



Modernising sport governance amid cultural constraints: a case study from Ireland

Hassan, D., Takos, N., & O'Boyle, I. (2021). Modernising sport governance amid cultural constraints: a case study from Ireland. *Sport in Society*, 1-11. [1]. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1912736>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Sport in Society

Publication Status:
Published online: 03/05/2021

DOI:
[10.1080/17430437.2021.1912736](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1912736)

Document Version
Author Accepted version

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**Title: Modernising Sport Governance amid Cultural Constraints:
A Case Study from Ireland**

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Word Count: 5606 words (Inc references)

Introduction

Cronin's (2018) recent insightful explication of the role of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in Ireland raises several issues pertinent to this article. Foremost amongst these is the situating of the GAA as markedly different to many other sporting organisations - not only in Ireland - regarding how its financial management has historically been understood but, particularly, the extent to which it has embraced the concept of entrepreneurship. As an overwhelmingly amateur body, one largely governed by elected volunteers, there was never any requirement for the GAA to be commercial in its approach, instead its policy of redistributing excess revenue amongst its constituent parts meant there was an in-built incentive for its members to contribute to the organisation's overall wellbeing because they, in turn, drew benefit from this situation. This approach remained appropriate for so long as the GAA, Ireland's largest sporting body, managed its costs through its effective use of committed volunteers, there remained an understanding amongst stakeholders that none was considered more privileged than any other, and the cost base of the organisation had not become inflated by recruiting large numbers of salaried employees.

This was true until, as Cronin (2018) correctly identifies, the economic upturn of the early 1990s in Ireland exercised a profound effect on many of the foundations that had ensured the success of the Association until that point, inviting it to evolve but, crucially, requiring it to do so amid broadly the same governance parameters that it had come to rely upon for well over a century. In other words, as members' expectations grew, as new revenue streams emerged, and as Irish society became evermore global in its outlook and aspirations, what had been a largely introspective, indigenous, and comparatively modest sporting organisation in international terms, began to see the possibility of becoming altogether more commercial in its dealings. The challenge, which this article considers, is how this transformation becomes realised whilst remaining broadly aligned to an amateur and volunteer-led ethos, still representative of its

membership at large and continuing to be broadly equitable in its funding and other fiscal policies. At a governance level it raises specific questions about the role of elected boards, their backgrounds, competencies, scope, and purpose as this strategic 'step change' becomes embedded and, inevitably, poses many challenging questions. Put simply, if the direction of an organisation changes, requiring new and different attributes on behalf of those governing it, what is the most effective way to ensure this happens within specific cultural constraints and what are the associated challenges if it does not achieve this outcome?

Sport Governance

Since influential author Bob Tricker published his seminal text in 1984 where he outlined the significance of corporate governance, the interest and evolution of the topic has been continually on the rise. Indeed, the last couple of decades has seen an increase in academic research relating to corporate governance, and the quest to achieve 'good governance' in the organisational setting (Filatotchev & Boyd, 2009). Sport governance research has followed a similar path to that of the corporate governance literature, and both importantly and increasingly, scholars are beginning to focus more on the behavioural and interpersonal aspects of boards versus the design and structure of sporting codes.

Historically, a considerable quantum of governance research has been underpinned by a dominant agency theory that separates the board and management, and focuses on areas such as control issues, board structure and composition. As sport governance scholars have taken their lead from the earlier established corporate governance literature, they too centred their interest on these aspects as they explored the unique sporting context. However, the focus eventually moved beyond the oversight and control role of the board, to exploring how boards could do more to contribute to overall organisational performance and success. Such areas within sport governance that received attention were those factors related to a board's influence on organisational strategy (e.g., Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015), mechanisms that improved board performance, such as shared leadership (e.g., Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007), and more recently, the systemic or network forms of governance and ways to improve how boards work together, such as through collaborative governance (e.g., O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016).

Although similarities exist with the corporate domain, especially given the commercialisation and professionalisation of sport, the distinction between issues that may impact governance in the sport sector continues to be raised (Ferkins, Shilbury & McDonald, 2009). For example,

sport has many volunteers, unique relationships with stakeholders (e.g., athletes, members, fans), and in further contrast to the corporate world, its purpose for existence is often related more closely with non-financial goals such as community engagement, increased participation, and athletic performance or success (Smith & Stewart, 1999; Yeh & Taylor, 2008).

The purpose of this opening aspect of the article therefore is to reflect upon the current state of sport governance research, specifically in relation to sport not-for-profit (NFP) entities, like the GAA, and to overview the contemporary issues challenging the industry, and which are emerging in the sport governance literature. Previously, much of the interest had related to the respective roles of board and management, which included decision-making authority and managerial opportunism (Ferkins, Shilbury & McDonald, 2005). However, Shilbury and Ferkins (2020) acknowledge the existence of volunteerism within sport, highlighting that many board members in sport NFPs worldwide are volunteers, and therefore they argue there is much more to learn regarding their roles and motivations, in turn warranting separate scholarly attention to that of the corporate context.

Historically, mainly due to this unique aspect of sport having a volunteer and amateur base, it has been a self-managed approach in terms of governance, with its own rules and regulations (Mrkonjic & Arnout, 2013). However, increasing commercialism and professionalism has brought a new set of issues for which sport organisations must navigate their way through, therefore the need for good governance has subsequently increased, leading to sport boards expected to operate with fit-for-purpose processes (O’Boyle & Bradbury, 2013; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2015). Examples of issues emerging from increased professionalism include athlete wage issues, the impact of gambling related controversies, increased expectations around performance, and demands for greater investment in sport facilities.

Within the new landscape of sport, an emerging area of concern that has attracted scholarly interest, is located within the global context (Philippou, 2019); those organisations that sit at the top of the governance hierarchy of the largest sports, i.e. International Sport Governance Bodies (ISGBs). The focus is being sharpened on the way global sports are governed, and as a result the topic of ethical conduct is coming evermore to the foreground. The sport sector is made up of a range of different bodies, which are responsible for the governance of a sport, such as NFP entities which include international and national governing bodies for specific sports (e.g., International Olympic Federation (IOF), International Cricket Council (ICC),

Cricket Australia (CA)), and governing bodies that represent regions or leagues and associations (e.g., GAA, National Basketball Association (NBA)). These modern structures of sport consist of networks of organisations, all with an overall sense of responsibility for their sport; however, they face challenges regarding retaining autonomy and power, whilst at the same time engaging and collaborating with other organisations for which they are connected in the network (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2018). This has resulted in the need for sport governance scholars to widen their research beyond the individual level of analysis, from inside boards to across boards (Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2019).

This transformation of sport structures has led to challenges in terms of leadership, hence the increased focus on this specific issue within the sport governance domain of late (Erakovic, & Jackson, 2012). O'Boyle, Shilbury and Ferkins (2019) note that with the emergence of sport governance as a legitimate field of research, it is not surprising that leadership is becoming a prominent area of interest. Many issues in sport governance relate to the ubiquitous topic of leadership, however despite both this issue and that of governance being well-established research areas, the scholarly interest in leadership within the sport governance discipline remains a relatively new and emerging field of enquiry (Takos, Murray, & O'Boyle, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, the agency approach tended to neglect the board as a resource, therefore other scholars suggested boards could expand their role beyond activities merely designed to closely monitor management toward a more interpersonal approach; where they support management with advice and counsel, particularly in relation to strategic direction and challenging issues being faced (Judge & Zeithaml, 1992; Westphal, 1999; Zahra & Pearce, 1989). Therefore, the human dynamics have begun to be more closely scrutinised, and it appears that researchers may be 'fighting the wrong war' (Sonnenfeld, 2002, p.1) if they concentrate solely on procedural rules for boards instead of exploring how to best manage the director behaviours and group processes in and around the boardroom (Bezemer, Nicholson, & Pugliese, 2014). For example, increased interest is occurring in those areas where boards are considered to directly influence organisational performance and where the human aspect is at the forefront, such as in the field of strategic capability (e.g., Ferkins, Shilbury & McDonald, 2005, 2009; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011), shared leadership (e.g., Schulz & Auld, 2006), issues of board cohesion (e.g., Doherty & Carron, 2003), and board-executive relationships (e.g., Hoye, 2006; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003).

The recent and well chronicled history of Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) leadership issues, predominantly regarding allegations of bribery and corruption, typifies the need for the current scholarly interest in ethical conduct and practices, with leadership, again, a central theme to explore. Most people would likely agree that leaders should be ethical, and indeed ethical leadership is generally accepted as a key ingredient for creating an environment respected by stakeholders (Ouma, 2017). The dichotomy between sport stakeholders' persistent concern of sport being a commercialised commodity managed by unethical leaders, and sport's foundation as a mechanism for moral education, has led to intense public and media scrutiny and a desire for improved governance (Naha & Hassan, 2018).

An example of ethically related key issues at, but not limited to, global sport is, as mentioned, the prevalence of bribery and corruption. The governance of sport structures, systems and operations are now the responsibility of a complex and diverse network of organisations (Pielke et al., 2019), often with an ISGB at the head. FIFA has not been the only ISGB embroiled in ethical scandals resulting from allegations of bribery and corruption, as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Rugby Board (IRB) have faced similar issues.

In addition to the commercialisation of sport as a rationale for increased ethical issues, the influence of political motives has also been noted (Geeraert, 2017). Although maintaining autonomy from government interference has historically been a fundamental principle embedded in many sports, it appears to be becoming increasingly compromised due to the acceptance of government financial support, and/or key bureaucrats succumbing to political pressure (Jackson & Haigh, 2008). Therefore, the capacity of traditional models of governance to successfully steer a sport and its stakeholders through such 'troubled waters' is being questioned by both scholars and practitioners, with calls for "ethical concerns to be the key element of governance" (Naha & Hassan, 2018, p. 721) in the future.

Recognising the importance of ethical leadership Naha and Hassan (2018) identified two major directions for future research; firstly, the growing significance of the "non-West" (p. 722) in terms of hosting major events, and secondly, the powerful influence of interest groups (e.g., athlete associations, politicians, lawyers) who have their respective and subjective motivations. The fresh ethical challenges faced by international and national governing bodies, mainly

because of commercial and politically related pressures, has created a need to better understand how change can be achieved within sport governance. Geeraert (2017) suggests leadership as a salient area for improvement, advising scholars to explore ways to minimise opportunities for leaders to commit fraud or receive bribes, so that corruption can be eliminated.

O'Boyle, Shilbury and Ferkins (2019) have also suggested future research directions for leadership research within sport governance and have proposed scholars address contemporary concepts which are relationship-based, such as collaborative board leadership and authentic leadership (AL), stating this would “undoubtedly provide interesting insights for intra-board and inter-board sport governance environments” (p. 200). In a recent study, Takos, Murray and O'Boyle (2018) found that AL styles characterized board member's leadership, and their interpersonal relationships, within boards that functioned effectively.

Coinciding with the growing amount of leadership-centric sport governance research is the interest in the ubiquitous topic of gender balance. Historically, sport at all levels has been decidedly masculine (Pfister, 2010), however, in recent times it is not only an issue in terms of participation, but the managerial and governance perspective has generated concern and interest from practitioners and scholars. Recent corporate governance research has explored women's collaborative leadership styles (e.g., Konrad, Kramer, & Erkut, 2008), and the impact of board gender diversity on financial and management decisions (e.g., Ward & Forker, 2017) and board performance measures (e.g., Terjesen, Sealy, & Singh, 2009). Gaston, Blundell, and Fletcher (2020) advise that if the more voluminous corporate governance research indicates benefits of gender diversity, “there is no reason to suppose these cannot be equally applicable to sport governing bodies” (p. 5). Winand and Anagnostopoulos (2019) recommend further research is required regarding board position recruitment for women, particularly in relation to what opportunities are available, what roles they undertake, their leadership style within the board context, and the relevance of power in the board gender context.

This introduction collates the current state of sport governance research and details the emerging topics that may guide future directions in the field. We recognise the shift toward the interpersonal aspects of governance, and therefore the emergence of research related to leadership and behavioural dynamics. Of significant importance is the leadership behaviours, styles and actions of board members and chairpersons/presidents, along with intra-board (organisations) and inter-board (systemic) leadership. With relative scarcity of leadership

theory applied in the sport governance discipline to date, O’Boyle *et al.* (2019) advocated “there are significant opportunities to investigate how contemporary leadership theories may inform a greater understanding of sport governance and leadership” (p. 199).

In summarising the opening part of this paper, the authors have highlighted the increased attention sport governance has received over the last decade or so, and identified those key themes that are increasingly attracting scholarly interest, such as:

- leadership underpinning board member performance, board effectiveness, and inter-board collaboration,
- increased political and stakeholder pressures,
- bribery and corruption, and
- gender diversity.

We anticipate that future research will not only concentrate interest on those emerging themes, but also initiate further questioning and the creation of new areas of investigation in this constantly evolving field of scholarly interest.

Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)

Kavanagh and Cusack (2020), in their recent examination of the management of the GAA, argue it is best to frame it as an ‘alternative organisation’ in that, they argue, “it manifestly advocates the principles of individual autonomy, collective solidarity, and responsibility for the future” (p. 1). They provide a very effective snapshot of the Association in their description of it as “a conservative organisation that looks much more to the past than it does to the future. When the future is considered, it is largely imagined as just a recycling and rejuvenation of these all-important traditions. This preoccupation with origins and traditions creates a tension, in that it both weighs down and energises the organisation. Or one might say that the GAA is at once conservative and radical” (p.9).

From a governance perspective the GAA, as a volunteer-led organisation and, importantly, one that is not-for-profit, is not legally required to adhere to the precise requirements of corporate best practice in respect of its approach to its affairs. However, it seems eminently reasonable that where it is possible to translate such practice for the betterment of the GAA, and indeed

other such national governing bodies of sport, that this should be facilitated. Across the British Isles, there continue to be a range of governance approaches variously deployed, including in the realm of sport, but stewardship theory, in which an individual (either appointed or elected) is required to act as if they were the principal of the organisation is widely recognised. It has applicability to the GAA because clearly the extent to which any individual in a position of responsibility within an organisation would, in turn, be prepared to act in this way, will be linked to the cultural expectations of the business sector in question. As a grassroots, members owned Association, the GAA imbues within its members a remarkable level of personal altruism, a spirit of volunteerism and selflessness that is by any comparison, atypical. Thus, for the most part, there can never be any question over the preparedness of the GAA's members to provide the organisation with effective governance. Rather the skills and competencies necessary to offer the Association leadership in the modern realm, as the GAA continues to expand its reach beyond Ireland, is where the focus should arguably now turn. Indeed, the globalising credentials of the GAA were further underlined in February 2020 when it appointed USA academic Larry McCarthy, an Irish emigrant, as its first ever overseas President and he assumed the most senior role in the Association in February 2021.

Within the pantheon of post-modern sport, the GAA exists as something of an outlier with its continued emphasis on voluntary contribution, with its resolute determination to ensure its players, amongst others, adhere to the concept of amateurism and therefore are not materially rewarded for their efforts (which remain considerable at the elite level) and the promotion of the unflinching principle that the 'whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. Of course, even organisations that advance this often-cherished set of principles, accept that as they grow and as the expectations of its members and participants similarly expand, they do require professional administrators to oversee this evolution. In so doing there is the basis of an emerging challenge for organisations like the GAA as they seek to safeguard the very founding basis of their organisations – in the case of the GAA, that it is a members owned entity and must reflect the wishes of its membership at large – whilst at the same time recognising they must prove reflexive, commercially astute and accepting of the consequences of this, and the increasing reality that sport – all sport – is now being deployed, in part, to give rise to non-sporting outcomes and the activities of the GAA are no different in this regard.

Accepting this reality, it follows that the 'traditional' means of governing sporting organisation, through a hierarchical 'top down' approach in which the balance of power continues to reside

with the sporting body, is itself being dismantled in front of our very eyes. Few credible national sporting bodies – to say nothing of transnational ones – would seek to argue that their strategic governance is anything other than a pragmatic negotiation between the needs of commercial sponsors, the proliferation of its commitments to various media platforms, the involvement of the State, and their sporting aspirations. As Clarkson (1995) confirms, the concept of governance has evolved and is now defined as a delicate inter-woven unity of very often competing yet sometimes mutual ambitions. The practical outworking of this is that policy-making, strategic priorities and operational decisions have all now become ‘crowded spaces’ with more voices to be heard and a series of interdependencies identified and facilitated.

Understanding this evolution is important in any modern-day appreciation of the GAA. The straightforward relationship between the broad membership of the Association and those elected, or appointed, to represent its views has been disrupted, perhaps irrevocably so if events of recent years are any indication of future intent. In some respects, this is inevitable as a need for a more agile decision-making approach means there simply is not the scope to gain approval from the GAA’s members every time it wishes to move the organisation in a new direction. Commercial imperatives, also, mean some issues are time sensitive, often confidential, whilst making provision for the capacity of members to shape some decisions the organisation may wish to make means, in practice, that others cannot be subject to the same level of external scrutiny. This tension, increasingly, is what challenges those governing the GAA when professing that the organisation remains ‘members owned’ in the face of heightened concerns from these very same members that it has, by now, emerged to become anything but.

Thus, the concept of ‘network’ governance represents a new reality for organisations like the GAA, which, heretofore, had grown comfortable with a largely transactional relationship with its members in which a combination of subscriptions, ticket sales and fundraising allowed for a modest annual revenue but one entirely in keeping with the equally measured outlook for the Association. Fast forward to today and it is unquestionably true that the Association has had to look afresh at its interface with a range of stakeholders – not merely because they represent the reality of modern sport’s landscape but because they are now reliant on the income they offer to fund the expansion of the GAA in all its forms.

As such, in accepting that the governance of the GAA, like many modern sporting bodies, is a product of a broader ‘network’ it appears prudent to better appreciate its machinations, and how activity in certain aspects of this governance ‘ecosystem’ impacts upon outcomes in other areas. Of relevance for the GAA is the means of ensuring its revenue is protected, how it continues to reconcile its primary role of providing a programme of games for all its participants whilst accepting the particular demands exercised by those at its elite level and, in broader terms, the strategic medium to long term future for a largely indigenous organisation operating in a wholly globalised sports sphere.

Governance and the GAA in Ireland

The many challenges now facing the GAA, some of which are unquestionably existential, must – at least for the foreseeable future – be considered in the context of its existing governance structures. It should be said that this layered, hierarchical approach, has served the Association well and whilst very often criticised for its hesitant, sometimes interminably slow, decision making, it has been presented as a model from which many other sporting bodies could draw important learnings. Between Annual Congresses of the GAA, the supreme decision-making body of the Association is its Central Council, comprised of representatives of each of its 32 Irish counties alongside delegates from its overseas units, including Britain and mainland Europe. Aside from the sheer unwieldiness of a meeting featuring 50 representatives of different GAA units, there is also the obvious challenge of a body seeking to exercise authority of the organisation at large whilst, individually and collectively, the very people engaged in this process *are* the organisation. Below the Central Council of the GAA there are a range of national committees (33 in total), sophisticated structures at Provincial level (Ireland having four Provinces) and, in turn, administrative units at both county and parish levels across the island. Whilst this single ‘spine’ surrounding the governance of the GAA has much to recommend it, the capacity of this to respond to the fast-paced nature of modern sport administration remains questionable and so it seems reasonable to assume some means of streamlining this decision-making process would prove sensible in the time ahead.

The GAA’s structural composition is informed by a long-held view that it is incumbent on any sporting body that seeks to safeguard its future and remain relevant to the broad masses of its membership to ensure it permits the redistribution of revenue to all levels of the game. It is a principle that has been gradually eroded in other sporting disciplines but the GAA has so far

remained resistant to increasing calls from sections of its own membership to recognise the exceptional level of commitment made by its still amateur inter-county players, who despite often contesting games in front of 70,000 spectators and more, do not receive any financial compensation for doing so. More and more this has contributed to an uneasy working relationship between the GAA and a body representing inter-county players – those performing at the game’s top level – the Gaelic Players Association (GPA). Although at pains to point out that it is not an organisation seeking ‘pay for play’ for its members, nevertheless it has done little to assuage the concerns of many rank and file members that the GPA retains the prospect of destabilising the basis upon which the GAA has successfully operated for almost 140 years.

As sport moves inexorably in the direction of an American style ‘entertainment model’, defined as sport effectively meeting the needs of broadcast media, it is not unreasonable that the GPA would begin to make its voice heard as the incremental demands of sustaining professional expectations by amateur players – those who earn a living doing something other than playing elite sport – may prove equally unsustainable. A recent decision by the GAA to approve a ‘split season’ model i.e., elite inter-county fixtures to take place for the first six months of the calendar year followed by club action for its broad membership, has been lauded for the certainty it has provided to the latter, it also means the former effectively playing on a 12-month rolling basis with no discernible ‘off season’. It seems reasonable to conclude that there is still some distance to travel in respect of this issue and offers still further evidence of the challenges facing the GAA in ensuring its effective governance into the twenty first century.

Conclusion

For a modestly sized, largely indigenous sporting body, the GAA has attracted an arguably disproportionate level of coverage and commentary. Very often this is because of how it is viewed by those who are not members of the Association, its socio-cultural and indeed political undertones, but also because it is one of the few remaining examples in world sport of a genuinely ‘members owned’ organisation. For much of its existence, the GAA was modest in every sense of the word, including in how it both generated and redistributed its income and, for the most part, this worked very well, whilst its membership at large seemed entirely content with this arrangement.

But as the essence of this article has demonstrated, as the speed at which the organisation developed and adapted has grown ever more pronounced, the stressors placed on the ‘amateur ideal’, in particular, have become ever more marked. It was no longer feasible, certainly following the turn of the new millennium, for the GAA to continue to deploy a straightforward administrative model of governance, defined by a simple redistribution approach in which all units received broadly the same level of re-investment whether they needed it or not, or permit its affairs to be handled simply by volunteers, committed as they undoubtedly were, who could only provide a certain level of response to matters that, if truth be told, necessitated full-time professional oversight.

Thus, this article reaches the inevitable conclusion that the pace at which the GAA needs to evolve will continue to quicken so that a stewardship approach to governance, defined by a streamlined Central Council and overseen by a more agile Management Board comprised of members selected and elected on account of their expertise to respond to the demands of governing a modern sporting body like the GAA, some of which are unique to the organisation itself, must inevitably follow.

Finally, whilst all sporting bodies attract criticism from within their own ranks – it almost comes with the territory – there has been a marked uptick in the extent of this aimed towards the GAA and those who govern it, in recent years. It, indeed, could be said to be in direct proportion to the extent to which many of the issues outlined in this article have been grappled with and ongoing adherence to the ideals of the Association have been ‘stress tested’. It appears reasonable to conclude that this will continue to be the case unless and until the GAA elevates its authority to a level that adequately offers a sustainable long-term response to certain issues that have beset its operations for some time now, and which provides the reassurance that in remaining true to its founding principles, can equally demonstrate the GAA’s adaptability and responsiveness as it moves towards the marking of its 150th year in existence in 2034.

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