



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
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**Sport, Politics and
Community Relations in
Northern Ireland**

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Since the early 1980s the relationship between sport and sectarian division in Northern Ireland has been subjected to considerable academic scrutiny. In addition, since the mid 1990s, such organisations as the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and the Irish Football Association have taken significant steps towards weakening the links between sport and sectarianism. Those of us who have been involved in this process from the outset, as academic researchers, as activists and as a combination of the two, have tended to base our approach on one very simple premise - namely, that far from being separate from the wider society, sport is an integral, and increasingly important, element of society in Northern Ireland as elsewhere. For many this will seem like a truism that is scarcely worth repeating. Yet it runs counter to the cherished belief that is held by many sports administrators who present their sphere of activity as one of sanctuary into which people can escape from the real and often unpleasant world of politics. This is a form of denial which needs to be challenged. At the same time, it would be ridiculous to suggest that sport can solve society's problems. However, at the very least people who are involved with sport should be expected to recognise the negative aspects that affect their particular part of society and seek to address these. In so doing they can contribute to making the whole of society a better place in which to live. For example it is widely accepted in many countries that challenging racism and sexism in sport can produce beneficial results that are felt well beyond the sporting world.

In Ireland, north and south, sport brings many benefits to the population in terms of better health, good companionship, excitement, fun and so on. It also possesses the potential to promote social inclusion. In many respects, however, this potential has remained unrealised. For example, sport in Ireland tends to be dominated by men at least at the level of leadership. Considerably more work needs to be done if women are to discover a sense of real ownership with regard to Irish sport. Moreover, gender is by no means the only area in which sport in Ireland presents itself as exclusive. This is particularly true in Northern Ireland.

It is frequently asserted that one of the great achievements of Irish sport is that it creates a strong sense of community identity. In a divided society, however, the very idea of community is problematic. Indeed it is commonplace to talk in terms of the two communities in Northern Ireland and one might even be inclined to suggest that there exist considerably more than two. Whilst it is undeniable that sport has played an important role in maintaining and supporting community life especially in rural parts of Northern Ireland, it is arguable that it has done so at a price. Whilst serving to consolidate a sense of pride in one's own people and one's own cherished places, it has also contributed to the construction and reproduction of the very attitudes towards others upon which conflict and division have thrived. Where there are high



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levels of social exclusion, it is often a very short step from celebrating one's own community and its values to vilifying those of others. In a divided society which contains some divided sports and numerous divided clubs and competitions in those sports that are superficially inclusive, it is important to be constantly aware of this danger and to do whatever is possible to counter it. With this in mind the various attempts that have been made by organisations such as the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and the Irish Football Association to challenge sectarianism are to be welcomed. However, there can be little doubt that the task is difficult and has arguably been made even more difficult as a consequence of recent political developments within and involving Northern Ireland.

When initial attempts were made to harness sport to the cause of promoting better community relations, there appeared to be some kind of consensus within the British political establishment and key elements of Northern Irish civil society that integration was the favoured means of tackling the problem of inter-communal strife. Bringing people closer together would work as if by some process of osmosis to foster mutual respect, understanding and, ultimately, trust. To the extent that sport had a role to play, therefore, the emphasis was on encouraging those sports and clubs which were strongly identified with only one of the two main traditions to become more inclusive. This was a laudable ambition holding out as it did the possibility that everyone in Northern Ireland would be able to enjoy an even greater number of sporting opportunities than ever before whilst simultaneously helping to lay the foundations for a more stable and peaceful society. Such objectives have been at the heart of many strategies involving sport in recent years. It is reasonable to ask at this juncture, however, how far sport is being assisted by the wider political process when it is asked to implement such strategies.

Association football has long presented problems as well as opportunities in relation to community relations issues in Northern Ireland. Of the major team sports it is the one that crosses the community divide most successfully. The 'people's game' is watched and played by Catholics and Protestants in huge numbers and also provides sporting outlets for members of Northern Ireland's less well known communities consisting of a variety of ethnic minority groups. Its potential for bringing people together is undeniable. Nevertheless it is precisely because of its cross-community appeal that football presents difficult challenges for those who would use sporting for integrative purposes. Whilst extremely popular within both nationalist and unionist communities, the game is not consumed in the same way by each (with the exception of support for English Premiership teams which does have the capacity to bring together unlikely bedfellows). In other respects, the local football culture has tended to be characterised by division with prominent nationalist



clubs (Belfast Celtic or, since the late 1970s, Cliftonville) being pitted against unionist adversaries (Linfield, Glentoran, Portadown and so on), support for Celtic and Rangers adhering strictly to the sectarian contours of Northern Irish society and, at least in the recent past, Catholics supporting the Republic of Ireland's national side and Protestants favouring Northern Ireland. The latter example is clearly particularly vexing if a peaceful future is postulated on the notion of cross-community integration.

Amongst its many responsibilities, the ministerial advisory panel on football in Northern Ireland which was set up in October 2000 by Michael McGimpsey, who was then Minister for Culture Arts and Leisure, was asked to examine ways in which the game could be made more inclusive and, just as importantly, could be made to appear more inclusive. Recommendations that were made in response to this particular task included a new national stadium for Northern Ireland which would not be seen to 'belong' only to the unionist community, equal opportunities that would allow teams with predominantly nationalist support to progress through the competitive structure and a governing body that not only talks about the need for good community relations but is also an example of good practice in this respect. Another suggestion that might have been made, but was not, was for the Irish Football Association (IFA) to reconsider its use of 'God Save the Queen' as the anthem played before international matches. None of these changes would be certain to attract more nationalists to Northern Ireland international football games. On the other hand they are surely in the spirit of an integrative approach to sports development. Whether or not it is right to continue to expect sports administrators to act in this spirit is, however, a very different matter.

The Good Friday Agreement which has been viewed as the cornerstone of the Northern Ireland peace process essentially adopts a consociational approach to peace-building. The two main traditions are allowed to cling to their competing constitutional aspirations. It is hoped that they will learn how to share political power. Yet there is very little attention paid to the need for them to share anything more than power - an identity perhaps, a way of educating children or the use of major sports and sporting spaces. It is as if, at the political level at least, the integration project has all but been abandoned in favour of living with difference. The problem is that this is not the message that is being sent out to the various elements of civil society, sports organisations included. Instead, as is reflected in the advice offered to the IFA by the ministerial advisory group, integration remains the preferred option. Furthermore, there are many who would agree that this is the best way forward for Northern Ireland as a whole, not necessarily pursued in isolation from the constitutional arrangements set out by the Good Friday Agreement but rather as an essential complement to these arrangements. The current political impasse



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suggests, however, that the Good Friday Agreement may well have served to institutionalise sectarianism to such an extent that the very idea of asking sport to put its house in order seems faintly ludicrous. In such circumstances, it is hard not to be sympathetic to sports administrators when they mouth the time honoured mantra that sport and politics do not mix and point out that they are offering people a place into which to escape from the real world. If the real world is represented by the kind of negative sectarian attitudes that have so seriously undermined the peace process, then sport in Northern Ireland, despite its failings, might indeed seem like a far, far better place.

Further reading

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