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## Stakeholder governance and Irish sport

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### ABSTRACT

Within global sport it appears the effective management of the interdependency of national governing bodies, individual clubs and a network of stakeholder interests has never been more widely discussed. It points to a requirement for all sporting organizations to remain sensitive to what is an ever-growing dichotomy between sporting volunteers and professional salaried staff, their competing interests and objectives. It is by no means a straightforward undertaking and is particularly foregrounded in a sporting environment that attaches significance to the preservation of an amateur ideal. As many sports clubs are now faced with the challenge of offering an adequate forum through which to reflect the views of their grassroots members, whilst simultaneously facilitating greater commercial interest in their affairs, the fundamental changes facing Ireland's largest sporting body, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), offers cause for timely reflection. This article argues that only through the introduction of a meaningful stakeholder model can the governance of an organization like the GAA, a social and cultural touchstone unmatched within Irish sporting life, begin to respond to these mounting and competing agendas.

### Introduction

In its broadest sense corporate governance addresses two issues; the philosophy of accountability evidenced towards stakeholders and the presence of a management framework that ensures the effective and efficient supervision of an organization (McNamee and Fleming 2007). As such its principal aim is to ensure that high standards of corporate behaviour are retained and the activities an organization undertakes are ethical and transparent. Consequently, corporate governance describes all the influences affecting how an organization executes its business, including those for appointing the controllers and regulators charged with organizing the production and sale of goods and services (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

Of course, viewed in these terms, corporate governance includes all types of businesses whether they are officially incorporated or otherwise. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), Ireland's largest sporting body, as an unincorporated entity, is not mandated to abide by the provisions governing the best practice in the corporate world. Nevertheless, it

could be argued that many examples of good practice emerging from the field of business can and should be adopted by all large organizations, including those, like the GAA, operating in the sporting realm.

Within Great Britain and Ireland, stewardship theory is the bedrock upon which most company law is founded. It requires that an individual behaves as if s/he was the principal of the organization and not merely an agent. Of course the willingness of an individual to act as a selfless steward is tied closely to the cultural expectations evident within the respective business (sporting) field. The particular cultural norms and values underpinning the activities of the GAA though make this model an ideal one for the effective regulation and strategic future of the indigenous body, which has over 1 million members in Ireland and even more amongst the Irish Diaspora living everywhere from Sydney to San Francisco.

In the realm of modern sport, the GAA remains something of a cherished entity. An organization founded upon the principles of amateurism and self-sufficiency, it is sustained by an unselfish sense of altruism. It is best described as a 'volunteer led' sporting body, one that is understood as 'membership owned', even if its success has almost necessitated the appointment of a professional management infrastructure to sustain its continued growth. This issue, in fact, goes to the very heart of this article – how do sporting organizations around the world satisfactorily manage the competing demands, expectations and views of an overwhelmingly volunteer membership, upon whom—in the case of the GAA—the entire association's infrastructure depends, with an ever more corporate approach to its business in which the principles of neo-liberalism seemingly hold considerable sway. The latter therefore is increasingly subject to the heightened expectations placed upon it by a form of 'stakeholder governance', defined by the positioning of sport for non-sporting, indeed largely commercial, outcomes.

As such the traditional hierarchical system of sporting authority has come under increasing pressure, mirroring developments in wider policy-making arenas. 'Governance' has been redefined as 'a change in the meaning of government, referring to a new process of governing' (Clarkson, 1995, 31). It is argued that this manifests itself through decision-making networks rather than direct control and an increase in the number of actors in the policy-making process. Henry and Lee (2004) have similarly referred to the notion of 'systematic governance' in which the,

old hierarchical model of the government of sport, the top-down system, has given way to a complex web of interrelationships between stakeholders in which different groups exert power in different ways and in different contexts by drawing upon alliances with other stakeholders. (Henry and Lee 2004, 24)

In this respect, the concept of 'network' governance provides an appropriate starting point from which to assess the changing nature of control within the GAA. Within the context of elite-level competition, the GAA has had to re-evaluate its relationships with stakeholders who are both part of the GAA sphere (its clubs, wider membership and various levels of management) and external stakeholders with the power to influence (such as the institutions of the State, the increasing media interest in its affairs and wider developments in civic life). If control within the GAA now occurs through a network of influence, as appears to be widely understood, then it is important to appreciate how that network operates as the breakdown of influence will necessarily impact upon the achievement of 'good governance' in the management of Ireland's foremost sporting body. In the context of the administration of the association, this relates directly to the management of revenue (including its

maximization), the role of non-salaried ‘priority’ members (specifically its elite players and managers) and the strategic direction of the GAA in an evolving Irish society where, amongst other concerns, a changing work–life balance and the appeal of global sports are prime considerations for its volunteer-base. Ultimately, an understanding of the GAA governance network, and in a wider sense the challenges faced by a mutually owned sporting body, can be gleaned through analysis of the different dimensions of power and the ebb and flow of the association’s transition from a wholly amateur body to the management of one in which the primary means of revenue generation (the elite game) appears to fund what some still regard as an over inflated central operation at danger of losing touch with its volunteer base.

## Sport governance

Indeed, in an overarching sense, the sport industry continues to evolve into an evermore professional and commercial entity and, in line with these changes, we are witness to a number of interesting phenomena taking hold within the broad field of sport governance. A previous, comparatively basic, need for governance in a largely volunteer led and wholly amateur context has now evolved into a requirement to adopt a full range of functions and practices synonymous with the corporate or traditional non-profit sectors. Within the contemporary non-profit sporting environment specifically, which best describes the context in which the GAA exists, this has led to tensions between volunteers and the influx of paid staff within the industry and has often resulted in conflict between member–stakeholders and representatives of sporting bodies (Shilbury and Ferkins 2014). Similar issues have also emerged in the for-profit or professional sports governance domain where members and fans of professional clubs and organizations have expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which their organization is being governed, often leading to calls for wholesale structural changes in the governance systems in place within such clubs.

Alongside the issues outlined here, the question of governance within sports generally is receiving a significant increase in attention within industry and academia over recent times. This may be attributed to the growing number of high-profile incidents of alleged malpractice within sport and similar accusations of corruption, which continue to define some sectors and organizations within the industry. Although governance deficiencies are mostly reported in mainstream media only when they involve high-profile figures, governance is not an area of sport scholarship solely reserved for such individuals or the organizations they are affiliated with. Rather governance is a necessary and institutionalized component of all sporting codes from club level to national bodies, government agencies, sport service organizations and professional teams around the world (Ferkins and Shilbury 2010). The term is often cited in the singular perspective, where one organization’s governance practices are brought into sharp contrast. This is often referred to simply as corporate or organizational governance (O’Boyle and Shilbury 2016; Shilbury, Ferkins, and Smythe 2013). However, governance also encapsulates networks of sport organizations, such as those that operate within the non-profit domain, which in turn are often affiliated with regional, national and indeed international governing bodies. This concept is generally defined as systemic, networked or federated governance within the extant literature (Henry and Lee 2004).

Regardless of the type of governance that is being discussed, one aspect of this field of enquiry is clear; governance coheres around the work of the board within a sport organization and their on-going responsibility in ensuring their organization is performing at an optimum level, is in tune with the body's key trading objectives and is operating in an efficient and effective manner (O'Boyle 2012). Hoye and Cuskelly (2007) suggest that the board must establish 'a direction or overall strategy to guide the organization and ensure that organizational members have some say in how that strategy is developed and articulated' (10). The latter is best preserved through a form of mutual ownership or at least the creation of a democratic setting in which grassroots members can exercise their opinions. They add that the board should also control the activities of the organization, its members and staff so that individuals act in the best interests of the organization and are working towards an agreed strategic direction. There is general consensus that one of the fundamental roles of the board within any sport organization is to act in such a strategic manner and thereby demonstrate its overall strategic capability (Ferkins and Shilbury 2012).

### **Governance in non-profit sport**

This focus on the strategic function of the board, alongside its many other roles, has been the primary field of enquiry within a number of studies in the non-profit sport governance domain (Inglis 1997; O'Boyle and Hassan 2014; Shilbury 2001; Yeh and Taylor 2008; Yeh, Hoye, and Taylor 2011). Other areas that have received attention, specifically within the non-profit sporting setting, include volunteer motivations for serving as a board member, board performance and CEO--Chairperson relationships (Cuskelly and Boag 2001; Hoye and Doherty 2011; Inglis 1997; Shilbury and Ferkins 2011; Soares, Correia, and Rosado 2010). These studies have been important additions to this field of study and have assisted our understanding of the intricacies of sport governance challenges that the industry faces and how they may be best overcome. To coincide with studies published in the academic arena, there have also been a number of industry reports that have sought to highlight the challenges associated with effective governance practices and potentially illustrate something of a 'best practice' approach for sport organizations amidst general acknowledgement that each organization can face distinct pressures and challenges in respect of their organizational capacity (ASC 2013; SPARC 2006; UK Sport 2004).

The most recent high-profile industry report addressing sport governance in the non-profit context has been published by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and has placed a responsibility on Australia's sporting organizations (both national and regional) to address real and perceived governance deficiencies within their sports. This report, entitled *Mandatory Sports Governance Principles* (2013), requires all ASC-funded bodies to comply with the principles therein or risk a reduction in funding from this government agency in subsequent years. Within the report the ASC states:

... the time is now here to raise the bar, recognising that organizations that are managing public investment and member interests must have structures in place that reflect a greater level of professionalism. This is true whether a national sporting organization (NSO) is focused on high performance or participation. Good governance is a necessary condition for success. (1)

The ASC (2013) report appears to capture the major issues facing contemporary sport organizations in relation to their governance, and is a relevant departure point not only

for organizations operating within the Australian context, but also for those existing internationally in both non-profit and even, in some instances, within the for-profit sporting environment. The report is delineated into three distinct sections, each focussing upon a multitude of governance challenges; structure for sport; board composition and operation; and sport transparency, reporting and integrity.

The first section, structure for sport, refers to the complex issue of ensuring all affiliated organizations that comprise a sporting network are working towards a common strategic vision and direction, with a shared understanding across the sport. This has been one of the major challenges within the non-profit sporting context in recent times, where often wholly autonomous organizations at regional levels are expected to collaborate and cooperate for 'whole of sport' progression, led by a NSO. This governance issue has also been the focus of a limited amount of academic work, which has investigated how such a sporting network can ensure that all federated bodies are working cohesively and towards such common strategic outcomes (Henry and Lee 2004; O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016; Shilbury, Ferkins, and Smythe 2013).

This federal system of sport governance operates similarly in a host of countries throughout the world, including New Zealand, Canada, the UK and a number of other European nation states. When exploring governance issues within federal models, Shilbury, Ferkins, and Smythe (2013) highlight a series of concerns surrounding these types of networks. These include questions about the suitability of federal models to facilitate a whole of sport perspective, how barriers to collaboration may be overcome and what role leadership plays within governance positions in a federal sporting network. O'Boyle and Shilbury (2016) build on this work when examining the issue of trust within governance networks and have uncovered that pre-histories of conflict and antagonism, and low levels of mutuality between federated bodies was significantly, and adversely, impacting upon the governance function of the sports examined in their research. They also noted that increasing the frequency of face-to-face dialogue between boards in a sporting network and intentionally seeking to become more transparent in decision-making processes could, in turn, elevate levels of trust and therefore collaboration within these systems. Also, coinciding with the findings of Shilbury, Ferkins, and Smythe (2013) and previous work in the public administration domain undertaken by Ansell and Gash (2008), it was found that effective leadership built on an ability to negotiate and communicate effectively was imperative when fostering high-level working relationships and facilitating horizontal cooperation within sport governance networks.

As commentators from both industry and academia begin to afford increased attention to 'structures of sport' in relation to governance, this area of 'collaborative governance' may play an increasingly important role in how we view and understand the relationship between various bodies that are required to work together within these governance systems. Previous studies, outlined above, have typically adopted theoretical frameworks from more established fields of enquiry and these theoretical underpinnings have, at times, had particular relevance to the federal model of sport governance. For instance, institutional theory, resource dependence theory, agency theory, inter-organizational relationships and network theory have all been adopted by researchers in this field and have provided useful results and insights (Dickson, Arnold, and Chalip 2005; Ferkins and Shilbury 2010; Henry and Lee 2004; Hoye and Cuskelly 2007; O'Boyle and Bradbury 2013; O'Boyle and Hassan 2016). An important recent addition to the suite of theoretical frameworks that has been

applied within the field is the theory of collaborative governance (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016; Shilbury and Ferkins 2014). Collaborative governance theory has its origins within public sector administration and until recently studies relating to this position have largely been based within this sector and emerged predominantly from the US (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012). It has been proposed that this theory has particular relevance to the federal model of sport governance as it is an arrangement in which wholly independent bodies are brought together to engage in a 'collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-orientated, and deliberative' (Ansell and Gash 2008, 544).

### **Governance in professional sport**

Notwithstanding the importance of governance within federal networks, and indeed that of boards operating within these environments (as previously described), governance in this domain is limited to those organizations that operate on a non-profit basis and many face different challenges and pressures when compared to those sporting bodies that exist in a more profit driven environment, as witnessed in a number of professional sporting leagues throughout the world. Examples include many of the professional soccer leagues operating in Europe and, of course, the dominant American sports systems. Within the US specifically, although federalism defines the nation's political make-up, a reflection of this federal system is absent from the sports environment with a significant disconnect between mass participation sport and professional sport is evidenced. The combination of a federalist system of government and an avowedly free-market economy has resulted in a plethora of sport organizations claiming governance over the same sport (Green, Chalip, and Bowers 2013). Furthermore, the lack of a nationalized governance framework within all sports in the US has created an opening for entrepreneurs who own professional sport franchises and who control the leagues in which that team compete. These groups and individuals can present their teams and leagues in any manner they see fit, with the only regulation to ensure that these activities do not contravene American business law. Consequently, each of the major leagues in the US, such as the National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL) and Major League Baseball (MLB), have their own rules and systems of governance, even if they do appear to operate in a broadly complimentary fashion.

Taking the NFL as an example of the contrast between governance in the traditional non-profit and for-profit sporting environments, it is clear to witness the contrast in the challenges facing these alternative governance systems. The NFL is a private and wholly for-profit enterprise. The mission of the organization is: 'To present the National Football League and its teams at a level that attracts the broadest audience and makes NFL football the best sports entertainment in the world' (NFL 2015). Much like a traditional corporate entity, the league is overseen by a Commissioner (equivalent to CEO) who reports to the Executive Committee (equivalent to a board) with ultimate responsibility for the welfare of the league (note the emphasis on the product as opposed to the sport). A delegate system of board composition predominates with representation from each of the 32 NFL teams. League policies are brought into effect based on a three-quarters majority of team owners with the overwhelming number of teams owned by individuals or a private corporation, who present a remarkably similar profile of sporting venture capitalism. In contrast to non-profit sporting networks, where members at grassroots level are often referred to as the 'owners' of the sport, this stakeholder group is largely absent from the governance systems that

operate in such professional sporting networks. Corporate governance within these types of professional leagues generally involves the adoption of a shareholder perspective – that is to maximize the economic performance of the teams (Senaux 2008).

This is not to imply that all professional sport is governed in a manner that directly mirrors the NFL. Within the English Premier League (EPL), for instance, a more free market-orientated system exists, which has been described accurately by Amara et al. (2005) as ‘neo liberal’. Contrasting the NFL and the EPL cases, Gratton and Taylor (2000) described the NFL system as involving much greater intervention and where media rights incomes are shared across the network, recruitment strategies are policed through the draft pick system whilst entry into the market is monopolized by the league itself, where a limited number of franchises exists and rare instances of expansion remain. These ‘equalisation’ measures are in large part designed to protect the key principle of ‘uncertainty of outcome’ to sustain interest in the league from fans and, by extension, the broadcast media (Amara et al. 2005). In contrast, the EPL has seen a wide disparity in the income levels of those teams at the top and bottom of its league over recent times and has led to somewhat of a reduction in the uncertainty of outcome within the regular season. Although Gratton (2000) suggests that there is a lack of empirical evidence to argue that the EPL should adopt a more ‘equalised’ approach, there have been suggestions that a European wide league (distinct from the existing UEFA Champions League) with limited entry could be established, as the various national leagues throughout the continent become evermore predictable and thereby risk the possibility of spectator interest waning over time (Szymanski and Hoehn 1999).

Remaining with the example of the NFL and indeed other professional sport in the USA, the corporate governance nature of these teams and leagues is, as suggested, ultimately to protect the value of the shareholder in every respect. In contrast to this shareholder perspective, the non-profit sporting environment can be understood as adopting a stakeholder view – and indeed some scholars have argued that a number of ‘for profit’ professional teams and leagues also adopt this perspective (Foreman 2006; Senaux 2008).

The concept of a stakeholder, and the development of the stakeholder model, are attributed to Freeman’s seminal publication: ‘Strategic Management: A stakeholder approach’ (1984). He suggested that the stakeholder is ‘any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives’ (46). Further definitions and descriptions of stakeholders have been offered by numerous other scholars, including Clarkson (1995), who labelled stakeholders as individuals or groups who have put something at risk in their relationship with the organization. Both definitions detailed here evidently rely upon high levels of dependency between organizations and their stakeholders. However, Donaldson and Preston (1995) also add that it is important to establish a clear contrast between ‘true stakeholders’ and those that simply influence the organization. The media, for example, may influence the actions of a sport organization but one could argue are not stakeholders in the truest sense of the word. Supporters, players, coaches, administrators and competitors, on the other hand, are more closely linked to the definition of a stakeholder from a sporting perspective.

This stakeholder perspective has its roots in the history of European sport, from which the majority of professional teams today have evolved after originally being developed as ‘sporting associations’, in contrast to the pathway developed by professional sport in the USA. Although professional sport in Europe also now reflects a strong emphasis on economic activity, as one might expect, ‘there are still deep heritages which profoundly structured



the organization of sport in Europe and somehow explain the existence of complex power games' (Senaux 2008, 67) between professional sport and its stakeholders. The stakeholder perspective in relation to sport governance is therefore relevant to professional sport in this respect where there may be a variety of interests and goals competing, and in conflict, with each other. Of course shareholders also exist in professional sport throughout Europe and therefore cannot be overlooked in any analysis of corporate governance in a professional sport setting. Much like their counterparts in the USA, shareholders can have a number of interests and agendas as capital owners within the organization (but not necessarily owners of the organization itself). These interests may include financial returns, reputation, self-promotion and indeed the 'on field' success of the organization as a result of a sporting passion. One could assume that the interests of shareholders in professional sport are often mixed and not necessarily explicit. Nonetheless, they clearly remain an integral aspect of the governance structure.

There are other primary stakeholders, of course, in professional sport from players, coaches, administrators, supporters and various sporting bodies that impact on the activities of this unique business field. Players, in particular, have become an important group within the stakeholder model of sport governance as player associations and lobbying groups continue to exert an ever-increasing influence on the manner in which professional sport, indeed the same may be true of amateur organizations like the GAA, is presented and governed. Something similar can be said for supporters groups who, in some instances, have even assumed capital ownership positions within professional sporting teams. Senaux (2008) suggested that this focus on players, as an exclusive stakeholder group, risks the alienation of other stakeholder groups who may prove equally significant but perhaps remain less visible. This array of stakeholders makes professional sport an interesting context within which to examine corporate governance, especially in respect of the so-called European model of sport. Furthermore, within the non-profit sporting environment it is accepted, with little dissent, that the owners of sport in these systems are the members or the grassroots community involved in a given sport. The entities that comprise the governance framework in non-profit sport are seen as 'service organizations' to their members in this respect.

It is this issue therefore that continues to define many of the challenges faced by the largest sporting body (in terms of membership and asset base) in Ireland: the GAA. At the turn of the new millennium this organization, founded in 1884, appeared to be at something of a crossroads. Its dilemma was clear – it wished to remain wedded to the principle of amateurism (operationally understood as its players, managers and members continuing to give of their services free of charge) but recognized that significant elements of the association belied this sense of honest, voluntary endeavour and, instead, pointed towards an increasingly professionalised and commercial future for the sporting body. Many of its key personnel were in salaried positions, it owned a stadium (Croke Park) that was the envy of many within European sport, and its leading games were regularly sold out having already attracted more than 82,000 spectators. It was the core question of how to offer the effective governance of a sporting body seemingly committed to two competing objectives – the retention of a long-standing model of 'mutual ownership' and involvement whilst at the same time accepting the reality of just how significant the organization had become in commercial terms – that was in the minds of the GAA's leading officers when it published its seminal Strategic Review document in 2002.

## Gaelic Athletic Association

Those behind the publication of the GAA's Strategic Review were clearly concerned at the way in which the organization was being managed, which was at best inefficient, and made specific recommendations on how it might undergo much needed transformation. It recommended that 'Coiste Bainisti (the Management Committee of the GAA) should prepare its proposals in respect of governance, and these should be set out in a document formally approved by Central Council' (GAA Strategic Review, 2002, 161). The GAA's Management Committee is concerned with the day-to-day running of the association. It is at this level that rules and regulations governing the affairs of the GAA are ratified and, if appropriate, implemented. It is also considered good practice under these arrangements to appoint an audit committee to monitor the implementation of such proposals. In most cases, the audit committee would also contain an independent person, someone with the requisite expertise, to provide additional assurances to the network of stakeholders, not least the GAA membership, of the continued practices of the organization.

The strategic review report went further in providing detailed recommendations on how the difficult matters of remuneration and performance were to be handled within the GAA. As the GAA is an organization founded upon its amateur ethos the issue of finance has always been one with which it has experienced particular difficulty. Indeed the question of commerce reflects a clear distinction between the GAA's central operation and its membership 'on the ground'. A view exists that the former has access to considerable amounts of money, whereas the latter is comparatively less well off and indeed is struggling to meet many of its on-going financial commitments. The review body was intent on reflecting the concerns of many rank and file members regarding an apparent self-regulating, relatively autonomous body in which the issue of accountability was never made entirely transparent. Instead, drawing upon examples of the best practice in the corporate and semi-state sectors, the review body made specific reference to the remuneration of executive officers at central level and the need for these to be kept under continual review by a separate committee. This committee may also be involved in compiling criteria for evaluating 'performance' for the ever-growing body of full-time employees within the GAA. The inference was clear; that any GAA policy on governance was either unfit for purpose or that one simply did not exist.

The mechanisms through which the wider GAA membership, not to mention its commercial stakeholders, are integrated into the decision-making process, remain equally dated. One general meeting each year, referred to as the GAA's Annual Congress, constitutes the sole occasion when those who govern the association can be adequately held to account. Even then much of the discussion that takes place at this meeting is pre-established as delegates are obliged to forward motions for debate, many of which are deferred or ruled out of order, often on account of some technical minutia. The picture remains one of an operating environment in which very little effective cross-examination of those in positions of authority within the GAA can take place. It makes for a less than satisfactory state of affairs for the majority of GAA members.

The lack of commercial awareness was equally unsettling for the review committee who recommended that the GAA's annual report 'should outline the (Central) Council's responsibility for the preparation of the financial statements and include a representation on the applicability of the 'Going Concern' basis for the preparation of the financial statements, with supporting assumptions and qualifications, as necessary' (GAA, 2000). It is against this

backdrop that wider concerns about the GAA's capacity to cope properly with its increasing commercial workload are being raised. As McGee comments:

Nobody can blame the GAA for maximising its financial returns which have come about from money well spent on developing grounds, coaching, etc., over many years. But lots of GAA people are worried about the emphasis being placed on making more and more money .... Big money and amateur sport have had a volatile relationship the world over and it's hard to see how it would be any different within the GAA. (McGee 2007, 60)

What ultimately was being proposed by the strategic review body was a form of governance that reflects the best practise in managing large organizations, which prioritises efficiency and foregrounds transparent and effective processes of financial management. To this end the stewardship model sees managers work effectively for an organization with the expressed aim of maximizing return for the shareholders or members (Donaldson and Davis 1994). Built around the suggestion that managers wish ultimately to work for the betterment of the organization, Donaldson and Davis (1994) argue that they should be freed from an essentially subservient role to assume a position on a board of directors, where they can control the direction of the business much more productively. This process can be assisted by the presence on the board of external regulators, whose role is to ensure that the fiduciary duty of the board is carried out to the satisfaction of its stakeholders. This remains valid in the case of not-for-profit organizations that occasionally believe that their responsibilities in respect of the organization's membership need not be as resolutely adhered to.

### **Governance and the GAA in Ireland**

The structure of GAA governance is important to an understanding of the stakeholder network of Gaelic games activity in Ireland. Essentially, this is comprised of a hierarchical pyramid in which representatives of the 32 county boards, that together regulate the GAA at a national level, form the membership of the central regulating authority, the all-powerful GAA Central Council. As such, there exists a potential conflict of interests whereby a select group of people emerge from a broader membership body only, in turn, to seek to exercise authority over this wider grouping. Whilst the structures of the national associations vary, they are largely based on wide representation of individuals, counties and provincial bodies at the various levels of the games. Each of the four provincial bodies, Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connacht, organizes club and county games within their own geographical area (and have their own staffing structures), whilst the aforementioned GAA Management Committee look after national competitions, including the All Ireland championships, the inter-provincial competitions and other all-Ireland series. The hierarchical integration of the elite and the grassroots of the GAA through a single system ensure that everything from the laws of the game to the organization of leagues and championships operates within one framework. The GAA's Central Council, Management Committee and provincial councils effectively enjoy a monopoly position controlling the regulation and organization of Gaelic games activity. There is a single governing body at county level, a single council in each province sanctioned by the GAA and a single national authority. The rules of the GAA prevent Gaelic games from taking place outside their own structures on a competitive basis, and ensure that leagues and clubs are, theoretically, subordinate to the provincial and national organizations.

This subordination is intended to recognize that in a multi-organizational context, in which clubs and counties compete across levels and defined regulatory areas, and with interdependence between those levels in terms of the development, well-being and provision of players and finance from the inter-county games right down to the grassroots, there should be a body that looks at the overall interests of the games at all levels. Thus, the provincial and national associations are routinely composed of different forms of representative combinations of GAA figures across the various levels. These are typically male, middle-aged and imbued with the guiding ethos and principles of a GAA, which are often located in the past. The structures also reflect the belief that there is a responsibility at the top end of the game to redistribute revenue to other areas of the pyramid. According to the GAA's strategic review document,

the continued voluntary efforts and commitment of thousands of people who play, mentor, coach or administer in every parish and every community throughout the country, remains a distinguishing feature of the GAA; its clubs have developed into a source of both personal and community pride and identity. (GAA, 2000, 10)

Within the GAA, there remains a strongly held belief that the elite game should continue to make a contribution to supporting other levels of the pyramid.

Nevertheless, divisions within the GAA and its on-going negotiations with key stakeholders may act as an obstacle to radical change, and may be one reason why the organizations like the Gaelic Players Association (GPA), effectively a trade union for GAA players, has so far been unable to transform latent power into sizeable political gains in its quest for greater recognition of its core role as a source of revenue generation. Elite players need a successful and united GAA, and the need for consensus amongst a sufficient number of GAA members and delegates means that changes to directives pertaining to the remuneration of players will require broad support. Of course on a range of issues the GPA has legitimate grounds for protest. Any situation where the primary means of revenue production are inadequately compensated for their efforts is likely to create resentment and quite possibly lead to a withdrawal of their services. The players have common concerns such as dealing with a congested fixture programme, meaning an off-season is considered a luxury rather than a permanent arrangement, a failure to be adequately compensated for unavoidable absence from their full-time employment and the negotiation of commercial contracts. The fact that the players help drive revenue production for the GAA, which ultimately helps subsidize the activities of the GAA on a national level, has led to demands for more direct integration into the decision-making structures of the governing body. To this end the GAA has recently expanded its Central Council to incorporate a representative from the GPA. Conversely, there is a degree of distrust within the GAA about the GPA's motives, fearing its agenda is to create an elitist arm of the association. Whilst the GPA denies this, given its present constitution and similar capacity to attract commercial sponsorship, it would be a natural development were the organization to pursue this at a national level.

## Conclusion

In many ways the GAA is a unique sporting organization. For its entire existence of some 130 years the association has expressed its strong belief in the amateur ideal and rejected any movement towards professionalism. Whilst it remained a modest, community-based organization such an approach proved to be very effective and it benefited enormously

from considerable levels of volunteerism and financial altruism. Yet, as the GAA has developed into a fully fledged, professional sporting organization it has encountered difficulty in retaining support for its policy on amateurism. As its central and salaried operation grew exponentially, it continued to employ a straightforward administrative model of governance, one that lacked any proper strategic underpinning or financial acumen. Whereas, in the past this was almost a part of the GAA's intrinsic charm, as its central bureaucracy grew so too did calls for the adoption of a more professional operating strategy on the part of the association.

These issues were laid bare following the GAA's own strategic review, published in 2002 but the resonance of which is still experienced to this day. A catalogue of issues that required immediate attention were outlined, with the need for a more efficient and effective form of governance foremost amongst these. The recommendation of this article, a view supported by those charged with the GAA's own review, is that a stewardship model of governance should be adopted by the association. This would involve a streamlining of the GAA's Central Council, to be replaced by a much smaller board of directors who would be appointed on merit and not merely on a representative basis. This imperative is made all the more real when one considers the growing body of internal and external stakeholders the GAA is attempting to engage with. Some of these stakeholders are intent on challenging the GAA's traditional *modus operandi*, and indeed have negotiated partial acceptance of some of their demands. Finally, what is noticeable (and presumably concerning for the association) is that some of the GAA's fiercest critics have emerged from within its own ranks. It exists as a reminder that even the most benign and erstwhile organizations eventually encounter problems as their mode of governance becomes out-dated and ineffective in the face of demands placed upon it from modern day sport.

In essence, then, any balanced analysis of the regulation and governance of the GAA under its current arrangements suggests that whilst its grassroots membership will play a major role in any future developments, the GAA's hierarchy itself is undermined by the nature of its own composition. The level of exclusivity and the lack of defined and coherent membership criteria pose problems of legitimacy and credibility. Positions of authority are held for considerable periods of time and even in those cases where arrangements of this nature are expressly prohibited; such difficulties are overcome by simply rotating portfolios. The GAA makes much play out of its democratic credentials, but in reality the reigns of power are held by a small group of influential personalities, albeit they rely on the passive consent of a much larger group to carry out their duties. It is unlikely that such an arrangement can continue to prove sustainable going forward. In turn the argument that this situation should be reversed and a professional board of directors put in place has gained considerable traction amongst the GAA's broader constituency.

The existence of various stakeholders with power encourages caution and leads to the view that it is unlikely that any single actor will have a monopoly on change in the period ahead. The GAA, through a policy of limited dialogue and a convoluted series of 'select committees', has so far managed developments by integrating players, media and corporate Ireland into the existing system, yet at the same time withholding genuine decision-making power. It remains questionable whether this strategy is sustainable in the long-term, but by opting for dialogue the GAA has positioned itself in direct and regular contact with key stakeholders. The GAA's continued commercial and sporting control of the All Ireland championships means that the organization retains its central role in the regulation of the

sport in Ireland. Nevertheless, the latent market power of its elite players is evident. That being so, the inclination of stakeholders to operate (but increase their influence) within the established structures, means that market power is offset by the realities of modern day sport governance. The GAA has gradually attempted to come to terms with this transition, albeit it has had sporadic success in doing so. Its principal difficulty is managing a vibrant, professional and modern sporting body within the confines of a historically determined and fundamentally amateur context.

The level of stakeholder influence is further clouded by legal uncertainty regarding the rules of governing bodies in a self-regulatory framework. Whilst stakeholders are largely inclined to operate within the system, they have also succeeded in altering the system through recourse to outside bodies. The full workings of NGB's and their lack of political and legal standing has occasionally been exposed and the GAA has proved as susceptible to this as any other organization. It must remain mindful of the fact that whilst at one level it is imbued with the right to regulate Gaelic games activity, the full extent of this capacity set against the law of the land often results in its autonomy being compromised. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that as the GAA continues to move ever increasingly in the direction of a fully fledged commercial sports body that it may require a more defined appreciation of its legal and political shortcomings. It is for this reason that a move away from a long-standing administrative approach to managing its affairs is long overdue. Indeed the imposition of a professional board of directors offers the opportunity to at least ensure that the GAA safeguards its current position within an increasingly congested sport and entertainment marketplace.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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