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Response to 'A Shared Ireland? Identity, Meaning,
Representation and Sport' By Katie Liston and Joseph Maguire

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Soft Power and the Building of Cultural Relations

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

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The proposition that sport is a space in both a historical and a contemporary sense, around which meaning, representation and identity can be struggled over, has received considerable attention from scholars. It is more than 50 years since the British athletes and politicians Goodhart and Chataway

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penned their account of international sport in *War without Weapons*;¹ thirteen years since Victor Cha, the former director of Asian affairs for the White House, penned *Beyond the Final Score*;² and eight years since a UK House of Lords report pointed to the necessity of balancing hard and soft power tactics and the role that sport could play in contemporary international relations.³ A more recent work by Kidd, *The Runner's Journey*, is a joy to read and an insightful autobiography of sport, advocacy and activism.⁴

The question of sport working in the interests of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the British state has also been the focus of much attention. Cárdenas (2013) has explained the role sport played in the building of the peace process and reconciliation between Irish communities.⁵ Few contributions have captured the complexity of the past in the present as accounted for by Liston and Maguire's original contribution to the ongoing dialogue. It would be easy to suggest that sport simply reflects the times in which it moves. That would not do justice to this substantive and valuable contribution to understanding the extent to which sport has enabled Irish politics and the complexity of the demands made by the different stakeholders. The authors are aware of the use of sport to make a difference, carry a message, deliver statements on a scale that few other areas of public life can achieve.

There is much to commend the extent to which the authors wrestle with the role of sport in terms of diplomacy and international relations. They highlight what they call the statecraft–sportcraft nexus and the different dimensions of north–south and east–west relations throughout a long history as well as suggesting the role of contemporary sport and the limits and possibilities of a future, shared, united and divided Ireland—no small thing.

What is clear amid this complexity is that while sport is not the solution to either perceived or real political problems, it does provide a valuable space in a softer way than more formal diplomatic channels allow. It substantiates the promise that sport can do good work, and perhaps do its best work under the radar for a long period of time or throughout what the authors refer to as the long history of Ireland.

¹ Philip Goodhart and Christopher Chataway, *War without weapons* (London, 1968).

² Victor D. Cha, *Beyond the final score: the politics of sport in Asia* (New York, 2009).

³ House of Lords, *Persuasion and power in the modern world* (London, 2014).

⁴ Bruce Kidd, *A runner's journey* (Toronto, 2021).

⁵ Alexander Cárdenas, 'Peacebuilding through sport? An introduction to sport for development and peace', *Journal of Conflictology* 4 (1) (2013), 24–33.

While I do not have such a detailed knowledge of the complexity of Irish sport, politics and society, the observations I make here draw upon work with different interventions over the years that have sought to use sport to find common ground between Irish and Scottish politics and society: not least the building of broader cultural events off the back of the combined shinty/hurling internationals, exploring the significance of Highland Games to, for example, Ulster Scots, and more recently the potential of Celtic sports as a diplomatic tool to be used by the Irish state.

The notions of sport and soft power and sport forging better cultural relations are of course two different things. Soft power is usually described as the pursuit of influence through attraction. Cultural relations is the creation of the conditions for sustainable collaboration between countries for mutual benefit. The Liston and Maguire narrative is strong on the notion of sport, diplomacy, statecraft and sportcraft. The authors in the future might consider the crucial difference between soft power and cultural relations building, and the need for both in the debate about sport enabling local, national and international relations involving the Irish and British states. The work of a range of sporting bodies and non-governmental organisations that use sport for different and in some cases similar political purposes should not be underestimated.

Matters of mutuality, trust, connectivity, long-term dialogue and co-operation are important. Those working with sport in the contexts covered by Liston and Maguire might be well served by the notion of sport enabling cultural relations and striving to forge an enlarged common good. Seeing sport as not so much a commodity or an imperfect notion of identity, but rather a space for dialogue that is softer than formal channels, can be held open and can hold different stakeholders for a considerable period, is something worth striving for. Such an idea mirrors the way in which the peace-building research fronted by Christine Bell and others, as part of the political settlements research programme,⁶ talks of the human rights space as a key factor in navigating the peace process in different parts of the world.

Those working in, through and with sport are well served by the notion of sport enabling cultural relations, forging an enlarged common good and being seen as a resource and public space that can help with making the art of the possible, possible. Sport cannot do this alone—nor should it.

⁶ British Academy, *Navigating inclusion in peace settlements: human rights and the creation of the common good* (London, 2017).