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## Sport and Politics

### **Kings and Countries - The historical tradition of political involvement in sport**

Despite repeated newspaper claims to the contrary and notwithstanding occasional bursts of outrage from governments who consider themselves the victims of international conspiracies, it is axiomatic that sport and politics *do* mix. There have always been political and nationalistic undercurrents whenever sporting prowess has been put to the test: at the feast known as The Field of the Cloth of Gold, in 1521, for instance, the boastful Henry VIII decided for no reason other than personal [and perhaps nationalistic] vanity to try out one of his wrestling throws on France's King Francis. Unfortunately for the English monarch, it seems that Francis was *au fait* with the particular manoeuvre and threw Henry to the ground. From this point on, negotiations went downhill, and months of diplomatic endeavour between the two nations were ruined. A hundred years before, Henry VI had banned the import of French tennis balls to England as a political measure, so this was not the first sporting contretemps between the two nations.

Indeed, centuries before this, the French had brought the notion of chivalry and the heraldic tournament to Britain. Contests in the lists between knights of different nations were more than just festive gatherings for the glory of the individual. National reputations were sometimes at stake, and victory at the tournament could give one side a valuable lever at the negotiating table. Of course, the very nature of these tournaments made them dangerous, politically. The gathering of so many armed troops in one place, even for what was ostensibly a sporting occasion, posed a threat to law and order. Following a rebellion in 1234, King John tried to ban tournaments altogether, but all he did was drive them underground - not the last time that an attempt to ban violent sport would fail in this way. We should be wary, however, of allowing the politics to obscure the sport. Birley [27] credits the tournament with 'a powerful appeal that lifted it above the merely prudential appeal of politics', in much the same way that today's Olympics stutter under the threat of boycott and counter-boycott but eventually take place before a world-wide audience of hundreds of millions.

### **Sport and Politics in the Modern Era**

#### ***Pride Before a Fall - Germany in 1936 and England in the 1950s***

The nineteen-thirties, which witnessed the rise of European fascism, also saw the dictatorships use convenient, if unsound theories of eugenics to support their political purges. The Italians and Germans, in particular, vaingloriously paraded their muscular young athletes and sportsmen and women in massive gatherings that made no attempt to disguise the message of physical and political supremacy. The Italians did gain world-wide acclaim for their achievement in winning the football world cups of 1934 and 1938. The Germans, on the other hand, were the subject of

international and very public ridicule following the defeat of Hitler's Aryan supermen at the hands of Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Owens, a Black American, won four gold medals ahead of the much-vaunted Germans and caused Hitler public humiliation: the German leader refused to present the awards and left the stadium. The Germans had made a huge impression with their achievement in building the Olympic stadium and with their magnificent opening ceremony. Unfortunately for Hitler, fortunately for the rest of us, the myth of Aryan supremacy was exposed in the most emphatic way.

1953 was a year of great nationalistic fervour in Britain. The new queen was crowned and the ceremony brought the nation to a standstill as flag-waving royalists blocked city streets and crowded in front of new-fangled television sets. As if to show to the world that, having played her part in ridding the world of the menace of fascism, the British lion was ready to roar from on high once again, a British expedition conquered [Everest](#). Sir John Hunt, leader of the expedition, succeeded in putting Britain on top of the world in the most literal sense possible, and all other nations were expected to sit up and take notice. It seemed to matter little that of the two men who made it to the summit one, Edmund Hillary, was a New Zealander, whilst the other, Sherpa Tensing, was Nepalese. It was British daring and British leadership which had triumphed. Britain's burgeoning political ambitions were mirrored in the athletic achievements of its sporting heroes. So, too, were its failures and embarrassments.

It was a misplaced belief in its own authority and influence overseas which saw the government precipitate the Suez fiasco of 1956. Similarly it was in a spirit of invincibility that England's footballers took on the Hungarians at Wembley in November of 1953. The previous five encounters between the two nations, four of which had been in Budapest, had seen England score twenty-six goals and concede only eight. The Hungarians' 6-3 victory on that day in 1953 stunned the nation, but was seen as an aberration. It was a chastened but still confident England side which travelled to Budapest six months later for a return match. This time Hungary won by seven goals to one, and England's 'sporting heroes' were well and truly humbled.

There were those in Britain [not least the Scots] who exhibited a considerable degree of *Schadenfreude* over England's humiliation. Among these were the die-hards of the last days of the amateur era, who saw the Hungarian debacle as proof of the inherent frailty of professional sport. In 1954, one of these amateurs, a bespectacled young Oxford man by the name of Roger Bannister, became the first runner to break the four-minute barrier for one mile. England's middle classes enjoyed showing the professionals' of the United States what they could achieve. It was an experience to be savoured, both in the sporting and the political sense, for it was not one which was to be repeated very often in the future. The decades to come - the sixties and seventies - were to bear witness to the rise of the Eastern Bloc countries as the main challenger to The United States in both spheres. As the cold war went on behind the Iron Curtain, the Olympic Games were increasingly dominated by Russia, East Germany and the Americans. Even countries with undeveloped economies such as Cuba, Romania, Poland and Czechoslovakia treated events such as the Olympics as a chance to beat the Yanks, quite literally, at their own game.

### **Overt Political Action - Black and White**

Since the end of The First World War, major international competitions have been subjected to all manner of nationalistic and political intrusions. These range from the harmless but ostentatious pageantry and flag-waving which have become a feature of opening ceremonies to direct terrorist involvement of the sort that culminated in the deaths of nine Israelis at the Munich Olympics of 1972.

In 1968 [at the height of the civil rights movement in the USA] Tommy Smith and other US medal winners gave the *Black Power* salute [raised arm with clenched fist] at the awards ceremony at the Mexico Olympics. They were publicly admonished by the US Olympic Committee and their

government for bringing politics into the sports arena. However, only twelve years later the US refused to send a team to the Moscow Olympics as a political gesture.

In 1971, [the Springboks](#)' rugby tour caused some of the most violent demonstrations witnessed in Britain and Ireland for many decades. The protest march to the Lansdowne Road stadium 'constituted the largest public assembly this century' [Williams: 337]. It was the last time the Springboks were to come to Britain until 1995. The protests centred around the issue of [apartheid](#), the system under which the Pretoria government denied Blacks equal rights with Whites. In the same year as this ill-fated tour, the International Olympic Committee [IOC] suspended South Africa from the Games for its refusal to accept inter-racial sport, a ban that was to last for over twenty years.

Three years earlier, [shortly after the 'Black Power' affair], the England cricket tour to South Africa had been called off because of the host nation's refusal to accept the presence of Basil d'Oliviera in the tourist's party. D'Oliviera had actually been born in South Africa, but his colour prevented him from playing there, so he moved to England and gained his residence qualification. Brailsford [ibid: 124] points out that the England selectors had tried to avoid the issue by selecting another player [Tom Cartwright] ahead of him, but injury to Cartwright meant that they could not avoid choosing d'Oliviera. So it would appear that England's 'bold stance' in defying the apartheid regime was no more than an accident of circumstance.

Apartheid was not a new political issue, nor was this the first time that the national team's selectors were seen to lack political backbone. As far back as the 1920s, they had accommodated the South African government by dropping the Indian-born Duleepsinji from the team to play the tourists in England. It was not until 1977, however, that the countries of the Commonwealth took united action against the South Africans. Following a much publicised meeting of sports ministers at Gleneagles, in Scotland, they produced the *Commonwealth Statement on Apartheid in Sport*, more commonly known as the *Gleneagles Agreement* [there had been a less decisive meeting in Singapore in 1971, and it had taken six years to get representatives around the table again].

Although the agreement did prove effective in excluding South Africa from competitions such as the Commonwealth Games, the equivocal nature of its wording left the door open for individual nations to pursue their own political line. The election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government in 1979 was always likely to produce tensions over South Africa, given the traditional Tory support for White Government in the country. It came as no surprise to political commentators, then, when the Sports Council took advantage of what they no doubt saw as a change in policy to send a fact-finding mission to the Republic to investigate progress made in multi-racial sport. There are suspicions that the group was merely shepherded about to visit one or two model sports integration programmes, although their reports claim that they had witnessed 'significant advances' made in terms of racial integration in sport. Their impressions were certainly favourable, for the following year the Council was pressing for South Africa to be readmitted to the international sporting scene. Hargreaves condemns their ingenuousness [203].

*[The Sports Council] entered the political arena by opposing the multi-racial sports organisations in South Africa which wanted a stronger boycott, the non-white Commonwealth nations and the Anti-Apartheid movement; and it accepted the South African Government's propaganda that progress was being made in multi-racial sport.*

Since that time, South African politics has been turned upside down, and universal suffrage has given the Blacks the rights they had been fighting for for three-quarters of a century. Significantly, Mandela's release from incarceration on Robben Island and his subsequent election as president have done a great deal for sport in South Africa. He is a self-confessed sports enthusiast, even embracing the traditionally White-dominated sports, such as cricket and rugby, with an infectious

exuberance which has encouraged others to set aside racial grievances and enjoy sports for their own sake. The new, multi-racial national fervour of sports fans in the country has been well rewarded, too: South Africa were world champions in rugby union, have one of the best records of all the test teams at one-day cricket, and are African champions at football.

### **Olympic Blood and Boycotts**

The IOC's ban on South Africa was the beginning of a period of almost two decades during which the Olympic Games was the arena for political protest and action from all quarters: global superpowers, terrorist organisations, and banana republics all had their few moments of notoriety on the world's most public sporting stage.

#### ***Munich 1972***

The most powerful statement was made by the Black September terrorist organisation in 1972, when they broke into the rooms of Israeli athletes at the Olympic village in Munich. In a stand-off which was played out before the world's media - gathered for an entirely different sort of occasion - they held several members of the Israeli team hostage whilst the German anti-terrorist brigade watched and waited. In the ensuing shoot-out at the airport, the terrorists were shot dead but detonated hand-grenades which killed nine of their hostages. Despite the brilliance of Mark Spitz's seven gold medals in the swimming pool, despite the appearance of Her Royal Highness Princess Anne in the equestrian event, and despite the dominance of several outstanding Eastern Europeans in the men's and women's athletics and of the Russian gymnasts [Korbut, Tourischeva *et al*], Munich 1972 is remembered for the bloody shoot-out which left the corpses of Muslims and Jews lying side by side on the tarmac at Munich airport.

#### ***Canada 1976***

The 1976 Olympics in Canada saw boycotts from several Commonwealth countries over the South African situation, but the Games were not badly hit because most of the teams that withdrew would not have been expected to finish high up the medals table.

#### ***Moscow 1980***

The same could not be said of 1980 in Moscow, when the United States pulled out and the athletes representing Great Britain had to fight parliamentary intervention in order to take part. In the end, competitors from the UK were represented under the Olympic flag, and 'God Save the Queen', always a rarity in the modern Olympic era, was not played at all. The issue which brought about the boycott was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which the US rightly condemned. The decision to boycott the Games backfired somewhat, however, when these proved to be successful, competitive and well-organised. They received a terrible press in the West, however, and Hargreaves is quick to point out the negative attitudes both of Margaret Thatcher [*'medals won at Moscow will be of inferior worth and the ceremonies a charade'*, p.200] and of the television companies [156/7].

#### ***Los Angeles 1984***

It came as no surprise, then, when The Soviet Union and all her satellite countries except one boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics of 1984. This was a tit-for-tat political statement which meant that the world's best athletes had not met at the highest level for eight years. The exception to the boycott was Romania, who had had a very public dispute with the USSR over the marking of gymnasts at the previous Games. President Ceausescu publicly defied Moscow and sent a team to the USA. His reward was a clutch of Olympic medals and the granting of

most-favoured-nation status from a grateful US Government, highlighting just how much political importance was attached to his decision by the hosts.

The LA Games will go down in history as embarrassingly jingoistic and openly one-sided. American television producers naively focused on their own athletes to an extent that had many otherwise disinterested viewers murmuring noises of sympathy with critics of the US. The BBC played down the political side of the boycott, but were unable to ignore the blatant and excessive patriotism which all but obscured some parts of the athletic competition. By the end of the Games, British commentators with a reputation for a fair degree of impartiality were quite clearly siding with non-American contestants in just about every competition, and the public were undoubtedly in agreement with them.

The boycott had produced only losers, so far as the superpowers were concerned. The USA had publicly gloated and lost friends, whereas Russia had been seen to act like a petulant child, albeit in response to the Americans previous boycott. Public dismay at the Soviet stance was heightened when Romanian attaches began to leak carefully-timed stories of Soviet sporting misdeeds, citing drug-taking, cheating by officials, the falsification of records and even the poisoning of food supplies for visiting competitors as systematic occurrences. At the time, gleeful journalists barely hesitated to consider what the Romanians had been doing while all this was going on, so thrilled were they to have the story from the inside. Lessons would appear to have been learned, however, for boycotts since 1984 have been little publicised and ineffective, only involving sparring between minor players on the world's political stage.

### **National Pride and Beating the English**

For the sportsmen and women of some nations, the desire to win at all costs has nothing to do with bending or breaking the rules, but means giving every last ounce of sweat and blood in the search for victory. Such is the case when the Welsh, Scots and Irish, along with the representatives of some of the former dominions, take on the English. This is politics of a different sort, a response to old wounds and long-distant but never-to-be-forgotten antagonisms: triumph on the field of play goes some small way towards atoning for what are seen as the English injustices of the past. When the Welsh win at rugby, the Scots at football, or the Australians at anything at all, victory is all the sweeter because the English have been vanquished. When the Scots take the field against the English at football or rugby, their anthem tells of victory against the 'auld enemy' on the battlefield, and their supporters are exhorting the players to repeat the feat on the field of play. They sing of their ancestors:

Who fought and died for,  
Their wee bit hill and glen  
And stood against them,  
Proud Edward's army,  
And sent them homeward,  
To think again.

*[Flower of Scotland.]*

There is nothing peculiarly British in wanting to beat one's neighbours and former enemies, but the Scots and Welsh in particular have their identity immersed in that of Englishness in a way unique in sporting competition. Competing in the Olympics as one team - Great Britain - they are separate nations for events such as the football and rugby world cups. There is no doubt that for the majority of those involved national pride means pulling on the red jersey of Wales or the blue of Scotland, not the White with red and blue hoops of Great Britain.

The Welsh see rugby as their national sport. It was not invented in Wales, nor does it even have a tradition at all in the north of the country, but playing rugby became part of the 'new' Welshness

of the late 1800s and early 1900s. This was a result of large numbers of immigrants from Western England and from Ireland coming to work in the coalfields and new industries of South Wales. Holt [1989: 249] describes this as part of a process whereby Wales 'moved away from a rural and bardic past and into the industrial world'. The South Wales population forged a new national identity, with English, not Welsh, as their *lingua franca*: but they were emphatically not English. The early years of the twentieth century saw them develop the game of rugby in a different direction from the exclusive middle-class amateurism of the English model, and generous expense allowances allowed them to keep the game officially amateur, thus permitting rugby league no foothold in the country. Because it was played by working men - miners and police traditionally provided the backbone of the Welsh team - Welsh rugby was more democratic than the English version of the game. Victory over England is still seen in some quarters as a triumph in a struggle between the classes.

For the Scots, football is the national passion. Rugby is popular, but has always had English associations - the Scottish Rugby Football Union only adopted the 'Rugby' of their title in 1924, having previously wished to avoid using the name of an English school. Football in Glasgow and throughout working-class Scotland is a story of religion - Catholic Celtic against Protestant Rangers - and the one occasion when the whole of the country is united in its fervour is when Scotland play England. Such matches have now become a rarity, partly owing to safety fears: in the past, the Scottish exodus to London would often resemble William Wallace's march on York.

Holt [ibid: 262] refers to football as a religion in Scotland, according to Durkheim's restricted definition ['a set of beliefs and practices through which a society worships an idealised form of itself'], but perhaps it would be more appropriate to qualify this by saying that it is a religion for the working-class male.

Australians from different regions and different social backgrounds disagree on what they consider their national sport - it could be cricket, rugby union, rugby league or even Aussie Rules, a game akin to rugby but played on a circular pitch. They would unanimously agree on the national passion, however: 'Pommie-bashing' - beating the English - is the highlight of the season in any sport, but finds its most ardent expression through the game of cricket. As far back as 1933, the infamous 'bodyline series' of test matches caused frantic political activity both in Canberra and London. The last straw was when the Australian Cricket Board made a public statement that they felt the English play was 'unsportsmanlike', an insult of monstrous proportions in the eyes of the MCC, who prided themselves on playing the game in the true spirit of fair play and sportsmanship. Holt describes the events that followed [ibid: 235]:

*This was a very serious matter. Politicians in Whitehall and the Australian prime minister applied pressure behind the scenes for an honourable compromise. Relations between the two countries were at a particularly sensitive point.... Enflaming Australian nationalism was the last thing the British Government wanted after it had just carefully constructed a Commonwealth constitution.*

### **Irish Nationalistic Fervour: The Gaelic Athletic Association**

In 1884 the [Gaelic Athletic Association](#) was founded, which epitomised Irish cultural independence from mainland Britain. It says much for the political and cultural importance of sport that the Gaelic Athletic Association preceded its more erudite cousin, The Gaelic League [now known as 'Conradh na Gaeilge'] by some nine years, and it certainly attracted more popular support.

The GAA was the Irish version of nationalism in sport. Whereas the Welsh and Scots played essentially English sports and tried to beat the enemy at his own game, the Irish adopted the principle that they should return to their sporting roots, abandoning any pastime that had the taint

of English conquest about it. The GAA owed much of its success to the fact that it was supported by so many different groups within the Irish political spectrum. It was not a party or a movement or a faith, and therefore posed no threat either to established religion or to existing political parties. From its inception, it was able to count on the backing of the Church, through the vehement Anglo-hater Archbishop Croke; it was also supported by the Fenians, a political party devoted to the overthrow of the English, which took its name from a legendary race of Irish giants; the 'home rulers', led by Charles Parnell were behind the GAA, too, completing a formidable line-up of nationalistic muscle with which to confront the English.

The GAA stood for everything that was anti-British, and the association was not even politics thinly disguised as sport; it was politics through and through, using sport principally because the Irish games were one of the few areas of their cultural heritage which could be used to unite the predominantly rural population. The Irish language was only spoken in areas known as the 'Gaeltacht' which were getting smaller all the time. The famines and subsequent exodus to the United States had decimated the population, and the country was becoming more anglicised by the day. Irish patriots knew that if there was to be a reversal in this trend, it had to come quickly and it had to be enforced ruthlessly. There was nothing pretty about their tactics, nor was there much eloquent rhetoric. The approach was that of the preacher in the pulpit warning a fearful and credulous congregation of fire and brimstone and everlasting damnation. Indeed, one of the architects of the independence movement used his position of authority within the Catholic Church to great effect in galvanising the people, and his wildly exaggerated but effective writings make fearsome reading today. Birley [281] feels justified in referring to Croke's outpourings as 'a masterpiece of invective, larded with sanctimony'.

The sports espoused by the GAA were essentially rural in origin, and had never been entirely displaced in the more remote areas of the country. Hurling and Gaelic football became the games of the Irish people once again, and the hurley stick - similar in size and shape to a field hockey stick - stood for Irish nationalism. Holt describes its significance to the advocates of home rule [1989: 241]:

*The GAA neatly harnessed the old parish and provincial loyalties of rural Ireland to create a liberal area of national life where the Gael was free of the garrison. The hurley stick became a symbol of Irish freedom, a weapon to drive out the British. Two thousand hurleys draped in the national colours were borne aloft at Parnell's funeral.*

The GAA set about the process of de-anglicisation with a vengeance. Not only were English sports banned, but also all of those who had ever played them were refused entry to the GAA: their attitude was as unforgiving as that of the RFU towards rugby league players in England a decade later.

In recent years, the success of the Irish soccer team in two successive world cups has someone stolen the limelight from Irish sports, but in the current era this should not constitute a threat to hurling and Gaelic football. Their place in Irish cultural heritage is firmly entrenched, and they figure in St Patrick's day celebrations around the world. Along with a renewed interest in the language issue and a revival in popular Irish music and literature [Townson, 1995: 1: 58-60], the playing of Irish games is just one aspect of Irish identity which sets the nation apart from its neighbour across the Irish Sea.

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## Glossary of Terms

### 1. APARTHEID

Literally 'separateness'. In sport, Whites refused to play with 'Coloureds' and Blacks and the issue of multi-racial sport caused controversy both within the Commonwealth and at the level of the IOC. Nowadays, sport appears to be truly multi-racial in the country. The traditional White sport of rugby union is proving popular among Blacks, and Asians are taking up cricket in large numbers. Football is the most popular Black participation sport, as it is throughout the continent, but more Whites are starting to play. South Africa is bidding to hold the football World Cup in the year 2006.

## **2. THE GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION**

Founded by Irish patriots in 1884, the GAA was a nationalistic response to the British presence in Ireland. The GAA banned the playing of all 'English' sports and games and encouraged the development of traditional Irish games, such as hurling and Gaelic football. In 1886, they caused controversy when they banned members of the Royal Irish Constabulary from joining. There was little attempt to conceal the use the IRA made of the GAA. Holt [1989: 242] records the case of the Monaghan football team which contained several IRA men caught with incriminating papers on them in 1922, the year of the founding of the Irish Free State and the separation of the six counties of Ulster in the North.

## **3. THE SPRINGBOKS**

The Springbok is the national emblem of South Africa and is worn on jackets, jerseys, ties and caps by those who represent the country at sport, usually a gold springbok on a green background. For many people in the country, the figure is a symbol of apartheid, and there was a current of anti-springbok feeling after the open elections. However, Mandela's public display of wearing springbok gear defused the argument, and the emblem has survived.

[http://elt.britcoun.org.pl/s\\_polit.htm](http://elt.britcoun.org.pl/s_polit.htm)