



Sport and Ireland's Future

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Sport and Ireland's Future

There are those on the island of Ireland for whom sport is central to their lives, whether as participants, spectators or club members, paid/unpaid administrators, coaches, and other officials. For them, sport (including play, leisure, and games) is a personal touchstone of identity, but this is also the case for communities and societal groups. Many believe intensely in the power of sport to change people's lives for the better and we are learning more about the complex mechanisms involved. Sport, like other cultural activities, allows groups to build and maintain social capital. Much has been made of its role in subverting conflict, building bridges, and bolstering peace and reconciliation. But there many others too who are disinclined towards sport, who may dislike or even abhor it. For them sport is trivia - of far less importance than health, education, the welfare state, economy, and politics for instance. It has even been said that sport is and should be untouched by politics and other ideological considerations.

Nevertheless, sport is inextricably bound up with all of these. This is borne out by the wealth of international research evidence since the 1960s. Building on our published open access work on the role of sport in a shared island (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/849124>), on the island's complex sportive histories and relationships, and on our collective personal and professional insights, here we explore the links between sport and identity. This requires immersion in our sporting heritage, aspects of which are still being discovered, as well as listening carefully to sports stakeholders, north and south, many of whom we have already interviewed.

Precisely because of the utility of sport, we believe that dialogues about the future of this island which omit sport are not only out of focus but, more importantly, they ignore an important cultural force. Thus, irrespective of where you place yourself on the sports continuum - from living and loving sport to being nonplussed or even detesting it - we invite all of you to take this reflexive journey. This is in order that everyone might participate in and share the possibilities for a genuinely shared and inclusive sportive future on this island; that is, one based on mutual understanding and respect and offers new perspectives on old issues. Here, we consider north-south relations and their relevance for sport. In doing so we signpost interim steps and highlight some challenges that we think are likely to arise. First, however, we set out the utility of sport and its role as an expression of cultural and national identities. Here we keep one eye on the past in ways that do not blind us to the future.

The Utility of Sport: Past and Present

Two contemporary examples of the utility of sport involve government actors, civil society, and individual sports competitors on this island. In May 2022, 81 members of Northern Ireland's newly elected assembly who were present signed a letter calling on the International Gymnastics Federation to reverse its decision to reject the entries of three male gymnasts to the Commonwealth Games. This was despite there being no elected speaker. In the centennial year of the creation of Northern Ireland (NI), and amidst the ongoing challenges of a consociational political model, sport was held by many to be a binding cross-community force. This letter was matched by statements from the Irish government, via Minister of State for Sport, Jack Chambers, and by Gymnastics Ireland amongst others. Sport was similarly highlighted in the 2021 Ireland-Scotland Joint Bilateral Government Review as being an important element of ancient and contemporary cultures for both communities and diasporic groups. And there have been many historical examples too of the utility of sport to political leaders, such as Nelson Mandela's wearing of the Springbok jersey in 1995, Irish government support for the *Aonach Tailteann* Games in the 1920s and 1930s and Northern Irish government and civil society interventions with British and international sports leaders regarding the jurisdiction and affiliation of six-county athletics and cycling for example.

At its core, the social fabric of sport acts as a constitutive force for identities. Think about the naming/renaming of sports stadia and clubs, the forging of emblems and the waving of flags and other insignia, the adoption of songs and performances of banter between competitors and supporters. The playing of anthems and the symbolic silences and protests of players are particularly visceral expressions of national identity as are the self-asserted rights of sports governing bodies to jurisdiction over a claimed territory and to governance responsibilities for its members. In Ireland we find a distinctive conglomeration of such rights and identities, owing to its colonial and Imperial history.

Irish histories are replete with symbols that reveal possibilities, prejudices, and contention. National and indigenous Gaelic games and sports made claims to the distinctiveness of cultural and social life, north and south, and played an overt role in renewing Irishness. Yet all-island practices existed in many sportive organisations founded before 1921 as they did for many civic organisations. The fusion of sport with socio-political issues borne of the turbulent twentieth century was, perhaps, unavoidable. Both resistance and openness to

British influence and connection was reflected in the growth of 32-county Gaelic games and the establishment of six-county and 26- sportive associations such as athletics and football/soccer.

Historically, then, there was a role for sport in augmenting national cohesiveness, international reputation, status, and influence. Indeed, diverse views on sport, politics and representation had different bearings across the development of sport on the island, and on relationships with Great Britain and the world. This was reflected, for instance, in Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera's lobbying of British Foreign Office representative, Philip Noel Baker, about team designation in advance of the 1948 London Olympics. 50 years later, NI First Minister, David Trimble, and eight other unionist MPs, backed a parliamentary early motion in support of the NI Cycling Federation's right to govern cycling. And as recently as last year, David Campbell, chair of the Loyalist Communities Council, wrote that it was not acceptable for NI competitors to compete under a foreign flag 'that they may well consider obnoxious and alien to their own nationality'.

Today, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement is meant to ensure dual eligibility rights for elite athletes from NI who can represent various configurations of sportive Ireland or Great Britain, even if its spirit and implementation is not yet consistent internationally, as noted in the example of the gymnasts. But 32-county sports were certainly not culturally neutral. Some, like rugby union, were deeply divided and their meaning to the rugby nation has changed over time. An influential Protestant unionist outlook persevered among the rugby union elite up to the mid-twentieth century but at the same time the game also attracted a broad church and became more culturally diverse. Because of controversies around national flag and anthem at international games, rugby's membership has recognised these matters of cultural identity and has successfully reached beyond these. Ireland's Call is one illustration as is the support from unionists and those from working class backgrounds in NI who also support Ireland in rugby.

Boxing, also a 32-county sport, is the most successful in medal terms across Olympic, World and Commonwealth competitions. Many elite sportspeople, boxers included, adopt a pragmatic approach to national team selection and allegiance, using a combination of passports, domicile, and club affiliation to meet selection criteria, such as that of Dundalk woman, Amy Broadhurst, who won a medal in the recent Commonwealth Games for NI. A

predecessor, Bill Britton, born in Tipperary and who lived and worked in Cavan, won *Ireland's* first medal (silver) at the inaugural Commonwealth (then British Empire) Games in 1930. This was the only occasion in these Games that an all-island team competed, under the harp flag. The significance of this should not be lost, being some nine years after the War of Independence and amidst the upshots of partition, political and sportive. This may yet have implications for how Ireland might view its future position vis-à-vis the Commonwealth itself, and in the entry of an all-island team in the Commonwealth Games, either by invitation or as a formal member. There is a notable similarity between historical views about this 1930 Irish team, which included one Belfast runner and an Irish emigrant, and those that are expressed today: participation in the Commonwealth Games might create further discord, political and sportive, owing to its attached political significance; sport and politics should not mix at all (see above); the Games are an opportunity to project onto the international/global stage, as Northern Ireland, Ireland or both and, for some, they are yet another reason to inject distance with the legacy of empire.

Many of these views are borne of apprehensions, misunderstandings, and lack of sustained cultural engagement along north-south lines.

Old and New North-South Identities

There is no one homogeneous identity on the island, even within a group who sees itself, unproblematically, as either Irish or British. In fact, there is both old and new Irish, some with Anglo-Norman heritage. Today, groups with no known historical connection to the island also regard themselves as Irish and there are Irish nationalists of Anglo-Irish descent. Some Ulster unionists too have differing views to those of loyalists about the future.

There have also been many past disagreements between these groups that were reflected in sport. In the twentieth century, laudable attempts to grow goodwill, mutual understanding, and cooperation and to establish one all-island athletic federation foundered on the double-edged sword of jurisdiction and international status under one licence. Today, the new generation of fulltime professional sports officials know less, potentially, of these complex all-island sports histories. Nonetheless, even in working relations between north and south they live, feel, and sense their impact. Indeed, many in the south still struggle to comprehend the NI question and underestimate the destabilising impact of Brexit on relationships. As a result, there has been a narrowing of the scope to deal with post-conflict tensions on the island.

Studies of NI reveal the intensity of feeling evident there, in everyday life, in political discourse, and in cultural expressions. This is because cultural space is contested. Emotions of unease, fear, and disgrace as well as confidence, celebration of identity, and triumphalism all intertwine, held in suspense by a negative silence embodied in the Good Friday Agreement. However, even in politics few complexities rival the world of Irish sport and almost every variety of governance can be found in Ulster and NI. In athletics for instance, Athletics Ireland (AI) and Athletics Northern Ireland (ANI) have jurisdiction over twenty-six and six counties respectively, but clubs in the counties of Ulster not in NI are registered to ANI while clubs in NI are affiliated to AI. To host an international tournament in NI and depending on the host club in question permission must be sought via either Athletics Ireland or British Athletics, to whom ANI is an affiliate member. And in a further complication, the Ulster Athletics Council (UAC) holds a special position in the current working arrangement between the two Irish national governing bodies.

There is a movement towards greater inclusivity in sport in NI and many people play sports and support local teams and clubs, irrespective of political or cultural persuasion. But it is equally true that sport is an important signifier of the defended link to the United Kingdom (UK). Hence, for some in NI, sports like soccer are the preserve of those whose personal and collective identities remain strongly wedded to a six-county Ulster and/or NI and, more widely, to the UK. Their identities, in life as in sport, are defined in more oppositional and dominance terms, being neither Irish or Catholic. It is in this context that the intense competitive forms of sport can become a potential lightning rod. Football/soccer is an important ideological crutch for those living in NI's most socially deprived areas and it preserves a space for Protestant-unionist-loyalist identities. In Irish league soccer, Ulster Unionism trumps connection with Britain for instance. In this sport, the imagined 'wee country' of NI is brought to life and projected through the display of the crowned red hand of Ulster (the Ulster banner) and the singing of God Save The Queen.

Footballers from NI have expressed a variety of views to us and to others concerning sportive identity codes: from 'leave my flag alone' and 'if you don't like it, you can play for another country' to 'time for an agreed NI anthem' and 'what about a separate football flag like rugby has done?'. None have yet proffered one all-island football association. Dual

eligibility remains a bone of contention between the two football associations and for many NI football supporters too. The creation of an official all-island football team would be a clear acid test of how strong and deeply entrenched is this imagined community. Moving in this direction, discussions about governance, funding, assets, and official roles would be required that would also impact on the club game (north and south and at amateur and professional levels). The same point applies to the Unionist/English Amateur Athletics Association conspired political boundary rule of 1934 in international athletics, whose current status means that in World Athletics-sanctioned events, the Irish team represents a 26-county organisation in terms of its jurisdiction, even though it includes athletes like Ciara Mageean, from NI, and who represented the 'wee country' in the recent Commonwealth Games, winning silver, behind the Scot, Laura Muir. Some 18 days later, in the European Championships she again won a silver medal, this time for a 26-county body under the title Ireland, proudly displaying the Irish Tricolour in her lap of honour. Reflecting on her family heritage she observed:

My granny Kathleen. I know she would have absolutely loved to see me out there racing. I have a grandfather that never got to see me do athletics, he passed away when I was 13 ... If he knew that I was running for Ireland, the pride that he would have ... I do believe that he's somewhere up there watching down seeing that, but there are little parts where you're like, 'God, I wish I could tell him that'. The pride my Granda Mageean would have had knowing that his little grand-daughter was running around with the tricolour over her shoulder and bringing a medal back home.

When Mageean ran in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games she was selected by the Irish Olympic Federation, constituted as a 32-county body. Irish or GB representation is open to all NI athletes in the Olympic Games and is, for some, a delicate conflicted issue.

In international sport, we have seen that national team selection can even become a flag of convenience. Like their rugby counterparts, track and field athletes and supporters demonstrate some capacity to separate political and sportive allegiances. It is not easy to predict how any potential constitutional change might impact the cross-community appeal of athletics in NI, owing partly to the injection of an overt political dimension that has subsided,

to a degree. But it is reasonable to expect that the tacit working agreements between Athletics Ireland and Athletics Northern Ireland would certainly come under greater scrutiny.

There are many potential futures on this island – whether united, divided, renewed, or even federalised – and many questions arise. What role might sport play in the nature and meaning of identity in unionist/loyalist and northern/southern nationalist responses? What of the symbolic role of sport in a shared Ireland and how might it assist in projecting mutual understanding and achieving consensus on the future? What potential changes in anthem, flag, emblem, and other symbols might there be? And what might be the practical implications of political constitutional change for sport? Here we can but sketch initial steps in this direction built on the premise that sport is one of the most powerful transfer mechanisms for culture.

Initial Steps

Across sports and throughout the four provinces, we need to be able to talk about all possible futures, freely and feasibly with optimism. A constructive shared dialogue is required, underpinned by an inclusive, consultative process that can command the support of those connected to sport as well as the wider public - akin to an all-island sportive assembly. This dialogue must start as soon as possible and certainly prior to any future border poll. If this does not happen, then any changes to national symbols such as flags, emblems and anthems resulting from constitutional change would likely prove challenging and even divisive. Ethno-national identities, socio-economic class and gender are likely to inform and shape the responses of national governing bodies of sport, of their members, and the wider sporting populace. Yet, while sport will be important in Ireland's future it cannot be expected to do the 'heavy lifting' alone, isolated from wider social currents and debates. We see three interwoven areas – structural, symbolic, and socio-cultural – in which future sportive and civic relations will be forged.

Structural: How we organise our sporting lives across the island

There are already models or templates that might steer future sporting structures. Some work on a cross-border basis, acting to minimise the effects of the border in many instances. But developing best practice on a shared structural future will make demands, not only of existing all-island organisations as diverse as rugby, boxing, and swimming, but also of those who might take on a new form. Sports representatives who can think beyond the status quo will be

crucial in this dialogue. Future state funding for sports structures, whether in merged, devolved and/or federalised forms, could be tied to requirements for reform and engagement, exemplified in balanced diverse board membership. The symbolism of unity – for example, one team, one league, one FIFA representative in the sport of football – will also have to be addressed across communities and not only in the senior executive boardrooms of sports bodies or on the floors of parliaments.

Dual state funding for sport in NI, via Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland, will also be subject to review. In addition, joint north-south structural initiatives in health, exercise, and well-being, as well as integrated government departments could highlight the extent to which challenges perceived to be unique or distinctive to one group/community are, in fact, common to many. The establishment of an all-island sportive assembly with an independent chair and expert representation would be a productive first step in this regard and would be a constituted forum of stakeholders from playground to podium in the four provinces.

This Assembly could explore the evidence base for sports-based interventions that foster friendship formation, community harmony and peace building in societies emerging from conflict. For sports can act as both social glue and toxin and thus require careful management to deliver verifiable positive outcomes. Crucially, athletes themselves must be involved in any all-island assembly and in all community fora in which new structures are debated and enacted. Here, as in other aspects of forging a new future, there will be a need both for visionary leadership and imaginative thinking but also a grounding in community views, dialogue, and shared involvement. Dual eligibility/identity would remain for the foreseeable future and thus those sportsmen and women from NI would be free to represent their country of choice. After all, in celebrating Ireland's recent historic series win in rugby over New Zealand, few took exception to three Kiwi-born players playing for the 'men in green'.

Symbolic: How our identities are made and renewed through sport

Sport matters. For better and sometimes worse, sport is a morality play in which both participant and spectator identities are made and expressed in a mutual quest for exciting significance. At the symbolic level, the rituals of sport, its anthems, emblems, flags, and uniforms, and its crowd cultures, move people emotionally, socially, and, at times, politically. As such, its symbolic significance must form part of the debates on the future of sport in

Ireland. It is inescapable to how people on the island view themselves, view others, and nation groupings.

Difficult though these may be, questions of place and space must also form part of discussions regarding the symbolic side of sport. Questions about anthems, emblems and flags are part of the cultural DNA of Irish sport as are the location of sporting events and clubs across the island. Hence, discussion of where and when major sporting events could and should be located, and under what flag(s) – Belfast and Dublin, of course, but also Cork, Limerick and/or Galway too – must be part of this new thinking.

The role of existing major stadia and their place in both national and provincial life would also need to be rethought. Planning the optimum use of these facilities – Windsor and (redeveloped) Casement Parks, the Aviva and Croke Park stadia – as multi-sport venues would no doubt be subject to intense deliberation given the existing emotional economy of the ‘Big Three’ mass spectator sports. Likewise, transforming governance structures towards integration in parallel with political change will be a challenge.

Socio-cultural: how we live and experience sport *together*

If, in a border poll, people voted for reunification, then UK funding for sport in NI would have to be reviewed (together with other exchequer transfers and public subsidies from Westminster). Equity in funding to all four provinces will have to be achieved ensuring, we would hope, an uplift in spending on sport, exercise, and well-being. Having benefited from EU Peace Funding through ‘Sport Uniting Communities’ for example, sport in NI could offer leadership to others on the challenges that are common to *all*. Because of the traumatic intergenerational effects of the Troubles on all communities, but especially the working classes, NI has specific needs in this sphere which will have to be addressed. Funding may continue to flow from the USA and the EU, but fellow citizens in the South may also have to own and share the legacy of the past.

Interim, joint (cross-border) structural initiatives along the spectrum of health, exercise, and well-being, and integrating educational, health and sporting initiatives across Ireland could be a useful steppingstone. Likewise, in developing play, games and physical education structures for children, future generations should have the opportunity to cherish their heritage but also to create new legacies and sporting memories and heroes – but only by playing *together*.

In inter/intra community relations within and between provinces, sport can provide a space and place in which a greater shared sense of belonging might unfold. Liberty and equality will be necessary ingredients but so too will fraternity.

From Cautious to Judicious Optimism

For the sporting populace – from children to the elderly, from participants to spectators and from playground to podium – something other than the sport itself is, and will always be, at work. In these shared spaces, new joys and sorrows can be created that supersede, or at least dilute, the pain and anguish of the past. Embracing multiple notions of Irishness and celebrating the plurality of the people who represent ‘us’ symbolically on the sports fields is part of this process. In the future, many of these will be second generation immigrants from across the world. And, it will be an incremental process: slow, uneven, with many setbacks, requiring understanding and mutual respect, but also care, kindness, and dare we say, a new recognition of a common heritage.

Sport can anticipate a transition to the future that involves these structural, symbolic, and socio-cultural dimensions. Sporting reunification may have a federal and/or devolved layering built into it. As we have seen, when identity is conceived in fixed dichotomous terms, and not relationally, sporting activities – with their rituals, symbols, and narratives – can act to amplify social divisions. This may prove to be the most intractable problem to face. In some ways, in people’s everyday thoughts, feelings and actions, northerners and southerners of all persuasions have to some extent become strangers to each other, relatively estranged from what unites them, even in the largest all-island sporting organisation, the GAA. Most closely interwoven with Irish cultural nationalism and identity, and perceived as exclusive and sectarian by many Protestants, the end of the GAA’s ban on ‘foreign games’ has had a slow and equally long-term effect on its supporters and detractors in equal measure.

The social initiatives across Ulster and NI that celebrate a common heritage in music, art and language, such as those led by Linda Irvine, Brian Vallely and others, are also beginning to find expression in sport in general and in Gaelic games in particular. Rugby highlights how things can change in terms of the symbolic and socio-cultural significance of an all-island team. Whereas in the mid twentieth-century rugby was seen as the preserve of northern Protestants and not representing ‘the nation’, the recent series victory by the men’s team over New Zealand and being ranked world number one is a source of pride, north and south. The

significance of the performance has not been overlooked. Michael D. Higgins congratulated the team as President of Ireland, Taoiseach Micheál Martin observed a lift for ‘the entire nation’ and Unionist leaders such as Doug Beattie and Jeffrey Donaldson also heralded the achievement. In a nod to our complex past on this island, one of the team’s star players is Josh Van de Flier, born in Wicklow, of *Dutch* ancestry, whose grandparents moved to Ireland in the 1950s. Playing together, united in a common endeavour, can be, under certain conditions, a signpost and a source of optimism for Ireland’s future.