

Which Boys in Green? Identity Issues in Irish Soccer

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Abstract

Ireland's political partition has clearly impacted on sport in a wide variety of ways leaving a sporting landscape that includes regulatory bodies that transcend the border and others that mirror the political divide. Soccer on the island is split between northern and southern organisations with both fielding teams in international competitions. Many northern nationalists have eschewed identification with the Northern Ireland football team, preferring to transfer their allegiance to the Republic in what might be seen as an intrinsic expression of a northern nationalist identity. Just as supporters loyalties prove contentious, so too have those of players themselves. Tensions have emerged over the decision by some northern-born players from Irish nationalist backgrounds to elect to play for the Republic, an option available to them by virtue of their entitlement to Irish citizenship. While this phenomenon seems a logical extension of a tendency amongst those from a nationalist background in the north to regard themselves as Irish, the apparent defection of players such as Darron Gibson and James McClean has engendered considerable controversy. McClean probably best exemplifies an apparent political motivation in his decision to opt for the Republic, having provided very explicit indications of his allegiance and publicly expressing his Irishness in ways that are intimately bound up with the city of Derry where he grew up. This paper focuses on on-going tensions surrounding this specific example of sporting representation and citizenship. It outlines the wider political and sporting context to the phenomenon, examines player motivations and explores the various reactions to it on both sides of the Irish border.

Key Words: Ireland, soccer, identity, citizenship, nationalism, FIFA.

1. Introduction

In Ireland, perhaps not surprisingly, the intertwining of sport, politics and culture is very readily apparent. As Alan Bairner has suggested, the nature of Irish history means the island displays 'a sporting culture ... closely bound up with such potentially potent themes as the meaning of being Irish and the relationship of Irish people with each other and with the world beyond'.¹ While much attention has been paid to the place of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) within wider social, cultural and political debates and its role as custodian and governing body of Gaelic games, other sports rarely receive the same level of attention.²

Ireland's political partition has clearly impacted on sport in a wide variety of ways leaving a sporting landscape that includes regulatory bodies in many sports

that transcend the border (though not necessarily the political tensions deriving from it) and others that mirror the political divide. In Ireland most international sports are organized on an all-island basis, with a single Irish team with representation drawn both from the Republic and Northern Ireland. In the case of the GAA this reflects an underpinning nationalist ideology, while for sports such as rugby, hockey and cricket it might be seen as a form of accommodation between the two entities. By way of contrast, Irish soccer is the only major game that is split between northern and southern bodies. Initially, there was one all-Ireland soccer team and an all-Ireland association, the Irish Football Association (IFA) based in Belfast. But shortly after Irish independence, the southern representatives broke away and established what is now called the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) based in Dublin. From the 1920s onwards, relations between the two governing bodies have warmed and cooled throughout the subsequent near century. Initially, issues of territorial jurisdiction arose with both associations effectively claiming to represent soccer on a single all-island basis. One consequence was that, up to the 1950s, they both selected players from the whole island until FIFA instructed them to restrict player selection to those from within their 'official' territorial boundaries.³ Some players represented both jurisdictions in the middle years of the 20th century. Stricter regulation at the global level by FIFA put an end to this situation but more recently the issue of international eligibility has re-surfaced as some northern born players have elected to play for the Republic. This paper focuses on tensions surrounding this contemporary phenomenon. It outlines the wider context, examines player motivation and explores reactions to it.

2. Soccer in Northern Ireland

Soccer in Northern Ireland has, predictably, given rise to, or reflected, broader issues of national identity. Although the game is popular amongst both unionists and republicans, partition and the contested nature of the territory have permeated many aspects of the sport. The political situation led to Derry City's acrimonious resignation from the north's Irish League in 1972, following the much earlier exit of Belfast Celtic in 1949, both teams based in strongly nationalist areas of their respective cities.⁴ Support for the Northern Ireland soccer team has taken an often sectarian nature reflected through chants at games and graffiti in and around the team's home ground of Windsor Park in Belfast. This space came to be seen as increasingly uncomfortable for many from a nationalist background.⁵ There were also instances of verbal abuse of Catholic players in the team. Efforts to eliminate sectarian chanting and to alter the perception of the team, the organisation and its supporters have been on-going in recent years. Nevertheless, many nationalists have eschewed identification with sports teams representing Northern Ireland and, in the case of soccer, preferring to transfer their allegiance to the Republic in what might be seen as an intrinsic expression of a northern nationalist identity.⁶ Even liberal unionists have expressed a degree of ambiguity in their sporting

allegiances.⁷ Soccer has at times become inextricably bound up with specific events and particular episodes stand out, such as the 1994 murder of six Catholics by loyalist paramilitaries in a bar in Loughinisland in County Down while watching the Republic's victory over Italy in the World Cup Finals.

Just as supporters loyalties prove contentious, so too have those of sports people themselves. The all-Ireland nature of the rugby team has meant that northern players of unionist origin regularly represent Ireland standing for *Amhrain na bhfiann*, though from the 1990s onwards this has been accompanied by *Ireland's Call*, an anthem specifically invented for the all-island team. Famously, boxer Barry McGuigan, born in the Republic in the border town of Clones, courted controversy by representing Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 80s but endeavouring to ease tensions through competing under the UN flag. More recently, some athletes from Northern Ireland have represented the UK while others competed for Ireland in Olympic competition. After considerable speculation, Northern-born golfer Rory McIlroy announced his intention to represent Ireland at the 2016 Olympics.

3. Soccer and International Representation

The issue of international representation has become a complex and thorny one in world football, throwing up many distinctions between national identity and sporting citizenship. Increasing flexibility means that many players now have the option to represent more than one country, usually by virtue of birthplace, residency or family origins. This has led to accusations of mercenary and utilitarian motivations over-riding feelings of national affinity.⁸ Increased commercialism and other factors contribute to this. There may be pragmatic reasons for players to choose a country but equally such strategies make sense for countries with limited pools of players enabling them to utilise talented individuals and widen the player pool. Different sporting codes have different eligibility regulations which intersect with national citizenship requirements. Irish and South African born cricketers appear for England, and the New Zealand rugby team draws on Pacific islanders.⁹ In soccer, countries such as Algeria draw heavily on their European diaspora selecting sons of Algerian emigrants to France while others such as Equatorial Guinea have controversially pursued a policy of 'nationalising' players with tenuous or no connections at all with the country.¹⁰ Soccer also allows a player to switch countries as long as they have not played a competitive international at senior level. This has allowed a degree of switching between 'junior' levels or representing a country in a senior friendly international but subsequently playing competitively for another. Once selected for a competitive international match a player is then locked into that relationship.

From the late 1980s, the Republic of Ireland's association began to exploit FIFA (the sport's world governing body) regulations allowing for the selection of sizeable numbers of British-born players of Irish parentage or grand-parentage to

play for them, under what was known colloquially as the ‘granny rule’. Throughout this period of moderate success the selection of non-Irish born players has remained an enduring phenomenon. The policy has provoked some negative reactions over what some see as the diluted sense of Irishness contained within the team and lingering suspicions that for some players a careerist rather than cultural motivation is at work. Conversely, for many others the phenomenon has been seen as a justifiable reclaiming of the diaspora, reflecting a more global sense of Irishness and a recognition of the multi-layered nature of national identity (Holmes and Storey 2011).¹¹ If the selection of the sons and grandsons of Irish emigrants for the Republic’s soccer team could be seen as a manifestation of a more complex interpretation of Irishness, one specific facet of the selection policy has begun to prove particularly contentious in recent years. Tensions have emerged over the decision by some northern-born players from Irish nationalist backgrounds to elect to play for the Republic, an option available to them by virtue of their entitlement to Irish citizenship.

Initial controversy arose when Derry-born Darron Gibson switched his allegiance to the Republic in 2006.¹² Gibson’s apparent defection became a subject of debate in the Northern Ireland assembly and was the source of much media commentary. Subsequently Marc Wilson, Shane Duffy and James McLean have been notable defectors from north to south. While not discounting the possibility of careerist motivations, this phenomenon seems a logical extension of a tendency amongst those from a nationalist background in the north to regard themselves as Irish and identify with the Republic’s team, as noted earlier. Additional related issues have been cited as providing further impetus to this trend. It has been suggested that players from Catholic backgrounds have felt somewhat marginalised within the Northern set-up.¹³ Standing for ‘God save the Queen’ (the anthem used by Northern Ireland) and the flying of union jacks and Ulster flags by supporters leaves some players feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Northern international Niall McGinn, who hails from a nationalist background, has spoken of the anthem issue suggesting that for some players it is a case of ‘just put your head down and try to get through it’.¹⁴

Derry-born James McClean represented Northern Ireland at under-21 level but has since switched to the Republic. He has also cited the issue of flags and the anthem arguing

‘You don’t really feel at home. I think any Catholic would be lying if they said they did feel at home, seeing all those flags (Union Jacks) and hearing the songs and chants’.¹⁵

McClean is the player who best exemplifies an explicit political motivation in his decision to opt for the Republic having provided a clear indication of his loyalty and having expressed his Irishness in ways that have engendered

considerable controversy. This has become most evident in his club career in England and his attitude to the wearing of the poppy. Most leading teams in England have in recent years, worn specially designed shirts that incorporate an image of the poppy in games played on, or close to, Remembrance Day in what has now become something of a ritualistic event. McClean refused to wear a shirt emblazoned with a poppy while a Sunderland player in November 2012. In November 2014, then playing for Wigan Athletic, he again indicated his wish not to wear a poppy-emblazoned shirt. On this latter occasion, he took the further step of writing an open letter explaining his actions. While justifying this clearly in relation to his nationalist background, a very place-specific reasoning also emerges. He said that to wear a poppy would be to show disrespect to those killed by British soldiers in Derry on Bloody Sunday in 1972. In his letter, McClean firmly links his decision to the fact that the poppy has different connotations in different places, especially in the north of Ireland and in Derry it is viewed in a quite specific way. He alludes directly to the Creggan area in which he grew up. In a subsequent interview he states

‘Northern Ireland is not my country. Unless you’re from where I’m from, Creggan - which was a big part of The Troubles when I was growing up - unless you’re from there, you don’t really understand’.¹⁶

Other players have also issued clear statements suggesting a strong Irish identity as motivation for playing for the Republic. Marc Wilson initially represented Northern Ireland at schoolboy level before opting for the Republic’s senior team. Around the time, he stated in an interview that ‘he grew up supporting the Republic so it was a comfortable decision for me’.¹⁷

In a similar manner Shane Duffy (like Gibson and McClean, born in Derry), initially capped by the north at various under-age levels, has expressed very similar sentiments in suggesting it was a logical outcome of his own loyalties

‘it is a dream to play for the Republic of Ireland ... Everyone in my family is Irish and so am I. We are just living in Northern Ireland. I have always wanted to play for the Republic. I grew up supporting Ireland and so did everybody around me’.¹⁸

While these examples seem to point to a firmly held sense of Irishness, other players have displayed a more pragmatic stance. Some have switched allegiance to the Republic, only to subsequently revert back again. One example is Michael O’Connor who represented Northern Ireland at under-age level, then defected to the Republic’s U-21 team (though he never actually played for them). Within a

year he had reverted back to the north. He is now a full Northern Ireland international and has since claimed that ‘it’s always been my ambition to play for Northern Ireland and I never thought about playing for the Republic’.¹⁹ Another intriguing example is Shane McEleney, one of the players interviewed by McGee and Bairner in the course of their research having opted at that time to play at U-21 level for the Republic. In that article the Derry-born player is cited as saying

‘Deciding to represent the Republic has given me something new and to be honest, it gets me away from all the political problems you have up here. The thought of now being able to represent ‘my country’ makes me feel great ... I do see the Republic of Ireland as my country’.²⁰

More recently, McEleney has indicated his availability for Northern Ireland, a decision also taken by his brother Patrick, both of whom play with Derry City (the club based in the north but who play their games in the Republic’s league and cup competitions). It might be argued that this displays a somewhat functional attitude; unlikely to make it in the Republic’s team, the option to play for the north was still there.

4. Reactions

This trend has, not surprisingly, generated a considerable negative reaction amongst both supporters and officials of the game in Northern Ireland. At an official level the IFA, supported by calls from some unionist politicians, has endeavoured to reverse what is, from their perspective, a worrying trend. At the time of the Gibson furore they cited FIFA regulations and claimed players needed to have a parent or grand-parent born in the Republic or to have lived there in order to qualify. FIFA re-iterated its view that players born in the north had the option of playing for either entity by virtue of their entitlement to Irish or British citizenship, or both. That northern born players are free to choose between north and Republic is a view in accord with the Good Friday agreement that

‘recognise(s) the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments’.²¹

The IFA themselves, while understandably frustrated, have endeavoured to ensure that their set-up is welcoming of players regardless of political background. Michael O’Neill, appointed as Northern Ireland team manager in 2012 (and himself a Catholic) has made clear an intention to ensure an inclusive environment

in which those from nationalist backgrounds would feel comfortable playing for Northern Ireland. The reactions of northern fans has seen a partial boycott of a friendly match in Dublin in 2011 between the Republic and the North with some northern supporters protesting what they perceived as poaching of their players by the Republic. While many northern supporters are far from pleased, some have moderated their displeasure by acknowledging that if a player does not want to represent them, then they clearly lack the necessary commitment. The case of McClean has provoked a particular level of fury. His poppy decision led to an apparent death threat and a vitriolic reaction from certain quarters. One strand of reaction was to accuse McClean of politicising the poppy debate, a somewhat weak argument that ignores the fact that the wearing of one seems itself to constitute a political act. Former Northern Ireland international Keith Gillespie accused McClean of hiding behind religion in opting for the Republic: 'if you're born in Northern Ireland you should not have the option of playing for the Republic'.²²

Within the republic a broadly pragmatic stance appears to hold sway exemplified by goalkeeper Shay Given (born in the border town of Lifford) stating

'I could have played for Northern Ireland... My mother was from Castleterg in Co Tyrone. But it's up to the players to choose who they want to play for. And we need to strengthen the squad'.²³

However, the team's one-time manager, Brian Kerr, has expressed a different perspective arguing that

'while the policy is legitimate under FIFA rules, ably abetted by the Belfast Agreement, I feel it is unfair, seedy and predatory to have such a policy towards a neighbour. Just imagine if the boot was on the other foot'.²⁴

5. Conclusions

In summary, the increased flexibility of regulations allows players greater choice in who they represent at international level. For contested political spaces such as Northern Ireland players who feel less affinity with the 'country' can opt to play for the Republic. While some appear motivated by cultural or political considerations it is also clear that career prospects may intersect with this causing some to make strategic decisions and to hedge their bets. However, it is useful to bear in mind that playing for Northern Ireland does not mean lack of affinity with Irishness; sporting citizenship, as with official citizenship, may be rather different from an individual's national and cultural orientation. Following a 5-0 victory for the Republic over the north in the friendly match alluded to earlier, the crux of the

issue was made clear when northern player Niall McGinn (somewhat unusually and perhaps not very wisely) declared himself a Republic fan live in a post-match television interview, an utterance that led to a very hostile reaction from Northern supporters. Equally of course, representing the Republic does not automatically imply a deep-seated and long-lasting allegiance. Former Republic international Alan Kernaghan (born in England but who spent part of his childhood in Northern Ireland) has subsequently claimed it was his ambition to play for the north. However, at the time (in the 1990s) they had a policy of not selecting players born outside the region.²⁵ Ultimately international representation does not always correspond to an individual's perceived identity and the pragmatic desire for career progression may over-ride other factors.

Notes

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⁴ John Sugden and Alan Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (London: Leicester University Press, 1993)

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