

## Chapter 3

### The GB football team for London 2012: What's all the fuss about?<sup>1</sup>

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#### Word Count:

#### Abstract

In this chapter extracts from debates between English football fans interacting in an online discussion forum prior to the 2012 Olympics (June 2008 – September 2009) are presented to highlight how the GB football team issue was strongly interconnected to British identity politics in the early twenty-first century by these fans.<sup>2</sup> Examples of support for and examples of arguments against the GB football team are presented before we discuss what actually happened in the immediate build-up and aftermath of the 2012 Olympic football tournament. The future prospect of a truly representative UK football team is then critically analysed in the conclusion.

#### Introduction

The prospect of Great Britain and Northern Ireland fielding a football team for the London 2012 Olympic Games first became a topic of media attention even before London's bid to host the Games was successful in July 2005.<sup>3</sup> Soon

after this, an intense political debate began between the home nations of the UK that went beyond football, the Olympics and even sport itself, to the very core of British national identity politics in the early twenty-first century (Ewen 2012; MacRury and Poynter 2010). As the host nation, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) expected Team GB to field a team for every event and football was to be no exception. The problem was that the UK has four separate national teams with four separate football associations for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, each affiliated to FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) independently. This is a privileged position in world football considering all other nation-states are only permitted one national team and football association in order to be formally recognized (Menary 2010, p.18).

After the first Football Association in the world was formed in England in 1863, the Scottish FA (SFA) followed a decade later in 1873 (Hay and Coyle 2002). The Welsh FA (FAW) was next to be formed in 1876 (Johnes 2002). Finally, the Irish FA (IFA) was formed in 1880 and governed football across the whole of Ireland prior to its division in 1921 (Cronin 2002).<sup>4</sup> Thus, despite the fact that England have maintained political power over the other nations within the UK throughout history, international football has often been the site for Celtic resistance to such political oppression.

This chapter seeks to capture the conflicting nature of this situation, with specific reference to national identity affiliations for British citizens as expressed in response to the decision for Britain to commission a football team for the London Games. Moreover, it acknowledges the explanatory power of sociologist “Norbert Elias” and his emphasis on the processual shift

in the “we-I” balance as globalization has taken hold in late-modern life. He explains that the manner in which individuals and their figurations complement one another across time and space continues to evolve, and this has implications for national identity ties in late modern life. Elias (1991, p.209) points out that in spite of the powerful advance of globalization processes and the growing sense of interdependence expressed by social agents (i.e. with many emphasizing “I” over “we”); when the nation state is considered it is possible for “we-habitus” to strengthen. This occurs, he suggests, because people regard themselves as individual representatives of a “we group”, such as an Englishman or a Welshwoman, for example.

Thus, with specific reference to UK devolution, in what follows we examine this contested terrain from the perspective of football fans and argue that far from its aim to unite people of the world (see chapter 1), the Olympic Games can potentially serve to undermine integration at a political level (Maguire 2011a). Before unravelling the intricacies of this case-study, it is first important to contextualize the situation leading up to London 2012.

### **Team GB and Football at London 2012: To be or not to be?**

Whilst a GB football team was fielded in eleven Olympic Games tournaments between 1908 and 1972, all players in the squads for many of these tournaments were English and before 2012 a British football team had not competed at an Olympic Games since 1972 (Menary 2010, p.290). This was said to be due to the English FA removing the distinction between amateurs and professionals in 1974, where enthusiasm for the professional game

accelerated at the expense of amateur tournaments such as the Olympic Games (Menary 2010, p.278).

In 2009, the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish football associations signed an agreement stating they would not stop England fielding a GB football team as long as it was a one-off for the 2012 Olympics and assuming there was no attempt to pick Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish players (Ewen 2012, pp.307–8). The Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish had unanimously decided they did not want to be involved in the Games in order to retain their independent status as national teams in their own right. The fear was that if the separate nations within the UK competed together under the “Team GB” label at the 2012 Olympics there would be little justification for them being allowed to compete as separate national teams in future international competitions such as the more prestigious FIFA World Cup. This is something many within FIFA and UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) have long been calling for despite FIFA president Sepp Blatter’s verbal reassurances that it would not happen (Menary 2010).

Whereas pre-1974 the FA had made the decision to field a GB football team regardless of what the SFA, FAW and FAI wanted, the growth in the political power of the “Celtic” nations within the UK following devolution processes of the late 1990s, meant that the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish now had the political power to stand up for themselves. What better way to flex this newly acquired political muscle than through the globally high profile lens of international football and the most popular sporting event on earth: the Olympic Games. Consequently, the Team GB issue was essentially one of national identity, with the main concern being that fielding such a team

signalled a loss of national distinctiveness for the individual home nations, including England (Ewen 2012). This issue highlights 'the close associations of sport with national cultures and identities' and that, particularly in the context of devolution of the UK, 'moves towards integration of regions at a political level are undermined by the role of sport' (Maguire 2011a, p.991).

In the vein that Maguire describes (above), a number of opinion polls, petitions and official/unofficial fan groups were mobilized (mainly via the Internet) to oppose the idea of a British Olympic football team. Perhaps one of the most prominent was the "NoTeamGB.com" campaign, a collaboration that began in May 2006 between official fan organizations from Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England.<sup>5</sup> The group attempted to lobby government MPs, the FA, and the British Olympic Association (BOA) by providing evidence in the form of fan polls / petitions to demonstrate that the majority of fans within the UK were against a GB football team ever happening (Ewen 2012).<sup>6</sup>

In an attempt to highlight this contested issue, in what follows we refer specifically to "fan interactions" in order to breathe life into an under researched and yet important set of informal discussions in the context of British identity politics. We argue that it is important, where possible, that scholars should use discussions that occur between fans (i.e. those directly affected by specific issues) as they ensue across time and space, in order to capture a sense of the unfiltered thoughts of agents in the moment as for example, they react rationally, and at times, emotionally to the proposition that Team GB would commission a team for London 2012. As part of a doctoral programme of work, the lead author conducted a participant observation

study, using an online fan community (chosen specifically for its independence from any single football club, governing body or association) as the research focus. This community interacts on an independent website that has been created and maintained for the use of English speaking football fans throughout the world. The site was established in 2007 and remains active at the time of writing with over 1,000 members, a figure that continues to grow.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting that debates regarding the GB football team arose during online discussions between fans around many other topics as well as featuring as an independent topic. In total 93 members of the online community contributed to 29 discussion threads that were used as data in this study. Whilst most of the participants in this sample were English (62%) and it was their comments that provided the vast majority of the data on the relationship between English national identity and football fan culture; fans of other nationalities also contributed with some comments utilized as comparative data.

On inspection of the data it became clear that English fans in the online community were divided not just on whether a GB football team would work and how it would look in practice (e.g. some stating that there should be a team entered and others stating reasons why this should not occur) but perhaps more importantly, what layer of identity football “should” actually represent. For many English fans, this was an opportunity to express their attachments to England or Britain. Given the vast amount of data collected, in what follows the discussion threads chosen and extracts used offer a thorough and accurate description of the range of opinions, experiences and reactions that were expressed by this online football community.

### *English Support for Team GB and Attachments to Britain*

There were many examples of support for a GB football team amongst the English fans observed. The reasons for this were varied. Some fans thought that a GB team would simply be more successful than the separate national teams within the UK because the pool of talent that could be drawn upon would be larger if players of all UK nationalities were eligible to play. For example:

December 17 2008 05:23pm

60: If we went into the Olympics as England we would come about 20th. Instead under GB we're about 5th in the world. 5th under team GB or 20th under England? I go for team GB. [Male, English, West Ham United FC, aged 45]

Some English fans also displayed similar sentiments after it was initially announced that the GB football squad would be solely comprised of English players. For instance:

June 17 2009 02:21pm

63: F\*\*k the other nations FAs they're probably just worried that their players wont (*sic*) get in the squad (poking tongue out emoticon). It's so stupid that politics have spoilt an opportunity to show unity and give a great exhibition of football. The ¼ squad allocation would work perfectly

to make it fair and with the right manager as well, I heard Fergie was interested if it was a GB team.<sup>8</sup> [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 23]

Other fans suggested that although they preferred separate national teams for the most part, as long as Team GB was a one-off for 2012 then they would get behind the idea and could not see a problem in playing as separate national teams for some competitions and being united under the British flag for others. For instance:

August 11 2008 03:23pm

59: I'd love to see a GB football team as a one-off for the 2012 Olympics, but away from that would prefer to keep separate sides. There is still plenty of room for people to celebrate their separate identities as English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish as well as being British. [Male, English, Everton FC, aged 25]

The author then asked this fan:

August 11 2008 06:26pm

1: So why would you prefer to see separate sides? Can you give any other examples of places where English, Scots, Welsh and N.Irish can celebrate their identities outside of sports?

To which he responded:



August 11 2008 07:32pm

59: The 4 countries have always enjoyed a sporting rivalry, and I'd like to see that continue. Although I consider myself British I'd always support, for example, an English boxer over a Scotsman, just as I'd support a Scouse boxer over a Yorkshireman. Events such as Burns Night and the patron saints' days (are examples of places where separate home nations' identities can be celebrated). [Male, English, Everton FC, aged 25]

Another fan in this thread simply said:

July 30 2008 07:16pm

47: It's sport, I'll be supporting the British team, just like I wish the separate home nations well in football. [Male, English, Queens Park Rangers, aged 24]

It is worth noting that, of the English fans in this sample, many have suggested that football represents a more central aspect for confirming their national identity than other sports. For instance, whilst they support British teams or Welsh and Scottish athletes representing Britain or their individual nations in other sports, they could not do this for football due to the strong link it had to their national identity. The following discussion typifies this:

December 5 2008 12:29pm

19: In the Tennis I like to follow Andy Murray (Scottish) and in the boxing I like Joe Calzaghe (Welsh). I don't see a problem in celebrating Britain's achievements in the sporting world outside of football. [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 21]

December 5 2008 01:13pm

1: Do you think there's a difference between individual sports like these and team sports like football then? Would you show similar support for Scottish and Welsh national football teams (or dare I say it, a 'British' football team)?

December 6 2008 01:26pm

19: Not for football teams, because I follow England so it would seem strange to show support for more than one country. I think the idea of a British football team isn't so bad as long as it stays in the Olympics. The England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland national teams have too much history, pride, etc., to make a British team work in things like the World Cup. I don't think many would warm to the idea. But in team sports such as Rugby I prefer the home nations to do well and would want them to beat the likes of South Africa, etc.

December 8 2008 05:49pm

1: So why do you feel differently when it comes to rugby?

December 9 2008 01:18pm

19: Don't get me wrong, I don't put on a Wales shirt and join in the national anthem, but I just prefer to see them do well over the southern hemisphere teams. Maybe because I'm not as into Rugby as I am with football so it doesn't seem strange to want another country to do well.

December 9 2008 04:36pm

1: I see. So is football the only sport that makes you feel like that?

December 9 2008 06:46pm

19: I would say so, yes.

Other English fans in this thread suggested that football was regarded as so important for affirming their national identity due to its popularity over other sports. This helps support both Robinson's (2008) and Porter's (2004) arguments that football defines the English more than any other sport, and yet this situation can disrupt other notions of identity in the context of British citizenship.

As Maguire (2011b, p.999) states 'people have multiple identities that are formed and transformed in social interaction' and 'sport plays an important role in embodying multiple notions of identity', or in this instance, for questioning one's own allegiance within a complex nation state constellation. This was reinforced by the fact that numerous other fans could not understand why the UK could unite in times of war but not in football. This was articulated best by fan 19:

December 17 2008 07:32pm

19: I love it when this whole identity crisis debate pops up (laughing emoticon). I don't know why people are so against the Team GB thing. In the Olympics we compete under the Great Britain banner. Britain is hosting the 2012 games. We should enter a team for football as we are the host nation and it makes sense. So that team should be Great Britain, surely? Then comes the whole, 'I hate England' or 'I hate Scotland' bollocks. We are stronger as four opposed to one. When we fight wars, we fight with our Welsh, Northern Irish or Scottish allies, why should sport be different? [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 21]

It must be noted here that this fan was in the British armed forces and as such was bound to defend an attachment to Britain, but others who were in agreement displayed similar sentiments about sport and war in general. For instance, one fan had the following to say:

July 4 2008 11:37am

18: Sport actually divides British people into regional thinking, whereas I would argue combat and warfare unifies British people into breaking down national barriers. [Male, English, Juventus FC, aged 28]

Still others suggested that those who stress their Englishness over Britishness are somehow deluded because the nations of Britain have worked together on a number of occasions throughout history. The idea that football in England is a substitute for war is a point that has been made by previous authors,

although without using the views of fans themselves (see for example, Carrington 1999, p.73).

There were also fans eager to point out that when it comes to ethnicity, the nations of Britain are all intertwined anyway and have been for hundreds of years. For example:

December 20 2008 05:57am

34: Most people in England probably have some Celtic blood in them. At any point I am not sure where we get our fierce English pride – most of the true Britons (original inhabitants of the land) were Celtic anyway. English in its truest form is mostly a mixed race of Romans, Normans, Saxons, Vikings etc. It's pretty amusing to me listening to people talk about English this, English that, we aren't Scottish we're English. I just don't get it. I mean I understand I am English first, then British. But I don't understand the hatred of Britain. [Male, English, Manchester United FC, aged 30]

This topic has been hotly debated in the literature on Englishness (Young 2008), and represents the identity crisis or 'anxieties' surrounding the idea of English national identity (Aughey 2007). Fans whose parents were immigrants were also keen to stress that Britishness is a civic identity that defines them much more so than Englishness which has often been ethnically exclusive (Burdsey 2007). For instance, fan 18 (of English-Italian heritage) stated this, although also recognizing that Britain is not as relevant as it once was:

August 8 2008 02:50pm

18: For me the term "British" is almost defunct now, it was a word that struck fear and commanded respect into outsiders and often pride in its citizens, but today it seems to be a term used to the same effect but with far less power. It only remains in essence because our laws are governed by the monarchy and a British government, the idea being of course that we are stronger as British than individually, in several areas. I consider myself British because I have mixed heritage but also a European for obvious reasons. [Male, English, Juventus FC, aged 28]

The discussion continued into the early hours of the morning:

August 11 2008 01:03am

7: I don't quite get why so many Scots get all anti-British and want out of the union. I mean the whole excessive patriotism seems a little outdated to me, it's like people are stuck in the past for some reason or other. The world's a small place... I mean I can't think of a good reason, even political, that would make the Scots hate the UK enough to want to leave and harbour such resentment towards the English. [Male, English, Manchester United FC, aged 31]

August 11 2008 12:02pm

1: Do you see yourself as English and British then? Which one do you feel most affinity for?

August 11 2008 01:12pm

7: English, but that doesn't mean I don't like being British.

The comments from fan 7 were made at an important time in the context of home nation politics, given that the Scottish National Party (SNP) had formed a minority government (with Alex Salmond as First Minister) one year prior to the posted comments (in May 2007) and from August 2007 the SNP had begun making steps towards Scottish independence from the UK (BBC News 2013). Such examples demonstrate how some fans recognized the increasingly outdated nature of national identity given the reality of global interdependence and the increasing drive of individualization in developed Western nation-states like Britain (Elias 1991). Elias stated that (generally speaking) the balance is changing from the “we” towards the “I” as a result of globalization. Individuals in Western European states are increasingly regarding themselves as part of humanity as a whole rather than as representatives of a more particular “we” group. Notwithstanding this, the following section explains that there are other possible reactions to global interdependence.

#### *Attachments to England and “Anti-Britishness”*

In opposition to the above, some English fans seemed to be against the GB football team idea. The English fans in the following discussion thread felt that Team GB would not work for football nor glean much interest from fans in the UK who were used to being divided into separate national teams:

May 29 2009 11:10am

61: Just for the Olympics. Still it won't be popular, people will laugh at it. [Male, English, FC Barcelona, aged 23]

This is a point also made by Kelly (2011) in reaction to the BOA announcement of June 2011 that a GB football team would be able to field players from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England. The outcome being that fans of the separate national teams – who have a long history of being divided (Moorhouse 1996) - would be expected to unite to support Great Britain. Other members of the discussion forum were against a GB football team because they could not see how it would be equally comprised of Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and English players in order to be truly representative of the UK. Later on in the same thread, fan 61 suggested:

May 29 2009 11:24am

61: People forget that players could refuse to play for it. Considering England's history and what not. [Male, English, FC Barcelona, aged 23]

To which a Spanish fan replied:

May 29 2009 11:25am

25: The first British teams at the Olympics were also all-English. [Male, Spanish, Real Madrid CF., aged 20]



After this, the author added:

June 6 2009 12:23pm

1: Bet there will be more English fans supporting them than Welsh and Scottish.

To which an English fan immediately replied:

June 6 2009 12:25pm

3: Only because there be (*sic*) hardly any Welsh or Scottish players in the squad (laughing emoticon). [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 53]

There were also English fans that were completely adamant they felt no attachments to Britain whatsoever and as such would never support a GB football team. Many of these fans demonstrated familiar xenophobic views and some even demonstrated a kind of “anti-Britishness” in a similar way to some of the respondents noted within the Future of England surveys, conducted on the English population by the IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research) in late 2011 and in 2012 (Wyn Jones et al. 2012; 2013). The following three examples are the views expressed by one English fan on three separate occasions, clearly demonstrating hostility towards the other UK nations:

August 21 2008 09:39am

17: Team GB can f\*\*k off unless its all English players. [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 20]

October 2008 05:41pm

17: Hate the term British as well, I'm English and that's the end of it, no one is going to tell me I'm not.

December 16 2008 10:19pm

17: F\*\*k Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we play as England or nothing.

Whilst these were the most extreme examples, two other English fans (3 and 30) demonstrated support for the sentiments expressed in the latter post and there were others who were similarly keen to stress their anti-British stance, for instance:

December 17 2008 05:03pm

14: When I walk around the streets you see England flags waving, not Great Britain flags waving. England til I die! [Male, English, Notts County FC, aged 22]

One of the fans that had previously highlighted support for the expression of English nationalism within this thread seemed eager to point out that the GB football team for the 2012 Olympics is not really a problematic issue at all and that fans should not worry about it:

December 17 2008 05:04pm

3: I don't see what all the fuss is about, it's a one off at the end of the day. It seems a bit petty to be whinging about this. The only reason that seems to be given is that we don't compete in football as GB. This won't result in a future merger of the home nations in all internationals, so chill the fcuk (*sic*) out

lads. [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 53]

This met with the following riposte from the fan who had posted the most blatantly anti-British views:

December 17 2008 05:06pm

17: Because some of us don't agree with GB. [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 20]

The following exchange ensued between fans 17 and 19 involving fan 19 challenging fan 17 about why he held such anti-British views:

December 18 2008 02:14am

17: I'm English not British, I support England only. I don't want a [Team] GB either what's so hard to understand about that? [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 20]

December 18 2008 02:16am

19: Why are you so against the whole British concept? (Clueless emoticon). We fight wars as Great Britain. Do you agree with that?  
[Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 21]

December 18 2008 02:18am

17: There is no need for us to be at war, but I think we should do everything independent (*sic*). [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 20]

This sparked debate between the researcher and fan 17 about the English political situation regarding UK devolution:

January 3 2009 10:42pm

1: What do you mean by “everything”?

January 5 2009 02:54pm

17: Sporting events, government, basically everything that is done in the UK but with it being 4 independent countries instead. [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 20]

January 6 2009 04:04pm

1: So are you saying you'd vote for English devolution?

January 6 2009 09:42pm

17: I'd vote for England to break away from the UK anytime.

In support of the assertions of Maguire (2011a) and Ewen (2012), this incident provides evidence that the Team GB issue can reach far beyond the intended subject “football” via its inevitable engagement with UK post-devolution politics (Wyn Jones 2012; 2013).

Another English fan highlighted that fan 17 was a British citizen regardless of his anti-British views, stating the following:

August 5 2008 01:10pm

47: You should probably rip up your passport then (fan 17). [Male, English, Queens Park Rangers FC, aged 24]

In order to probe further into the philosophy underpinning anti-British views, the researcher asked fan 17 why he disliked being classified as British so much, and this sparked the following discussion:

August 6 2008 09:19pm

17: I've got no connections with Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland so I class myself as English. Also I was born in England so class myself as English and therefore believe in the flag of St George not union jack. [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 20]

August 7 2008 09:09am

1: Is national identity important to you then? Or is it only important when it comes to football/sport in general?

August 7 2008 03:58pm

17: National identity is very important for everything, inside sports outside sports. I look at it in this way, Britain is a collection of countries not a country itself, it describes me as much as saying I'm European, while English describes me much more. If someone from outside the UK said are you British? I would go 'I am English'. Calling me British is like calling an American person Canadian or calling an Aussie a Kiwi, or even a Geordie a Mackem. [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 20]

Two other English fans (3 and 79) agreed with this statement. There were other brief conversations between the author and individual English fans in this thread that highlighted somewhat ambivalent feelings towards the idea of the Olympics representing Britishness. For instance, in response to the author's initial post asking fans whether they felt British when the Olympics was occurring and whether the Olympics had the effect of uniting the home nations, one fan replied:

August 5 2008 09:05am

78: No and no. In general I suppose if I happened to see some athletics I might cheer for a British lass rather than a Bulgarian (don't have anything against Bulgaria, it's just an example!) but I don't cheer for the Brits no matter what.<sup>9</sup> It's just not THAT important to me. And the hypocrisy of the Olympics makes vom (*sic*). A war or something might bring the Nations of the British Isles "together behind the flag", but the Olympics, nah. [Male, English, Blackburn Rovers, aged 27]

The same fan later went on to say:

August 5 2008 07:51pm

78: I think the four nations should each have a team at the Olympics. And sure, I feel England deserves to have its own team at the Olympics. Why not? (Confused emoticon).

Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of English xenophobia came in response to the following post:

August 6 2008 09:20pm

35: lol it's amazing that the people who haven't experienced even the UK, let alone interact and meet other people just come out and say, I'm English ... f\*\*k everyone else ... . The ignorance.<sup>10</sup> [Male, English, Newcastle United FC, aged 22]

This was met with the following:

August 7 2008 09:02pm

3: I'm English and yh fuck everyone else.<sup>11</sup> ENGLISH AND PROUD! Have you a problem with that? [Male, English, Arsenal FC, aged 53]

For some English fans the idea of Britain simply did not sit comfortably with how they perceived their own national identity. The anti-British views cited

here provide evidence of 'resistance by those within a national culture who still cling to more intense versions of the invented traditions that underpin their sense of identity' (Maguire 2011a, p.988). In relation to England specifically, Maguire (2011a, p.990) has termed this anti-British reaction the 'Little Englander', which he defines as a 'strong defensive reaction to globalization processes, European integration, the pluralization of national culture and the assertiveness of the "Celtic fringe".' Thus, in this case the English layer of identification was being "dragged" alongside moves towards a more inclusive Britishness (Elias 1991).

Such findings are hardly surprising given recent UK devolution processes which have led to cultural divisions rather than unity between the nations of the UK. This can be aligned to the idea that for some at least, England is an emerging political community in its own right (Wyn Jones 2012; 2013). Whilst UK devolution occurred after Elias had died and the complexity of the identities that exist within the UK was not a topic Elias himself wrote about in any detail (Fletcher 1997), his concept of - "changes in the we-I balance" is useful to explain how identities of many different ages and sizes conflict with one another and how national identity is challenged by global integrative forces.

### **What actually happened?**

In June 2011 the BOA declared that they had made an agreement with the FA meaning that players from all four home nations were eligible to be picked to play for Team GB at London 2012 (Conway 2012; Ewen 2012). The decision



meant that the SFA, FAW and the IFA were effectively silenced. Nothing new according to Menary's (2010) account of the history behind the GB football team, but the agreement contradicted that previously made in 2009 between the FA and the other UK national associations that the team would only be comprised of English players. In any case, current Olympic football rules mean that all teams must consist of an eighteen-man squad of fifteen players under the age of 23 and three players of "open age" and that they must play for no money in line with the amateur ethos of the Olympic movement (Menary 2010, p.287). Such restrictions mean that national teams who compete in the Olympic football tournament are quite different in make-up to the national teams who compete in the FIFA World Cup or UEFA European Championships (Euros) which are competitions with no age or payment restrictions that gain much more global interest from fans.

On 28 June 2012, it was announced that Micah Richards (English), Ryan Giggs (Welsh) and Craig Bellamy (Welsh) would be included as the three "over-age" players in the Team GB squad (Kelso 2012a). The full squad was announced on 2 July and comprised thirteen English and five Welsh players, but no Scottish or Northern Irish players were selected (Daily Mail 2012). Thus, as in previous Olympic tournaments (Menary 2010), Team GB was dominated by English players and was therefore not truly representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This was despite the fact that no players from the England squad for the "Euro 2012" football competition (which took place prior to the Olympic tournament) were allowed to be picked by the 2012 Team GB manager Stuart Pearce to avoid players being tired and to reduce the potential for injury (Idessane 2012).<sup>12</sup> This acted

to clearly highlight that the main focus of the English FA was not success at the 2012 Olympic football tournament but at Euro 2012.

Both during and after the 2012 Olympics, the GB football team issue was a much less popular topic of debate in the British national press than it had been prior to the tournament. This was largely due to the fact that the team only managed to progress to the quarterfinal stages losing 4–5 to South Korea following extra-time and a penalty shootout after a 1–1 draw. During the tournament there is some evidence that players in the squad, including the Welsh captain Ryan Giggs, as well as some members of the BOA, wanted Team GB to enter a football team at future Olympic Games (Toney 2012; Winter 2012). The chief executive of the English FA is reported to have said that the FA would not support a future GB football team at the Rio 2016 Olympics (Kelso 2012b). The success of Team GB in other events, resulting in them finishing third in the overall medals table, meant that the football tournament was not the main focus of most national media coverage. This is rare considering men's football usually dominates the English / British national media and especially considering the England national team had competed in the Euro 2012 competition less than one month prior to the beginning of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Overall, those findings presented in the current chapter have highlighted the multiple ways in which British identity politics were debated by English fans in their discussions regarding the prospect of fielding a GB football team for the London 2012 Olympics. Most English fans recognized the difference between

the constructs of English and British, and whereas some had little problems with showing support for a GB football team so long as it was a one-off event for the 2012 Olympics, others actively tried to establish an Englishness which was separate from Britishness by resisting the assimilation of England into Britain. This 'Little Englander' (cf. Maguire 2011a) response was evidence of English football fans clinging on to older layers of identification in response to global and European integrative forces. Such evidence demonstrates the utility of Elias' concept of changes in the "we", "I" balance as agents react to the conditions of any given time and space to either embrace interdependence (not only between the home nations, but also recognizing the interdependence of the late modern global framework which emphasizes the place of "I" before "we") or form emotive hard-line views that strengthens nation state "we habitus" (as people regard themselves as individual representatives of a "we" group). This contested position has not gone unrecognized by associated officials and consequently, the position of any future GB Olympic team is uncertain at this time.

Even though some players in the 2012 GB football team as well as members of the BOA wanted a "united" team in future (Toney 2012; Winter 2012), the fact that only English and Welsh players were picked to play with no representatives from Scotland and Northern Ireland makes the possibility of a future team unlikely (Daily Mail 2012). The decision of the English FA to not allow members of the Euro 2012 England national team to play for GB in the Olympics is another example of division rather than unification between the UK football associations. Had the GB football team been as successful as Team GB were in other sporting events at 2012, then having a united football

team in future Games, and even in the World Cup and European Championships, may have been something supported by many football fans.

Considering the data for this study was gathered between June 2008 and September 2009, it provided an excellent opportunity to gauge the views of a sample of fans on the Team GB issue as it was very high on the agenda in the national news at that time. In order to build on the research presented in this chapter, which took place prior to the London 2012 Olympics, further research is required to assess whether the short existence of the GB football team, the success of Team GB in other sports and the success of the whole event, have united or divided people within the separate nations of the UK or indeed whether the memory of the Games did anything for Britishness in the long term. Both opportunities for integration and division continue to be made possible via the medium of sport.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the material in this chapter has been previously published by Ashgate publishers. The author would like to thank Ashgate for granting permission to re-use some of the material from the book: Gibbons, T. (2014) *English National Identity and Football Fan Culture: Who Are Ya?* Surrey: Copyright © Gibbons, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>This chapter is based upon findings from a doctoral research project in which an online participant observation study was conducted (see Gibbons 2014 for more details).

<sup>3</sup> The Olympic football team is referred to hereafter as “Great Britain”, “GB” or “Team GB”.

<sup>4</sup> After the partition of Ireland in 1921 the IFA became the FA for Northern Ireland and remains so to this day (Cronin 2002). In 1921 a new FA was set up for southern Ireland originally termed the ‘Football Association of the Irish Free State’ (FAIFS) which was formally recognised by FIFA in 1923 and later became known as the ‘Football Association of Ireland’ (FAI).

<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to point out that the ‘NoTeamGB’ campaign was organised by a Scottish fan group and its membership was dominated by Scottish and Welsh supporters.

<sup>6</sup> According to the [noteamgb.com](http://noteamgb.com) website: ‘The NoTeamGB.com campaign is run by fans organisations from England (Football Supporters’ Federation - FSF), Northern Ireland (Amalgamation of Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs), Scotland (Association of Tartan Army Clubs) and Wales (FSF Cymru) and we are united in our opposition

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to the creation of a Great Britain football team for the purposes of the 2012 Olympics or beyond' (<http://www.noteamgb.com/Q-And-A-About-No-Team-GB.htm>, Accessed Jun. 2011).

<sup>7</sup> For more information relating to the research methods used, see Gibbons, *English National Identity and Football Fan culture: Who are ya?* pp.161-174.

<sup>8</sup> 'Fergie' is a nickname for the now retired Scottish Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'lass' is used in some areas of the UK to refer to a 'woman'.

<sup>10</sup> 'lol' is an abbreviation for the phrase 'laugh out loud'.

<sup>11</sup> 'yh' is an abbreviation for the terms 'yeah' or 'yes'.

<sup>12</sup> The 'Euros' are an abbreviation for the UEFA European Football Championships.

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