A Shared Ireland? Identity, Meaning, Representation and Sport

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines historical and contemporary interdependencies in Ireland, north and south. We explore how individual and group identities and traditions on the island were and are understood, felt, expressed and promoted through the medium of modern sport, a powerful transfer mechanism for culture. We examine the interweaving of sportcraft and statecraft, and how group notions of identity contour and shape possibilities for engagement that might, in some conditions, allow for potential mutual understanding and reconciliation. We analyse ‘Ireland’ and Irish–British relations through the historical and contemporary development of Olympic sports and track and

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Irish Studies in International Affairs, Vol. 33, Issue 2, 101–132, Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South © 2022 The Author(s). This is an open access article licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
field athletics, in the spirit of a public and policy sociology about a shared Ireland; this can potentially inform decisions about sport-related issues. Without reference to the centrality of sport for identities, considerations of a shared Ireland are more likely both to reaffirm silences, shadows and collective amnesia and to limit future opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 EU (Brexit) referendum altered Irish–British relations, exposing deep political, cultural and social fissures in the ‘equality’ between communities in Northern Ireland. It also sparked public debate about the future for the island of Ireland: in the north, given that the majority voted to remain in the EU, and in the south, in terms of both Irish–British trade relations and the implications for ‘old’ or ‘new’ Irish, Anglo- or British-Irish, Ulster-Irish and Ulster-British domiciled there. Diplomats, civil servants and politicians have long held an interest in the wider social role of sport,¹ and sporting administrators also operate in the context of how ‘the diverse identities and traditions on the island are understood, felt, expressed and promoted, and how they are perceived and understood by those of other traditions’.² Recent illustrations include funding by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) of a 2021 centenary athletics programme.

The ‘political nature of ... support’ for athletics was underscored by Athletics NI (ANI), the official governing body for the sport, in an email reply to a club that raised concerns about the NIO’s involvement. Given the context, it was no surprise that Brandon Lewis, Northern Ireland secretary of state, congratulated the athletics organisers on his official Twitter account and foregrounded the government’s support.³ This event preceded another in September, involving an NI 100 (centenary) church service to which the president of Ireland declined an invitation, much to the anger of some unionist politicians. Two months later, in November 2021, a council renamed an athletics venue ‘the Northern Ireland Centenary Stadium’, sparking criticism

of the politicisation of athletics. The reaction to Brexit in conjunction with the decade of centenaries on the island and the inclusion of athletics in centenary celebrations is by no means coincidental. Indeed, the renaming of the stadium and reactions to it highlight still salient sensitivities and the legacy of the past. One could use the term ‘partition games’ to describe their cultural and symbolic significance.

The prospect of a shared Ireland—united, divided or even federalised—has evoked responses ranging from conscious policy decisions to avoid constitutional issues and (in)sensitivity towards minorities in contemporary or any new arrangements to various unaffiliated civic initiatives, such as Shared Ireland. The position of the current Irish government is to forgo any official discussion of unity owing to its potential destabilising consequences. This position is ‘a perspective ... of the moment’ in Irish official nationalism, born also of EU integration whereby the border has been seen as a (peaceful) bridge to the fulfilment of interests.

In the ‘great game’ of Irish–British relations, sport has featured as war with other means because it involves relations across north–south and east–west axes that connect past, present and future. Diplomats and political figures practised both statecraft and sportcraft, often at critical junctures. For example, in 1998, David Trimble, then first minister of Northern Ireland, and eight other unionist MPs backed a parliamentary early day motion on the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation (NICF). This motion supported attempts by the NICF to resist the right of an internationally recognised body, the Federation of Irish Cyclists, to govern the sport on an all-island basis. This intervention illustrated sportcraft in action and was cited in August 2021 by

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6 Doyle et al., ‘Introducing ARINS’, viii.
David Campbell, chair of the Loyalist Communities Council, who had been Trimble’s chief of staff in 1998. Campbell claimed (incorrectly) that ‘in some [Olympic] events participants from Northern Ireland are considered for inclusion in the British team, but in many others they are excluded and must offer themselves for consideration for the Republic of Ireland team’. He went on:

Clearly for Northern Ireland competitors from a nationalist background this is probably a welcome situation, but for those of a unionist disposition it is discriminatory and offensive, and runs against the Rights and Identity provisions for all citizens in the Belfast Agreement... It is simply not acceptable for Northern Ireland competitors to have to compete under a foreign flag that they may well consider obnoxious and alien to their own nationality.\(^\text{11}\)

Such comments and political moves echoed his predecessors, notably Lord Craigavon, Richard Dawson Bates and Thomas Moles, as we discuss later.

Many questions arise. What role does sport play in the nature and meaning of identity, in Ulster and Irish unionist and loyalist, northern and southern nationalist, and republican responses to a shared Ireland? How and in what ways might sport project mutual understanding? What of its symbolic significance? Might it function in paradoxical ways: reflecting, exacerbating and, in some cases, aspiring to unify and transcend difference? What are the practical implications of change (constitutional or otherwise) for culture and identity as expressed through sport (e.g. national eligibility and all-island or federalised jurisdiction)? What potential changes in sportive habitus codes (anthem, flag, emblem and associated symbols) might there be? What might we learn from compromises, milestones and pitfalls in sport over the twentieth century? And in what ways are stakeholders willing and able to engage in such new possibilities today?

This paper is one contribution towards understanding these issues and the wider social role of sport in a shared Ireland. It is offered in the spirit of a public and policy sociology;\(^\text{12}\) that is to say, we disseminate and use research and knowledge in public dialogue, and we apply these to

\(^{11}\) David Campbell, ‘It is not acceptable for athletes from Northern Ireland to have to compete under a foreign flag’, News Letter, 10 August 2021, emphasis added.

potentially inform policy decisions about sport-related issues, current and future. For the so-called ‘Irish question’ has dominated not only Irish–British relations at times, but also Olympic sport and international track and field athletics on the island, over the course of the twentieth century and more recently.

This question has roots in empire, the internationalisation of sport and the legacy of partition. Its currency is reflected in loyalist desire for separate sportive representation—which acts as an ideological fantasy shield— and an associated discontent with and resistance to all things ‘foreign’, including the tricolour. The question is formalised in the wording and operation of the (political) boundary rule adopted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF, now World Athletics/WA) in the 1930s. Specifically, only one governing body is recognised by international athletics in any country or territory. Country is defined as a self-governing geographical area recognised as an independent state by international law and governmental bodies, while territory means an area that has aspects of self-government, at least to the extent of being autonomous in the control of its sport. At present, a civic group, the Friends of Irish Athletics, with members in Ireland, north and south, claims that this rule undermines the right of athletes to represent a 32-county Ireland in world athletics.

This ‘Irish question’ is a case study of wider processes and issues that have many implications for a shared Ireland. This is examined here through archival research in Ireland, the UK and internationally, and 22 in-depth interviews with civic and sportive stakeholders. To appreciate its material and symbolic significance, we focus below on the nexus of statecraft and sportcraft expressed through the Irish Olympic movement and athletics in the twentieth century, in sportive ‘word wars’ from overwhelmingly male voices, and in regulatory and ideological battles over legitimation and jurisdiction. We also examine the paradox of sport—as a social glue and/or social toxin—and its double-edged potential for engendering mutual understanding. Such insights are crucial for appreciating the scope of sport in civic society

and in a shared Ireland. First, however, it is necessary to appraise the links between sport, culture and identity.

SPORT, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

During the twentieth century, sport both helped to cement divisions between formerly united nations and was a source of potential reconciliation. In pre-war Germany, sport helped reinforce notions of Aryan supremacy. Hans von Tschammer und Osten, Reichssportführer, promoted sports to harden the German spirit and instil unity among German youth, and played a major role in organising the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games (boycotted by the Olympic Council of Ireland owing to the international imposition of the boundary rule). Post-war sport was implicated in, and expressive of, the ideological struggle between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Reunification of national teams and sport systems of the new Germany was achieved post-1990, albeit with rancour and ongoing tension, and wider economic, cultural and political divisions remained within the new German ‘nation’.

The cases of North and South Korea also underscore challenges that lie ahead for a shared Ireland. In North Korea, international sport provides a forum for internal unity and external recognition and legitimacy. ‘Unified’ Korean teams have entered various Olympics, yet with limited, ephemeral symbolic success, as north–south schisms remain. Likewise, within the new South Africa, apartheid-era fault lines persist. Rugby union had been a bastion of Afrikaner identity, with the distinctive Springbok jersey symbolising resistance to change. By wearing this jersey at the 1995 South Africa-hosted World Cup, and promoting the new anthem, Nelson Mandela sought to symbolically neutralise old conflicts and build trust and peace. However, progress within

16 Grant Jarvie, ‘Identity, recognition or redistribution through sport?’, in John Harris and Andrew Parker (eds), Sport and social identities (London, 2009), 15–28.
South Africa has been intermittent and problematic in sport and other sectors of society.

Sport and divided identities are similarly salient in the Basque region, western Balkans and other eastern European states, as they are too on the island of Ireland. Flags, emblems, anthems and team colours were integral parts of twentieth-century rituals of the Irish Free State, Irish republic and Northern Ireland, and will continue to be in the future. This is because sport is mutually reflective and reinforcing of broader processes associated with the sociogenesis of warfare, civilising processes, and cultural, symbolic and physical forms of violence.

Stakeholders in a shared Ireland will likely confront sporting issues that require careful reflection, cross-community and intercultural engagement, reconciliation and trust-building measures. This is because the national symbols of identity—anthem, emblem and flag—are woven into the fabric of international sporting representation; sports are embedded in nations’ quest for exciting symbolic significance; and groups utilise sports in seeking to (re)establish distinctive identities, laying claim to jurisdiction and waging ideological battles for recognition and representation.

Irish history is replete with symbols that reveal possibilities, prejudice and contention. Similarly, the history of sport on the island involves shared and divided stories, reflecting socio-economic class, gender and ethno-religious differences, and responses to colonialism, empire and the uneven diffusion of ‘British’ or ‘foreign’ sports. Gaelic games (football, hurling, camogie, handball, and rounders) reflect the distinctiveness of Irish cultural and social life, claiming the status of ‘national’ sports/games that, at times, played a more overt political role in resistance to imperialism. Still, Irish sportive nationalism is not monolithic. Though

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17 For example, Paddy Dolan and John Connolly (eds), Sport and national identities: globalization and conflict (London, 2017).
18 Liston and Maguire, ‘The “great game” and sport’.
22 This was reflected in the GAA’s aim of strengthening national identity in a 32-county Ireland through the preservation and promotion of games and pastimes, the Irish language, traditional Irish dancing, music, song, and other aspects of Irish culture. Prohibitions (now lifted) existed, historically, against membership by the police and British military forces (rule 21), the banning of GAA members from watching or playing other sports (rule 27) and the playing of ‘foreign’ sports at GAA grounds (rule 42).
initially slower to develop in Ulster, Gaelic games took on heightened meaning for Northern nationalists following partition. For example, some Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) members were interned in the 1920s ‘for no reason other than their cultural identity’ and others came under attack in the 1990s. Protestant, unionist and loyalist support for association football/soccer (which is governed separately by two associations in Ireland and Northern Ireland) and rugby union (all-island) also exemplifies this heterogeneity. For loyalists especially, culture may have greater importance than social class for conceptions of identity politics, also reflected in Campbell’s words above. Its potency resides in practices concerned with the display of symbols of identity (such as flags, murals, monuments, anthems, emblems and kerbstones) and a sense of belonging. Windsor Park, now titled the National Stadium (official venue for all home football games, at least for the senior men’s team), was regarded as equally important to Protestants as other activities such as Orange Day (12 July) celebrations.

Even now, sports played internationally that are governed on an all-island basis, e.g. men’s and women’s rugby union and field hockey, are marked by symbolic silences of players from the four provinces during the singing of anthems, especially those from Ulster, and carefully choreographed anthems, flags and emblems are on display. Declaring that it was the first time he had kicked a Gaelic football, in 2016 Paul Givan, then Democratic Unionist Party minister for communities, paid tribute to the GAA’s community work with carefully chosen words: ‘I support the organisation – in terms of the sporting aspect of it – and the value that it brings to young people’ and ‘I did acknowledge to them [the GAA] that the cultural dimension ... does present a challenge and we had an open conversation about that and the Irish dimension.’ These examples strike a cautionary note, irrespective of whether sports are governed separately, whether they have working relations that minimise the impact of the border, or even in 32-county governance requiring astute historical and intercultural understanding as well as administrative dexterity to operate across two political jurisdictions.

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The partition of Ireland led to differences in emphasis in the practice of statecraft and sportcraft. All-island practices endured in many sportive organisations founded before 1921, such as the GAA, the Irish Rugby Football Union and the Golfing Union of Ireland, as they did for many other civic organisations. Those founded after 1921 tended to observe the border. In the Irish Olympic movement, established in 1920, and in track and field athletics, which merged into one all-island body in 1922, the fusion with socio-political issues was unavoidable. British influence was resisted through the growth of Gaelic games but also in Olympic sports, involving athletes such as Peter O’Connor and Con Leahy who protested their right to represent an Irish Olympic team in 1906 and, later, 1928 Olympic gold medallist Pat O’Callaghan, who claimed after his win that the world had been shown that ‘Ireland had a flag, national anthem and that Irish athletes had a nationality’.

The Irish Olympic movement and athletics are a case par excellence in sport, culture and identity. The history of athletics and Olympic sport, with attendant north–south and west–east (Irish–British) dimensions, reveals inconvenient truths, political ploys and deceptions. The future of the present governance model—involving Athletics Ireland (Irish republic), Athletics Northern Ireland and the all-island Olympic Federation of Ireland (formerly the Olympic Council of Ireland)—will be made by those currently involved, who have a significant role in generating mutual understanding in a shared Ireland. In examining this case further, our entry point is the phase in Irish–British relations that emerged in the 1920s, after the Civil War ended, in which sport was war with other means and a different manifestation of these.

THE IRISH OLYMPIC MOVEMENT AND ATHLETICS: STATECRAFT AND SPORTCRAFT

Modern state formation on the island of Ireland involved a slow shift in power relations between the ‘Irish’ and ‘British’—from colony to free state, the formation of a statelet in Northern Ireland and the emergence of an independent state.
Characteristics of established-outsider relations can be found in this process, including politics and sport being largely male preserves, and in which the two main traditions claim(ed) a length of association with the island, or parts of it. Catholics became a minority in Northern Ireland in the 1920s while Protestants became a minority in the new Irish state, where the Irish Olympic Council was formed soon after. Reflected within Irish Olympic and athletics movements was a set of interconnected identity questions that centred on the search for international recognition, representation and jurisdiction and involved sportive bodies on the island of Ireland and in Britain, and international counterparts (see Fig. 1).

There was an ostensibly English question (on the part of the Amateur Athletic Association) of how to recognise those who held greater affiliation to Great Britain in sport; a British (Olympic Association) question concerning the Irish state and claims to nationality and citizenship before and after independence, and the implications for eligibility of those from Northern Ireland; and Irish questions on all-island unity and governance (for the Irish Olympic Council, the all-island national athletics and cycling bodies and the Northern-Ireland-only athletics association). Tensions existed between the (‘old’ and ‘new’) Irish including the Ulster- and British-Irish domiciled north and south, between the athletic associations in the south (the National Athletic and Cycling Association (NACA) and the Amateur Athletic Union of Eire (AAUE) and its successor, Bord Lúthchleas na Éireann (BLE)) and, in nine-county Ulster, between the Ulster branch of the NACA and the Northern Ireland Amateur Athletics Association (NIIAA), which governed athletics in six counties (see Fig. 1). There was an international sportive dimension too, comprising Olympic and athletics elites. These executive members of international sports bodies were diplomats with (often primordial) views on nationality and citizenship who, by their beliefs and actions, were a means for some nations to increase their appeal, power and scope. These beliefs and actions were strongly contested and were unevenly applied over the twentieth century.

The implications of the War of Independence, the Civil War and constitutional change for Ireland from 1919 to 1922 were decisive and divisive. Of

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32 For instance, the successful efforts of British administrators to thwart the participation of a unified Irish team at the 1948 Olympics were a stark contrast to their (failed) efforts to welcome Soviet and Eastern bloc teams.
particular note for the future were accommodations between Irish and British sportive traditions involving symbols and emblems (flag, anthem and national title). Successful ploys by British and international organisations to restrict some all-island sporting bodies to 26-county jurisdiction, and the associated recognition given to six-county groups, contributed to ruptures with effects lasting to this day. These ploys meant that Olympic and athletic jurisdiction, originally accepted by international bodies on an all-island basis in the 1920s, was subsequently delimited by them to 26 counties. The 32-county Irish athletics and cycling body, formed in 1922, refused to accept the imposed boundary rule and retained its all-island claim for almost 100 years. In the 1930s, this resistance led to its suspension from international athletics. Despite isolation from sanctioned international competition, however, this association remained active throughout the twentieth century and members played a role in negotiations to establish Athletics Ireland, the current 26-county body, in 2000.
In the intervening years there were many attempts at athletic unity: within ‘the south’ and between ‘the north and south’, with British and international officials posing as ‘neutral’ brokers. As we demonstrate next, Olympic sport was a means through which ‘Ireland’ sought international recognition on an all-island basis and achieved this, but with a far-reaching caveat in athletics. It is necessary to understand these events, and the selective amnesia around them, before we can consider claims that, today, sport could transcend such deeply held views, traditions and differences.

Milestones and pitfalls in sportcraft

Leaders of the new Irish state and Dáil Éireann sought international recognition through the League of Nations and other bodies. For them, Irish foreign policy was to be determined primarily by powers derived from the people of Ireland and not by membership of the British Commonwealth. The Irish government projected a right to 32-county sovereignty, even as the lives of those in the Free State began to take on material difference to those in Northern Ireland, now dominated by unionists who looked to Britain for legitimacy and status. These differences—not only in economies and polities but also in traditions, identities and views on the future—were secured further over the course of the twentieth century as Ireland’s profile as a small nation became tied into wider international and European developments.

In searching for international recognition, Irish leaders gradually recognised the strategic soft-power role of sport in the symbolic representation of, and claim to, independence and jurisdiction. Despite claims of being apolitical, the modern Olympic movement in fact exposed and amplified international politics. Many examples span the twentieth century: from Irishman O’Connor’s protest and the United States team’s refusal to dip the American flag to Edward VII in 1908 to the 1936 (Nazi) Olympics and various boycotts and bans. The Irish state sought to reap the benefits of international representation when the Irish Olympic Council was founded in April 1920 under the presidency of J.J. Keane, former chairman of the GAA’s athletic council. Keane also became president of the all-island athletics and cycling

34 There was also the People’s Republic of China boycott in 1956 over the inclusion of Taïwan; the banning of South Africa in 1964, which lasted until 1992; boycotts by 26 African countries in 1976 owing to the failure of the IOC to ban New Zealand, who completed a rugby tour of segregated South Africa; and the reciprocal US and USSR boycotts of 1980 and 1984.
body, which subsumed the GAA’s stake in athletics and unified several athletic bodies on the island.

Even if no formal state policy or assigned government department for sport existed then, there was a role for sport in augmenting national and foreign policy to project the nation: not only in support for the Olympic Council but also for the Aonach Tailteann Games in the 1920s and 1930s, and in the portrayal of national emblems such as flag and anthem through rugby. For instance, the Irish chargé d’affaires in Paris wrote to Dublin concerning the anthem and flag to be used at an upcoming international match. Some sports such as boxing and swimming continued to select all-island teams in Olympic and world competition after partition and successfully resisted attempts to delimit their jurisdiction, while others were ‘without the North, whose affiliations were with the UK’ by the late 1930s.

Diverse views on sport, politics and representation had a significant bearing on the governance of athletics at various points throughout the twentieth century. For instance, the all-island body voted in favour of an all-island athletics team, titled ‘Ireland’, with the harp flag, which participated in the inaugural 1930 British Empire Games in Canada, though not without debate and dissent on the separation of sport and politics. Views within this body continue to resonate today: participation in the Empire Games would create further athletic discord owing to an attached political significance; sport and politics should not mix at all; the Games were an opportunity to brand Ireland on the empire stage, or another reason not to have anything to do with any part of the British empire (given that athletes pledged allegiance to the crown).

The effect of the aforementioned political boundary rule enforced by international Olympic and athletics executives in the mid-1930s meant that by 1938 only athletes from Northern Ireland were officially selected for the Empire Games. ‘Northern Ireland’ became the official team title from this point. This development—in name, jurisdiction, representation and eligibility—ran parallel with the involvement of the British government in imposing its interpretation of citizenship and nationality, which was reflected throughout the history of Northern Ireland. In 1934 (at the London Empire Games) and again in 1948 (at the London Olympics), the British organisers’ views on

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35 IOC Archives Lausanne, Keane to de Coubertin, 10 April/8 May 1922.
36 O’Kelly de Gallagh to Walshe, National Archives of Ireland, DFA GR 1489.
keeping to their chosen political style and title of territories held sway over the participation of athletes selected by all-Ireland sports bodies. Swimming (all-island) and athletics (with continued all-island claims by the NACA) were contentious sports for British organisers at both events.

The same issues as in 1934—around title, jurisdiction and eligibility—threatened the participation of the Irish Olympic team at the opening parade in 1948 owing to a combination of efforts by the local organisers and the British government. These allowed Lord Burghley, chair of the British organising committee, to insist that the name of the Irish team be recorded as Eire and not Ireland, despite official Irish objections. It also resulted in the participation of two Irish athletics teams in the opening Olympic parade: one selected by a 26-county body (having internationally sanctioned jurisdiction over athletics in the Irish republic) and the other by the all-island body (then suspended from international athletics and cycling but which remained a member of the Irish Olympic Council). The position on ‘the Irish question’, i.e. the contestation of all-island jurisdiction, had been laid out very clearly from British and unionist perspectives in the September and October 1946 correspondence between Stephen Williamson of the Belfast Telegraph and Lord Burghley (later Marquess of Exeter), president of the IAAF, Olympian, Conservative MP and peer, as follows:

The Northern Ireland AAA will not be a party to any agreement whose sole object from a Southern standpoint would be ... helping the NACA to obtain recognition from the body governing the Olympic Games ... [Burghley replied] If NACA are so anxious to develop athletics in Eire and perhaps geographical Ireland, they should before anything else affiliate to the AAU of Eire to prove their sincerity in the matter and that they are not concerned with politics.

There is both veracity and irony in Burghley’s analysis, given his central role in resisting Ireland’s claim to all-island Olympic status, in the sanctioning of the 26-county body as the official international member for Ireland and permitting its direct entry to the 1948 Olympics. His use of the descriptor ‘Eire’

39 Such action was in breach of Olympic protocol on the official languages of the international Olympic movement. Liston and Maguire, ‘The “great game” and sport’.
40 Stephen Williamson–Lord Burghley correspondence, IAAF, Lausanne.
(not Éire) was also in keeping with the British position on national names, denoting delimited jurisdiction. On occasion ‘Eire’ was used deliberately by British sportive elites to contest the use by Irish sporting bodies of the term ‘Ireland’, thereby preserving it, ideologically, for Northern Ireland. This was despite two official government letters being dispatched (in 1950 and 1951) to international Olympic and athletics bodies confirming the Gaelic (Éire) to English (Ireland) translation.

**Sportive word wars and the ideological battle for legitimation and jurisdiction**

Irish–British relations involved word wars over national political and sportive names: this was the core UK diplomatic position until the Good Friday Agreement. Great Britain refused to use the constitutional title of ‘Ireland’ post-partition and made diplomatic efforts to persuade others to do the same. This was contested by Irish diplomats. International athletics, through the influence of Lord Burghley and executive officials, continued to impose the titles ‘Eire’ and, on occasion, ‘Republic of Ireland’. In the 1950s, Lord Killanin, President of the Irish Olympic Council, succeeded through his membership of and influence within the executive group of the IOC in changing the use of ‘Eire’ to ‘Ireland’ and in re-establishing 32-county Irish Olympic jurisdiction. A British peer by inheritance, Killanin described himself as Irish, saying ‘my flag is the Tricolour’. Burghley vouched for Killanin’s accession to the IOC executive. He thought that Killanin had ‘just the right background’ (being a fellow Cambridge man) and did not portray ‘the incurably parochial outlook of the [Irish] people’, but he was subsequently less than enamoured of the Irishman’s sportcraft on the Irish question.

Burghley was a trusted link between the international Olympic movement and the British government by the 1950s, and on at least three occasions consulted with British government officials on questions of Irish title and jurisdiction: in August 1948 and in April and October 1956. On one such

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42 Killanin Collection, UCD Archives, correspondence to Edizioni SNC, no date.
43 Burghley to Edström, 11 October 1951, IOC Archives, Lausanne, marked private and personal; Avery Brundage, IOC President, regarded Killanin’s sportcraft as ‘an ingenious’ solution to ‘the troublesome Irish question’ (Brundage to Killanin, copy to Burghley, 1 February 1954, Killanin Collection, UCD).
45 National Archives (UK), DO 130/92 and FO 612/98 respectively.
occasion, Burghley was described by British officials as ‘charging full tilt into battle’. In retaliation to Killanin’s sportcraft, Northern Ireland was included in the British Olympic team name in 1956, as were EIR and GBI (not IRE or GBR) on the athletics stadium scoreboard. This was against IOC naming protocol, as it had been in 1948, and has never been used officially since. ‘GB and NI’ was used in London 1948, rebuffing the claim of Irish Olympic and athletic bodies to the title ‘Ireland’ and all-Ireland jurisdiction. The symbolism of this title and the related actions of all concerned were much more than coincidence, and reflected changing balances of power between the Irish and British. Travelling in the same direction as the partitioned ‘southern’ Irish, there were both similarities and differences in statecraft and sportcraft practised by the unionist majority in Northern Ireland, whose sportive nationalism also played an important role.

**Partition patriot games**

The forces of nationalism were equally recognisable in the north-east corner of Ireland. Ulster athletics split formally in 1925, although not initially along strict sectarian lines, and the British officially recognised the Northern Irish athletics body as their affiliate in 1930. Preceding the actions of David Trimble by 60 years or more, sport was unfinished business for politicians of the Northern Ireland parliament who promoted a separate identity and jurisdiction, thereby ensuring unionist hegemony: political and sportive.

Leaders in Belfast intervened with British Athletics and Olympics officials, and consulted with the Dominions Office in the 1930s on legal interpretations of British citizenship and nationality. Dawson Bates, UUP member, minister of home affairs and president of Glentoran football club, wrote to British Athletics and to the RUC’s inspector general, for instance. He urged British Athletics to act on behalf of the Northern Ireland athletic group seeking affiliation and expressed concerns regarding the playing of the Soldier’s Song (Amhrán na bhFiann) and the display of Irish Free State emblems. Northern

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46 FO 612/98, 17 September 1956.
47 Liston and Maguire, ‘The “great game” and sport’. In August 2021, prime minister Boris Johnson was said to be considering plans to rebrand the British Olympic team as Team UK in an attempt to boost the union. Brandon Lewis, Northern Ireland secretary, was said to have been consulted about this. In response to complaints about the title and brand (Team GB), the British Olympic association explained that this included Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands and UK Overseas Territories (including the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar). Neither ‘UK’ nor ‘GB’ accurately captured all of these.
Ireland prime minister Lord Craigavon intervened too with the British Olympic chairman (and IOC executive member), Lord Desborough, to ensure that the Northern Irish athletics body was granted British affiliate status prior to the formal adoption of the boundary rule by international Olympic and athletics executive boards.48

The Dominions Office supported the position taken by politicians and British Athletics officials on citizenship in Northern Ireland. Consequently, the adoption by international Olympic and athletics bodies of the boundary rule was assured through the influence of British members within their executives (for example, British Athletics officials filled the role of international honorary secretary of athletics from 1946 to 1976 when Burghley was president; he was also a long-standing executive member of the IOC). A memo prepared by Harold Abrahams on behalf of British Athletics that was approved by the Dominions Office and sent to international Olympic and athletics bodies contained claims to political and sportive jurisdiction over Ireland prior to partition and independence.49 This claim and associated sportcraft cemented the adoption of a British-worded boundary rule and imposed the right of the Northern Irish body to govern athletics there and be a British affiliate.

Irish football was already partitioned by the mid-1920s50 while other sports retained 32-county jurisdiction, including rugby union, cricket, hockey, boxing and swimming. In boxing, for instance, exemptions were granted to individual RUC and Garda Síochána (Irish state police) boxers to take part in the 1934 Empire Games after the Irish boxing association declined the invitation. Dawson Bates, who was instrumental in the events of Ulster Day and the signing of the Ulster covenant in 1912, the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Larne gunrunning as well as the aforementioned athletic affiliation with Britain, resisted all-island authority invested in Irish boxing. He intervened directly again to ensure that four RUC boxers could compete in the 1934 Empire Games, their medals being credited to Northern Ireland even though they were official representatives neither of Northern Ireland nor of an Irish boxing team.

Thomas Moles MP, deputy speaker at Stormont and managing editor of the Belfast Telegraph, used this print platform to press unionist views on British

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50 Cormac Moore, The Irish soccer split (Cork, 2015).
Athletics, and on international athletics and the Olympic committee. He and another Telegraph employee, Stephen Williamson (cited above), corresponded directly with Burghley, personally and at the international athletics body, and pursued an agenda of protecting autonomy for the Northern Irish athletics body. In these practices, identity was both claimed and imposed by British and Northern Ireland unionist groups.

**Unity attempts and the limits of the ‘ingenious Irish solution’**

Prior to the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, the all-island athletic and cycling association proposed and agreed to autonomy for athletics in Northern Ireland and the establishment of an island-wide umbrella authority (to be called the Irish Amateur Athletic Union) for national and international events. The flag of this union was to be St Patrick’s blue, with the arms of the four provinces, which was ‘more representative of all “Ireland” than the Tricolour’. The question of the flag to be used in events under the auspices of the Northern Ireland body was to be a matter for that association, and the flag to be flown at the Olympics was to be decided by the Irish Olympic Council, which proposed to retain the tricolour. However, both the tricolour and the emblem of the proposed island-wide Irish athletic union were a step too far for some southern and northern athletics members.

Further unity opportunities went unfulfilled over the next 50 years. Killanin, along with W.R.E. Murphy of international boxing and chief superintendent Patrick Carroll, secretary of the Irish Olympic Council, held talks with the all-island, Irish republic and Northern Ireland athletics groups in 1953 and 1954. The proposed solution was like that in 1932—the establishment of a new federal body (this time, the Irish Amateur Athletic Federation) that would select all-Ireland teams. Differences surfaced again, nevertheless. These centred on: the boundary rule enforced by international bodies and its delimited jurisdiction of any Irish-affiliated athletic body; the right of the Ulster branch of the all-island athletics body to govern athletics there, and whether this would merge with the Northern Irish body or vice versa; and the Northern Irish body’s autonomy as a British Athletics affiliate.

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51 Ferguson, Ulster NACA, cited in Irish Times, 6 June 1932.
52 At that time, Rule 1 (2) was worded: ‘The jurisdiction of members of the IAAF is limited by political boundaries of the country or nation they represent.’
53 Killanin Collection, UCD Archives, memo re 1953–1954 talks.
In these and the ensuing discussions up to the 1990s, the right of athletes born on the island prior to 1922 (and the formation of the Irish Olympic Council) to be eligible for selection for Great Britain or Ireland was imposed via citizenship ruling and British nationality law. However, the corresponding sportive claim and Irish legal basis—that anyone born or living in Northern Ireland was eligible for both Ireland and Great Britain—was neither acknowledged nor formally approved by British Athletics or Olympics or by those in the Northern Irish body. In the absence of this reciprocal right, Ireland- and Northern Ireland-born athletes represented Great Britain in the Olympics, and representatives of the all-island Irish athletics and Olympic bodies were on record as supporting the wishes of those athletes. An official ceding on dual eligibility was finally enshrined in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Laudable attempts to grow mutual understanding, goodwill and cooperation and establish an all-island (umbrella) association failed, often falling on the double-edged sword of representation and recognition.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, deep divisions intensified, between Northern Ireland unionist and Irish republic athletic representatives and between the Irish themselves, some of whom rightly questioned the benign, and at times malign, influence of British Olympic and athletic officials in the respective international bodies. In the ‘southern’ segment of this athletic journey, government officials were involved in brokering a deal in the 1960s between the 26- and 32-county athletics bodies that led to the formation of a merged association, BLE, in 1967. This was facilitated by the Ulster Athletics Council, which ceded its right to organise competitive athletics in Northern Ireland but retained membership of clubs from there. This new association was accepted by the international athletics body as the member for Ireland (26-county jurisdiction). Further talks involved this group, a breakaway group from the all-island association, the six-county body, and (unusually) the Northern Ireland Women’s Amateur Athletics Association, formed in 1951. The view of British Athletics chairman and Olympian Harold Abrahams, who authored the 1930s memo and chaired yet more unity exchanges in the early 1970s, was that any move towards a ‘one Ireland not necessarily united’ required agreement from the British. The Northern Irish association strongly resisted any change in its jurisdictional status.

55 Papers of Harold Abrahams, ATH/HA/8/1/32, Sound recordings, Cadbury Library, University of Birmingham.
North–south athletic relations from the 1960s to the 1980s often involved mutual bans on athletes competing cross-border. Yet flexible solutions were found by organisers and athletes alike, who were willing to ‘turn a blind eye’ and placed the competitive development of athletes above the politics.

The all-island athletics association held Olympic protests in Melbourne 1956 and Rome 1960 to focus continued attention on the boundary rule. Those involved were viewed by the other Irish athletics body and by British and international officials as bringing unwanted (republican) politics into sport: a charge never substantiated and continually denied, then and today. In 1987, a memorandum of association that provided the framework for a working relationship was signed between the two southern associations (one of which retained a longstanding claim to all-island jurisdiction), and that began ‘a process of unification based on mutual understanding of sporting philosophies and traditions’.  

Subsequent working agreements were carved out between Northern Irish and Irish athletic representatives, involving a unique role for the Ulster Athletic Council, whose membership continues to draw from two political jurisdictions today. Athletics Ireland was formed in 2000, two years after the Good Friday Agreement. This involved the disbandment of the other Irish athletics bodies, and agreement from the Northern body (which became Athletics Northern Ireland) and UK Athletics that athletes from Northern Ireland could represent Great Britain and/or Ireland in Olympic and world athletics. A memorandum of understanding exists today between the three athletics groups, with attendant operational practices. The sportive outcome is continued demarcation of 26- and six-county jurisdiction, and the maintenance of British affiliate status for Athletics Northern Ireland but a largely hands-off role for British officials in its athletic affairs. Meanwhile, Athletics Ireland and Athletics Northern Ireland have relatively low-profile involvement in each other’s affairs; for example, representatives sit on management boards and some athletics clubs from Belfast are registered with Athletics Ireland, via the Ulster Athletics Council, which continues to exist in Northern Ireland.

Such is the delicate state of working relationships today that they can be destabilised by the real or perceived reopening of ‘old identity wounds’, such

57 UK Athletics approves all international athletics events hosted in Northern Ireland as Athletics Northern Ireland has affiliate status only.
as public lobbying by civic groups like the Friends of Irish Athletics, through political and sportive channels, for an official derogation of the yet enforced boundary rule; or a high-profile political intervention like that of loyalist leader David Campbell. That this tangible risk of destabilisation exists reflects the legacy of division. Public and private mutual distrust between former and current stakeholders is, in some cases, taking a long time to be forgotten, and is certainly not forgiven.

Today, some Northern Ireland officials know little of the complex all-island history of athletics but sense its impact and the wider legacy of Ireland’s colonial history. They are protective of the status quo. Others, north and south, struggle to comprehend the Northern Irish question, politically and sportively, reflecting passive and active avoidance norms around it. An unintended outcome of this is a limited development of the skills associated with understanding and respecting difference, but also a narrowing of the scope to deal with post-conflict tensions and the narratives of those that might propagate it on the island.\(^58\) In Northern Ireland, the end of armed conflict (notwithstanding dissident threats) brought even more attention to culture, in which anthems and flags have become, in effect, symbolic peace walls of the mind, particularly for Protestant, unionist and loyalist groups. Accordingly, many sports officials on both sides of the border have reported to us that, on balance, it is better to ‘let sleeping dogs lie’, especially in the aftermath of Brexit and debates on all-island unity. This is because the distinctive habitus problem in Northern Ireland might well be compounded, thereby exposing the limits of sport in transcending difference. This is the context within which ideas endure today, and it contours the problems, opportunities and challenges facing those who seek to use sport as a tool for social bonding or even for bridging social divides on the island.

**SPORT, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SOCIETY**

The paradox of sport and traditional games, and the role they play within and between communities and nations, can be succinctly expressed by different forms of social capital—‘social glue’ and ‘social toxin’.\(^59\) For writers

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\(^{58}\) Liston and Deighan, ‘Show respect to our anthem’.

\(^{59}\) Joseph Maguire, ‘Sport as a social glue or toxin for Europe?’, *Sport et Citoyenneté*, special issue: Sport and European Identity, 10 (2010), 73–82.
such as James Coleman and Robert Putnam, social capital is a public good that reflects participatory potential, civic orientation and trust in others—individuals, communities and nations. Sport (including Gaelic forms) can act as a form of social capital or glue, binding communities together by enabling a sense of belonging, common purpose and meaning and, under certain conditions, bridging social divides such as those between unionist and nationalist traditions. These social ties stretch across generations in Ireland, and both reflect and reinforce aspects of community. Sport, then, can provide an ‘anchor of meaning’ and a sense of heimat when people experience the villages, towns, and cities they know so well as being under siege from broader social, economic and political forces. In generating and reinforcing social capital, sport can contribute to the healing of communities’ wounds and the enlargement of trust, and provide hope for a better or different society/nation.

Yet, at the very same time, sports can pull community relations apart, erode trust and open old wounds. Thus, the social capital described by Pierre Bourdieu and others reflects and reinforces the fault lines of communities, societies and nations. The divisions of class, gender and ‘race’/ethnicity can also be bound up in issues of sectarianism, nationalism and deeply entrenched established-outsider relations. Fuelled by sectarianism, compounded by nationalism, and reflecting long-standing divisions within and between the organisations and structures of sports bodies across the island, sport can exacerbate the fault lines of society—acting as a social toxin. For instance, the Gaelic games of hurling and football are still viewed with apprehension and suspicion by sections of the unionist/loyalist communities: the founders of a new club in East Belfast received security threats.

In any shared Ireland, the contradictory meanings and functions of sport will certainly not disappear. Indeed, without sustained, coordinated civic engagement and policy formulation and implementation across the island of Ireland, the more problematic features of sport and their impact on social relations could well undermine wider civic society initiatives.

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62 Maguire, ‘European body cultures and the making of the modern world’.
Contemporary Ireland

Questions of symbolic identity and significance expressed through the rituals of sport are already on display in both parts of Ireland. For better and for worse, international sport embodies the nation and invokes notions of the patriot’s game. Such issues raise difficult policy questions, but these are not the only ones created by discussions surrounding a shared Ireland. Partly reflective of divided cultural and political histories since partition, sporting organisations, associations, clubs and individuals have had to grapple with a complex mosaic of eligibility, regulation, jurisdiction and governance—as well as who gets to decide, and by what means. It won’t be easy to resolve these current or any new issues, or to smoothly reconcile the interests of different groups. Football, athletics and the Commonwealth Games, for example, have the potential to be community flashpoints that might derail wider civic cooperation. Here we comment briefly on these.

Irish representation at the Olympic Games is approved by the IOC and governed locally by the 32-county Olympic Federation of Ireland, based in Dublin. The history of this federation (briefly outlined above) reflects the broader tensions and struggles faced over the past 100 years. Issues remain, particularly in sports such as athletics, where partition continues to cast a long shadow on structure and organisation. The British Olympic Association also has selection rights over athletes born in Northern Ireland, under the title Team GB. In contrast, the Commonwealth Games (the successor to the British Empire Games) are seen, conventionally and historically, as the exclusive preserve of Northern Ireland and overseen by the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council. The council retains the crowned hand of Ulster in the flag, a red hand in the official emblem, and emerald green and royal blue as the two main colours on team uniforms, and adopted a compromise anthem, ‘The Londonderry Air’ (‘Danny Boy’). In any shared Ireland, all-island involvement in hosting of, or even jurisdiction over selection for, these games has been mooted publicly as part of ‘reaching out’ to unionists and would likely be a source of contention, especially given the current position of Ireland and the Commonwealth more

63 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), The invention of tradition (Cambridge, 1983).
broadly. Yet, as was noted above, a team representing Ireland (involving athletes from both jurisdictions) competed in the inaugural Empire Games in Canada.

Furthermore, ‘new’ Irish (such as athlete Rhasidat Adeleke) will not just be drawn from the diaspora and claiming citizenship through kinship or residency. Indeed, they may be neither Catholic nor Protestant; nationalist, unionist nor loyalist; but nevertheless will call Ireland home and represent or support ‘the nation’. ‘New’ Irish feature in GAA teams also. Not all welcome such developments, however. Given that sport both reflects and reinforces wider concerns regarding migration and notions of Britishness and Irishness, issues of this kind will likely surface in debates about what kind and form a shared Ireland will take. Might populists propose an equivalent to the Tebbit test to affirm the loyalty of immigrants, as well as loyalists in Northern Ireland, in order for them to gain acceptance and integration into ‘Irish’ society?

Specific sports also engender greater or lesser tensions and divisions. Some 32-county ‘united’ sports such as field hockey navigate the complex questions of allegiance, identity, jurisdiction and eligibility for players who can opt to play for Ireland or Great Britain at the Olympics and European championships. ‘Guidance’ is issued to prospective players on what path to take because of the legacy of partition. This legacy ensured that, in other sports, divisions formed along harder lines in which the boundaries of allegiance, eligibility and jurisdiction were firmly policed. This remains starkly evident in football/soccer, where teams, particularly the senior men (and likely women given their qualification for the 2022 European Championships), are especially resonant for unionist–loyalist communities. Entrenched identities evident in sports such as soccer may prove very difficult, if not intractable, features of the process towards forging more harmonious notions of what it is to be a citizen of a shared Ireland.

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64 See for example Irish senator Frank Feighan’s 2017 suggestion, ‘Senator Frank Feighan calls for debate on Ireland competing in the Commonwealth Games’, available at: https://roscommondaily.com/2017/01/26/senator-frank-feighan-commonwealth-games/ (13 December 2021). See also Liston and Maguire, ‘Sport, empire and diplomacy’. Irish athletes such as Bill Britton competed in British Empire select teams against the USA in the late 1920s and early 1930s.


UNRESOLVED ISSUES AND THE POTENTIAL FOR RESOLUTION

Overt conflict has diminished since 1998 but peace-building has been constrained by a lack of bridging capital that connects different traditions. The frozen clinch\(^67\) that marks community relations in Northern Ireland is manifested in systems of governance: political, civil and sporting. Continued disputes over symbols, flags and emblems find expression in the New Decade, New Approach deal to restore the Northern Ireland Executive, in which Irish language legislation has become a flashpoint for more contentious identity-related issues. Into this context came the fallout of the Brexit vote, including the Protocol Agreement. The latter has ignited submerged political and civil turmoil and rekindled the longer-standing sense of ontological insecurity and grievance held by sections of the unionist–loyalist communities, evident in the body language and words of representatives like Campbell above. Reflecting on the role that sport was envisaged to play post-1998 and the current context just outlined, a leading sports official in Northern stated in a recent interview with us:

I just think the way things are going now it’s going to be much more difficult. You have various policies in place ... [for example] Together Building on United Communities policy, and which most, if not all government departments have embraced but it’s lip-service ... With the developments happening at the moment in terms of Ireland’s Future, or other terms that have been used, I just see that engagement, and bringing people in as part of it, as a long way off. It’s further away now.\(^68\)

The implications of the Good Friday Agreement for sport are themselves now contested, as seen in Campbell’s opinion piece.\(^69\) As another illustration of this, one unionist-oriented sport official criticised Hockey Ireland’s (HI) approach to player choices and praised how the UK link was preserved in his sport:

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\(^67\) Liston and Maguire, ‘Making sense of “Ireland”, sport and identity’.

\(^68\) Ireland’s Future was established to ‘advocate for, and promote, debate and discussion about Ireland’s future’ (https://irelandsfuture.com/).

\(^69\) Campbell, ‘It is not acceptable for athletes from Northern Ireland to have to compete under a foreign flag’.

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Liston and Maguire—*Identity, Meaning, Representation and Sport* 125
If they’re not competing for Ireland and [instead] they’re competing for Britain then they [HI] don’t want to know them ... In my opinion that is not an equitable way, is not within the spirit of the GFA ... Athletics has found a way to fully recognise the link with the UK and fully recognise the link with Ireland.

Such issues permeate interviews across our wider study of athletics on the island and of how sport in general could or should contribute to or mitigate moves towards a shared Ireland. Several interwoven themes emerged in these interviews with key stakeholders who have occupied leading positions in sporting relations across north–south and east–west axes. These are: a deep, abiding sense of mistrust of the ‘other side’; a belief that sport should not be, or a desire to disguise how sport is, embedded in wider political issues; a recognition of the need to work ‘below the radar’, at tacit, practical solutions to problems engendered by these wider historical and political issues; a desire that solutions, however ingenious or massaged, should not (re-) enter the public domain or be subject to scrutiny; and a weary acceptance that discussions about a shared Ireland are so fraught with divisiveness, for those in Northern Ireland especially, that many involved adopt a self-imposed code of omertà. With a resigned demeanour, they declare ‘don’t go there’ and ‘whatever you say, say nothing’. What implications arise then for wider considerations of sport and a shared Ireland?

Mistrust, politics and ‘fudging’

Questions and assertions about the right to exist from the Northern athletics bodies, in the past and now, were not confined to sport but echoed the fear that the existential status of Northern Ireland itself was at stake. Acknowledging that as late as the 1970s his predecessors wanted no ‘fraternisation with people in the south’, when asked about the continued relevance of the boundary rule in athletics today, one Northern official observed that its removal would be ‘divisive’. Using aspects of unionist rhetoric also expressed on wider political issues, he went on to observe: ‘I am not in favour of and will fight to the bitter end to stop the IAAF rule being changed ... by changing that rule, it opens the way for Athletics Ireland to organise in Northern Ireland in competition with Athletics Northern Ireland’ (emphasis added). Another leading official also recognised this danger, describing himself as agnostic on the possibility of one all-island athletics association that nonetheless would
be a ‘seismic change’. Such comments reflect a perceived zero-sum game in terms of any change to the jurisdictional status quo. The greater challenge is how to facilitate a society-wide process by which change is not perceived by one group as a catalyst for increased status and by the other as an inevitable dilution or denigration of status.

In contrast to these sentiments, a long-standing member of the all-island athletics body and of the civic group advocating for the boundary rule derogation observed about a one-time rival organisation in the Irish republic that ‘they were very successful in putting a label on us, saying we were republicans or nationalists or dangerous people, not to be associated with, these people of danger’. This label continues to be applied by some, yet many in athletics, north and south, expressed a genuine desire to ‘keep politics out of it’—provided certain red lines were not crossed. As the same official plaintively expressed: ‘what we are trying to achieve and have been for some time now is to remove the politics out of our sport. But we failed because it’s very deeply embedded in the sport.’ Set in the wider context of identity, politics and community relations, any change to the status quo is self-evidently political.

Others sought to differentiate between their political stance and the wider social role of sport on the island. One advocate for the removal of the boundary rule quoted a leading cycling official in Northern Ireland as saying ‘I’m a unionist, I advocate for the retention of the union ... But when it comes to sport, I’m an Irishman for the island of Ireland ... The whole sport should be for the island of Ireland.’ This dexterity in cultural and political identities is matched by the actions of sporting officials operating in private, away from the glare of the media or the surveillance of republican or loyalist groups. Reflecting on the development of more covert and flexible cooperation between athletic organisations within Ulster around jointly held championships, a senior Northern Ireland athletics official noted:

There were things like that were happening practically on the ground but there was no actual signed agreement saying we were going to have joint championships. We just had them and some of these things are probably best not put down on paper ... you try and fudge a lot of things.

This kind of ‘fudging’ was a consistent refrain in the interviews. Indeed, a senior GAA official with high-level experience in sports governance and policy across Northern Ireland/Ulster said, with a degree of weary resignation:
We have become professional at fudging within sport. I think we find some ground ... and try not to ruffle too many feathers along the way. And then what we tend to do is to find ways of dealing with an issue when it arises ... whether it’s to do with ... team selection ... with competition, to do with whatever part of the sporting system.

Irrespective of whether there was a willingness to compromise, and where varying degrees of adeptness were shown by stakeholders to try to manage controversial issues, it was viewed as crucial to negotiate these without political masters or media being aware of this. For some, this adeptness was best not committed to paper, but for others, it is now important to do so in light of Brexit’s destabilising impact. Another official observed: ‘To some extent, and it’s still the case today, most of UK athletics people don’t fully understand what’s going on, don’t want really to fully understand what’s going on. And, to some extent, that suits us as well.’ In these ways, relative autonomy for Northern Ireland is protected and clearly prized. Nevertheless, flashpoints of community tensions still emerge and issues of identity, representation and symbolism in Irish–British relations clearly affect sport. Describing these tensions, a Northern Irish athletics official observed:

In reality, most [Northern Ireland] athletes nowadays choose to compete for Ireland, not Britain ... the problem that throws up is that every so often someone in UK Athletics will say ‘Why are we making money available to NI to develop athletics of a separate country?’ Up to now we have walked that tightrope.

The east–west relations raised here capture in miniature questions that would arise in a shared Ireland. Funding, organisation and administration of the sports system will parallel wider debates about education, health, legal issues and culture. Questions that prompt the need to ‘walk the tightrope’ are not confined to the right to choose who you represent and what that means for communities in both parts of Ireland. A Northern Irish sports official struck a pessimistic note:

The same issues exist on the island of Ireland. But we have two separate funding pots, two different organisations who set policy and two different organisations who are in place to implement that
policy and two different sets of staff who are responsible for that ... I do not believe there is any level of engagement on an all-Ireland basis to ensure that a level of crossover, a level of overlap, of complementarity around sports policy ... If you have one organisation responsible for sport development, great; one government department, even better, but will it happen? I cannot see it happening.

The task identified by this official likewise faces those seeking to understand the political, economic, social and cultural outworking of the 1998 Agreement, what constitutional questions arise and what a shared island might look like. At this time, it is not certain whether or when a referendum on the constitutional position will be held, or what its outcome would be. It is clear that an absence of knowledge and informed debate concerning the historical legacy and contemporary enactment of sporting relations on the island of Ireland would be deeply problematic and potentially disastrous.

CONCLUSION

Partition continues to have a profound impact on civic society and culture across the island of Ireland. While some cling to the misguided notion that sport is somehow separate from society and that its practice is or should be apolitical, in reality sport was never immune from the fallout of partition. It not only reflected the changes wrought by partition, but also reinforced and exacerbated the boundaries erected in the hearts and minds of people in Northern Ireland and the Irish republic. Today’s sport systems, practices and meanings are bound up in this legacy of the past.

In the search for harmony and equality between the two main communities in Northern Ireland, sport has the potential to reflect and reinforce fault lines but also to promote potential mutual understanding. As sports organisations and programmes are revived or recreated in new, post-Covid forms, there are opportunities to reconsider the purpose and interests of those funded from public and private sources. But such questions also apply to the Irish republic, especially in relation to understanding better the shared and complex histories of all peoples on the island and a commitment to human rights and social justice. Among other things, our study of the sporting present and its emergence from the past highlights how difficult this process has been.
and likely will be, especially when deep-rooted oppositional ideologies are reignited. Tensions and divisions remain in the sport of athletics, centred around the boundary rule and what it represents. While some want this rule to be derogated, the prospect of this happening remains uncertain given the interweaving of sportcraft and statecraft and the political and legal issues that might arise with jurisdiction and ‘country’, the implications of a shared Ireland for dual eligibility and the primacy of Irish, British and/or European citizenship rights going forward.

Attempts at unification are not uncommon, as we have noted. If they grow in range and intensity, what broader role and impact might sport have? In constitutional terms, both the status quo and a shared/united Ireland have implications for sport. The governance of sport, with its mixture of 6/26/32-county federations, continues to raise a host of questions regarding representation, eligibility and jurisdiction. As highlighted here in the case of athletics, these continue to require cross-border cooperation but are subject to media scrutiny and popular backlash when one ‘side’ is seen to be winning and the other losing.

In any future united Ireland, ‘reunification’ or even a pragmatic amalgamation of sporting federations would likewise generate a host of related constitutional, organisational, economic and cultural questions that are dealt with across the ARINS research project. These relate to the position of existing sport structures but also the status and position of such sports in east–west (Irish–British) relations and in international terms, for example FIFA, the status of the two association football federations and questions of sportive citizenship.70 Likewise, while a broader constitutional settlement may reinforce the rights of dual citizenship established in 1998, complex questions of sporting identity, representation and eligibility would have to be handled sensitively domestically and negotiated adroitly with international governing bodies. Without the co-support of Dublin, Belfast and London (and the wider EU and the USA), ‘success’ may not be achieved.

In terms of representation at the Olympics, it could, as now, be possible for athletes to assert a strong British identity and thus seek to represent Great Britain. Future participation in the Commonwealth Games as Northern Ireland would pose unique challenges should changes occur

in sportive jurisdiction but, as noted, an all-island team participated as Ireland in the early Empire Games. Furthermore, the specialised diplomacy of international sport related to accreditation does not always coincide with sovereign states and recognised international borders. Such was the sensitivity to ‘the Irish question’ in 2011 that the text in the draft report of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting was edited for diplomatic reasons because Ireland had to reach a decision about re-entering the Commonwealth on its own.\(^7\) In time, the re-entry of Ireland to the Commonwealth, and Commonwealth Games, may come to be considered on its own merits and as part of the wider project of a shared/united Ireland.

In other sports, structures, jurisdiction boundaries and eligibility rules would require careful statecraft and sportcraft on the part of representatives drawn from the both parts of Ireland. For example, football, long an ideological bastion of northern unionism and loyalism, would be confronted not only by a union of the two existing federations but also by questions concerning status and constitutional position within FIFA. The Irish Football Association has long-standing rights and privileges due to its status as a member of the ‘home nations’ and thus a secure rotating position on the FIFA executive board. A merged all-island football association may seek to maintain this position. These and yet unanticipated issues will require both a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation and a commitment that the process seeks to benefit all communities, north and south. The ongoing tensions outlined here in relation to athletics show how difficult this process will be. Despite this, it is both necessary and urgent that public debate about such matters, and the wider role sport can play in civic society, is informed by the evidence and analysis that this paper and the wider ARINS project seek to provide.

Looking back on events post-partition, we have observed that efforts to reintegrate athletic organisations led to the formation of the Northern athletics association (NIAAA), approved by the British Athletics group in February 1930. Perhaps this sporting past can reveal some insights into a future Ireland? By 1930 the position of the British/English on ‘the Irish question’ was clear: its jurisdiction extended to Northern Ireland while the Irish all-island association was limited to the Irish Free State. Yet, for sportive reasons, the British/English observed that:

\(^7\) Liston and Maguire, ‘Sport, empire and diplomacy’. 
If, at some future date the two athletic associations of Ireland should express a unified wish that Ireland participates in all international competitions as a unified whole, the AAA would use every endeavour to secure that the IAAF and the IOC should recognise such a unity for the purposes of international competition. (AAA Minutes, 15 February 1930)

In some ways, such sentiments are akin to the commitments of the British government in the Good Friday Agreement. Sport is a vessel through which peoples assert ethno-national identities and a utilitarian conduit of soft power for governments in which sportcraft and statecraft entwine. Hence, the expression of such a unified (or, at best, shared) wish—in athletics, sport in general and indeed across all aspects of the island—remains possible.