What about the Athletes Themselves? The Need for a Facilitated Dialogue: A Response to 'A Shared Ireland? Identity, Meaning, Representation and Sport' By Katie Liston and Joseph Maguire

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What about the Athletes Themselves? The Need for a Facilitated Dialogue

A RESPONSE TO ‘A SHARED IRELAND? IDENTITY, MEANING, REPRESENTATION AND SPORT’ BY KATIE LISTON AND JOSEPH MAGUIRE

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To what extent does playing, watching and hearing about sports contribute to the mutual respect—or enmity—of participants, especially those from different, even bitterly divided, communities? Can sport lead the way towards reconciliation? These questions, which sportspersons, scholars and public

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Throughout recorded history, at least since the first Olympics of ancient Greece, states, rich patrons, commentators and entire communities have conferred representational status on prominent athletes, teams and even codes of sport. In Canada, a country of three ‘founding peoples’—the Indigenous, French and British—and waves of immigration from many other parts of the world, the federal state invests heavily in the Olympic sports in the interests of strengthening a shared sense of ‘pan-Canadian unity’.

It’s clear from the paper that governments and politicians on all sides of the Irish debate insist upon and vociferously promote their preferred readings of representational status. But what about the athletes themselves? I’m a complete outsider, but as I read their paper, with a few historical exceptions, I’m struck by the absence of athletes in these discussions.

In my experience, while athletes may have deep feelings for the communities from which they come and that have supported them, most are accustomed to bearing multiple identities—of clubs, educational institutions, sponsors, ethnicities and genders as well as national teams—and voicing the expected codes of representation with only a change in name. Some athletes assert multiple identities simultaneously, as Mohawk paddler Alwyn Morris, competing for Canada, did when he raised an eagle feather on the victory podium of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, and when 400-metre runner Kathy Freeman ran her victory lap at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney with both an Australian and an Indigenous flag. Sponsored athletes do it all the time.

It is only when some of those other identities conflict with the requirements of sport or government power-brokers that controversy arises. In the most famous case, US sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos were expelled from the 1968 Olympics in Mexico for asserting a Black identity on the victory podium that infuriated the white US sports leader Avery Brundage, president of the International Olympic Committee. The other medalist, Australian Peter Norman, wore a button in solidarity with Smith and Carlos and was subsequently punished by his Olympic committee. In the iconographic photograph of that victory ceremony, Lord David Burghley, who championed the British cause in Irish athletics during his long tenure as president of the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF), looks on grimly.
During the 2008 Olympics, the Beijing organising committee compelled National Olympic Committees to police their athletes’ uniforms and personal identifiers in ceremonies, lest subordinate groups within China get ideas.

I have no recent experience with Irish athletes, but I competed in international athletics at the same time as the legendary Maeve Kyle. She represented Ireland in the Olympic Games and major athletics championships and Northern Ireland in the Commonwealth Games. In her storied field hockey career, she played for three Irish provinces, including Ulster, which spans the border. Maeve first introduced me to the bewildering complexities of Irish sport. I marvelled at her fluidity, but she took it in her stride. I remember her as proud of her Church of Ireland roots but prepared to take sporting opportunity where it was possible.

I have also observed professional and Olympic athletes in many sports forging effective playing relationships and friendships with those from very different countries and cultural backgrounds. Athletes bring an embodied perspective to the navigation and mediation of such divergent identities.

Obviously, athletes cannot provide the only voice in any ongoing dialogue about the role of sport in a shared Ireland, but they should play an integral role. Athletes are assuming a much greater responsibility for the direction of their sports worldwide and they have begun to assert themselves in Irish sports. The Athletes’ Commission in the Olympic Federation of Ireland recently published an ambitious strategy to collect and assert the views of Irish athletes on all aspects of the Olympic sports in Ireland. They should be formally encouraged, with perhaps a specific commission by the Royal Irish Academy, to comment on how sport can contribute to strengthening the culture of intercommunity understanding and respect across the entire island.

Although it is not always pursued in practice, there’s a long tradition of affirming intercultural communication in the Olympic sports—in fact, it was founder Pierre de Coubertin’s overarching goal. Given the international tensions created by the calls for a boycott of the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in Beijing, the Olympic Movement is strengthening its commitment to such dialogue. Although the possibilities might be limited by the ongoing pandemic, a facilitated dialogue among athletes in Ireland would be a constructive, instructive investment of time and resources. Subsequent stages should engage supporters and fans. The Liston/Maguire paper should be compulsory reading for everyone involved.
I make no predictions about how such a consultative process might turn out, but there are countless examples of progressive athletes’ leadership changing their sports, and some examples of changes in sport contributing to or at least accompanying larger changes in societies—think Jackie Robinson and the integration of Major League Baseball in the US.

No dialogue about the future of sport can be comprehensive without the athletes.