiums talk about CSR and community engagement when wheelchair users are far more likely not to have the same experience as non-disabled people. I suggest that this is just an outdated way of looking at this. We should be forward thinking and inclusive. It is not just about the fans. I wonder how many disabled people actually work in sports stadia.

Wrexham also got in touch with me via Twitter and adopted an altogether more positive tone. The club is 100% fan owned and the ownership body is Wrexham Supporters Trust. The stadium is owned by Glyndwr University and is the oldest international football stadium in the world still in use. The club is not making any excuses about the age of the stadium. It is a non-league club and receives no FA/Football League pre-season “solidarity” payments or parachute payments, and, because of its status, its football in the community and centre for excellence denominations are also unfunded by the FA and Football League. However, the club has done some incredible work. It sanctioned and facilitated the UK’s first ever autism-friendly football match and donated two separate cheques received from the proceeds of the FA Charity Shield for its FA Cup runs. Admission prices are fixed at the lowest ground rate for wheelchair fans based on the lack of choice that they have in viewing the match. The club does so much more. Its first wheelchair viewing platform will be available next week on Wednesday 22 July. Twenty of its season ticket holder fans voluntarily moved their seats to allow wheelchair users to watch the match. The club has a commitment to raising funds for two more wheelchair viewing platforms, one of which will be for away fans. This is a club that genuinely cares about its spectators.

The big clubs are hiding behind all sorts of reasons. I do not generally think that we should be legislating for this. What has changed my mind? It was the fact that a really big, powerful, rich club is able to tell a family with a disabled son that they should perhaps go and support a smaller club like Stockport, which might be able to accommodate them. Those clubs do not deserve those fans, and that is why we should support this legislation.