

# Sport for peace in Northern Ireland? Civil society, change and constraint after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement

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## Abstract

Using the case of Northern Ireland, this article examines how post-conflict transition impacts sports organisations which have traditionally underpinned societal division and what factors facilitate or restrain such organisations from fulfilling peacebuilding functions. The article identifies three peacebuilding functions of sport: in-group socialisation, promoting social cohesion and symbolically representing new identities. Then, after outlining the sporting and political context in Northern Ireland, the article explores changes within the sporting environment stemming from the peace process as well as persistent socio-political barriers to sport's capacity to encourage reconciliation and integration, especially symbolic contestation and territorial segregation. The analysis draws on a public attitudes survey (n = 1210) conducted by the authors as part of a major government-funded study. The findings demonstrate the potential of the three peacebuilding functions of sport, yet also, crucially, the constraints imposed by the distinct and divided political context. Avenues for further and comparative research are identified.

## Keywords

civil society, ethnic conflict, Northern Ireland, peacebuilding, peace process, sport

## Introduction

What impact does peace and political transition have on civil society groups, specifically sporting organisations, which have traditionally underpinned ethno-political division? Despite the widespread contemporary interest in the links between sport, peace and

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conflict, this question lacks explicit treatment in the literature. The burgeoning field of 'sport for development and peace' (SDP) (Darnell, 2012; Kidd, 2008) is preoccupied with sport (usually soccer) as an intervention in favour of peacebuilding, not as an existing aspect of civil society, enmeshed in the conflict, although there are some exceptions (e.g. Wood (2013) on football in Bosnia).

A valuable case study in this regard is that of Northern Ireland. While it is well known that sports have been implicated in the region's bitter constitutional politics (Sugden and Bairner, 1993) and that a relatively successful transition away from violence and political exclusion has taken place (recent accounts include Cochrane, 2013; Mitchell, 2015), little attention has been paid to the interrelationship of the peace process and the sporting world. What can we learn about how sports in divided societies, even those sports which are traditionally single-identity, can respond supportively to peacemaking? What contextual factors facilitate or constrain sports bodies from fulfilling a peacebuilding role? How can sport assist the reshaping of group identities which have been embittered and polarised by inter-communal violence?

The article begins by examining the relationship between sport, civil conflict and peace, identifying three peacebuilding functions of sport: in-group socialisation, promoting social cohesion and symbolically representing new identities. The article then explores the divided nature of sport in Northern Ireland and the content and implications of the 1998 'Good Friday' peace agreement. Then, changes within sport stemming from the peace process, as well as persistent barriers to sport's capacity to encourage reconciliation and integration, are examined. The analysis draws on a survey (n = 1210) conducted by the authors as part of a major government-funded study on social exclusion and sport (Hargie, Somerville and Mitchell, 2015). It assesses the findings in the light of the three potential peacebuilding functions of sport, noting considerable and innovative contributions from sports yet, crucially, the influence of the distinct and divided political context which constrains sport from exercising these functions fully. Avenues for further and comparative research are identified.

At the outset, definitions of key terms are in order. Northern Ireland is considered a 'deeply divided society', that is, one in which 'conflict exists along a well-entrenched fault line that is recurrent and endemic and that contains the potential for violence between the segments' (Guelke, 2012: 30). Organised sport is treated here as a dimension of civil society, defined as a 'sphere of voluntary action that is distinct from the state, political, private and economic spheres' whose organisations are 'oriented to specific interests' (Spurk, 2010: 8–9). Peacebuilding, in keeping with the classic formulations of Galtung, Boutros-Ghali, Lederach and others, is taken as the broad and long-term project of both structural and interpersonal change intended to avoid a relapse into violent conflict.

## **Sport, societal division and peace**

The capacity of sport to underpin group divisions exemplifies the fact that, as writers on social capital and civil society make clear, voluntary associational life is not inherently positive but is liable to acting as an incubator of separation and egotism (Paffenholz, 2010, 2014; Paris, 2004; Varshney, 2001). This propensity towards exclusivity is what Putnam (2000) terms the 'dark side' of social capital or what Chambers and Kopstein (2001) refer to as 'bad civil society'. Belloni (2008), meanwhile, notes that in ethnically divided societies, as well as unifying, multi-ethnic, civil society groups (such as human rights groups, trade unions, ecumenical movements) and groups which explicitly foster

violence and division (for instance paramilitaries), there is a third type: groups which, although eschewing violence, are culturally homogenous and are thus de facto perpetuators of difference and separation.

Participating in in-group activities is not inherently intolerant; as Mac Ginty (2011: 186) emphasises, there are good reasons—convenience, physical security, shared culture—why people perceive the in-group as the natural setting for cultural participation. Yet, civil society groups built on ascriptive criteria such as race, religion or ethnicity are likely to be based on exclusion and conflict with others, since a ‘worldview that regards identity as closed, fixed and inherently conflictual underpins a politics of belonging’ (Belloni, 2008: 191).

Given the widespread mismatch between identity groups and state borders in the contemporary world, numerous cases of sport exhibiting and expressing political cleavages exist (see McClancy, 1996; Sugden and Bairner, 2000). But a remarkable example is Lebanon, where soccer and basketball teams are part and parcel of the sectarianism and clientelism endemic in Lebanese society and are openly aligned with political/ethnic blocs (Reiche, 2011). Indeed, sport’s role as a vehicle for group identity makes it likely that it may not merely mirror social division, but actually exacerbate it, providing a platform for the expression of hostility, group chauvinism and violence, as football did, for example, in the lead-up to the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia (Wood, 2013).

However, contemporary interest among policy-makers, researchers and peace practitioners increasingly gravitates towards sport’s potential to transcend division in divided societies. This potential may be theorised variously (see, for example, Cárdenas, 2012; Giulianotti, 2011) but, retaining the present focus on sport as civil society, an instructive way to understand sport’s capacity in this regard is via the following threefold framework: sport may promote *in-group socialisation*, *social cohesion* and *symbolic representation of new identities*. The first two of these capacities are drawn from Paffenholz and Spurk’s (2010: 67) typology of seven peacebuilding functions of civil society, the other five (protection, monitoring, advocacy, intermediation and facilitation, and service delivery) being less relevant to sports organisations.

In-group socialisation, according to Paffenholz and Spurk, can take two forms. First, it can entail creating a culture of peace through promoting democratic attitudes, capacity building and conflict resolution skills. While some contend that sport is value-neutral and holds no intrinsic meaning apart from that which participants give it (Kidd, 2008; Sugden, 2010), Parry (2012: 785) argues that, on the contrary, rule-governed competitive sport is a ‘lived experiment’ in liberal values, promulgating ideas of social contract, equality before the law, justice, toleration and mutual respect. In any case, sport has an obvious relevance to the second type of in-group socialisation: building or consolidating group confidence and identity, especially within marginalised groups in asymmetric conflicts. However, Paffenholz and Spurk point out the danger that such identity strengthening may encourage behaviour, attitudes and a level of solidarity which are perceived as threatening by outsiders.

Social cohesion goes beyond creating in-group bonds towards forging Putnam’s (2000: 22) ‘bridging capital’ with other groups (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2010: 71–72). This may be promoted by sport in situations where sports and sporting organisations cross social divides, and it is the explicit purpose of sports-based reconciliation interventions such as Peace Players International (Tuohey and Cognato, 2011), Football for Peace (Sugden, 2010) and Open Fun Football Schools (Dorokhina et al., 2011; Gasser and Levinson, 2004). These projects use sport’s popularity and accessibility to bring

people of differing cultural and political identities together, especially young people, with the aim of undermining the group myths and stereotypes which survive through the absence of meaningful contact with the 'other' (Giulianotti, 2012). They implicitly or explicitly follow broad peacebuilding principles such as Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis or Lederach's (1997: 26) emphasis on encounter as 'humans-in-relationship' in ending inter-group antagonisms.

To these two peacebuilding functions of sport we add a third: the symbolic representation of co-operation and new identities. If sport can express antagonistic and exclusive identities, it can equally symbolise inclusive and open self-understandings, providing estranged groups a shared focus of allegiance and embedding a political transformation in the popular consciousness. In South Africa, sport provided the platform for totemic representations of the political change taking place, such as Mandela's donning of the Springbok rugby jersey associated with White South Africa, and Black and White athletes travelling to the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 in a plane decorated with the new national flag. Sport also underwent structural change in order to become more representative of South Africa's new democracy (Höglund and Sundberg, 2008; Keim, 2003). Another notable case is that of North and South Korea, where 'trans-national, pan-Korean, identity ... has been reinvigorated by the often emotional celebration of a common cultural heritage and national unity through the various sporting encounters between the two nations' (Merkel, 2008: 308). Nevertheless, the symbolic function of sport can be fleeting and is difficult to quantify; certainly, in the cases mentioned, its achievements should not be exaggerated. The potential impact of unifying symbols, gestures and rituals is acknowledged in the comparative study of peace processes, yet so too is the uncertainty surrounding their long-term effects (Darby and Mac Ginty, 2000: 242).

## **Sport, conflict and the peace process in Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society (Guelke, 2012: 9) comprising two main political communities: unionists who are pro-British and mainly Protestant, and nationalists who are pro-Irish and mainly Catholic. The origins of the conflict are often attributed to the settlement of Ireland by Britain in the 16th and 17th centuries (see McGarry and O'Leary, 1993; Ruane and Todd, 1996). The opposing political aspirations of the two ethno-political blocs led Britain to partition Ireland in 1920, with 6 counties in the north remaining within the United Kingdom (becoming Northern Ireland) and the remaining 26 counties becoming autonomous. For 50 years, Protestant unionists monopolised power in Northern Ireland in part due to their fear of being subsumed into a Catholic-dominated Southern state. However, grievances of the Catholic minority in the north eventually led in the late 1960s to civil rights demonstrations, civil unrest and the armed campaign of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) aimed at removing British rule from Ireland. Thirty years of violence, the so-called 'Troubles', followed in which over 3500 people were killed.

An early examination of the role of sport in this history of antagonism (Sugden and Bairner, 1993) emphasised how sport tended to mirror rather than challenge the wider conflict, and was pessimistic about the integrative potential of the main sports. Gaelic games, which are played almost exclusively by Catholics in Northern Ireland and taught in Catholic schools, are governed by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), an organisation that was set up in 1884 with an explicitly Irish nationalist purpose of resisting the cultural/sporting Anglicisation of Ireland and promoting political nationalism. The GAA has been overtly anti-unionist and, notably, until 2001, prohibited the participation of

members of the Northern Ireland state security forces, including thousands of (overwhelmingly Protestant) members of the police force. Hence, it was ‘unimaginable’ that Protestants could ever support Gaelic games in large numbers (Sugden and Bairner, 1993: 130). Rugby, along with other British-associated sports such as hockey and cricket, was predominantly Protestant and middle class, meaning that although it did enjoy some cross-community support and participation, it was incapable of acting as a unifying force among the working classes who were most directly affected by, and involved in, the political violence. And soccer’s popularity in both communities allowed the sport during the period of the Troubles to become a platform for antagonism, affording pro-state Protestants opportunities for displays of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and sectarianism (Bairner, 1999: 285) and playing a ‘counter hegemonic’ role for Catholics wishing to express an Irish identity and alienation from the Northern Irish state (Hassan, 2002: 80). Separate sports curricula in effectively single-identity schools were central to the perpetuation of division in sport, despite some use of sport as part of the government’s community-relations education programme ‘Education for Mutual Understanding’ introduced in the early 1990s (Sugden and Bairner, 1993: 98).

These pessimistic assertions, echoed in subsequent analyses of Northern Ireland sport (see Cronin, 2001), bear out the observation that rather than solely and benignly representing a neutral or moderating constituency, civil society in Northern Ireland has itself been divided and supportive of sectarian politics (Brewer et al., 2011). Sport, along with religion, education, housing and, of course, politics, has been part of the sectarian ‘system’ which conditions the experiences and life choices of individuals (Liechty and Clegg, 2001: 9). While cross-community civil society peacebuilding movements have made an important contribution to changed political circumstances (see, for example, Byrne, 2001), much sport has represented Belloni’s (2008) third type of civil society—helping maintain patterns of separation, even if not explicitly encouraging conflict. The key contemporary questions, therefore, are whether the recent political developments that have taken place were intended to make, were capable of making or have actually made any difference to the single-identity stasis and divisive nature of sport in Northern Ireland.

The consociational power-sharing deal that was reached on Good Friday, 1998, recognised the validity of unionist and nationalist identities, cultures and political aspirations and, in the main, encouraged reciprocal respect and tolerance between the two blocs—arguably seeking to manage their competition rather than encourage their demise. This absence of ambition to overcome these identity categories in the Agreement was criticised in some quarters, and indeed, evidence of power-sharing’s reconciliatory potential in contexts such as Bosnia, Lebanon and Iraq is notably dubious (Taylor, 2009; Wilson, 2010). Yet, the proponents of consociational power-sharing prescriptions for internal conflicts insist that such arrangements are a necessary response to political realities and that they do have the capacity, by allowing a prolonged period of political stability and cross-ethnic co-operation, to create a shared identity and allegiance (McGarry and O’Leary, 2009). In addition to its recognition of group identities, the Agreement contained powerful human rights protections and a range of measures designed to decrease the salience of ethnicity. These included police reform, demilitarisation, the disarmament of paramilitary groups and recognising victims (Higson, 2008). Furthermore, although the Agreement affirmed the two main traditions, it also enshrined the right to reject the traditional binary, confirming people’s right to hold both British and Irish citizenship simultaneously.

The likely impact of the Agreement on sport, culture and civil society, then, was uncertain. On one hand, single-identity sport would in theory erode organically over time as a

result of the improved security situation, political stability and a new political culture of tolerance and respect. On the other hand, the vulnerabilities caused by mandatory power-sharing, the uncertainty surrounding the constitutional future (the Agreement permitted Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom should a majority, at some point, favour this) and the absence of any energetic plan to encourage inter-communal mixing made it likely that cultural assertion might take the place of the military struggle, and social division would persist.

As we explore in the next section, both of these tendencies have been in evidence since 1998. First, we examine developments within sport as well as findings from our survey that suggest sport may be following a trajectory away from its role as a marker of societal division and towards greater inclusivity. Second, we discuss persistent barriers to greater inclusivity and integration, particularly in relation to symbolic and territorial contestation, as well as certain public attitudes which suggest continuity with traditional divisions.

The survey (n=1210), designed by the authors, probed attitudes on a range of issues pertaining to sport, sectarianism and inclusion/exclusion and was included as part of the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (ARK, 2014). The survey items were developed from the findings of a comprehensive literature review and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with members of the public [!] and representatives of sports bodies concerning perceived successes and failures in creating more inclusive sports cultures in Northern Ireland. The survey respondents comprised a systematic random sample drawn from the Postcode Address File database of addresses. In terms of religious community background, 40% of respondents identified as Protestant, 41% as Catholic, 17% as no religion and 1% as 'other'. This compares with proportions recorded in the 2011 Northern Ireland census when 48% identified as being from a Protestant community background, 45% as being from a Catholic community background, 6% as no religion and 1% as refused/missing.<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews with persons over 18 years of age in their homes.

The researchers' choice of a public attitudes survey is a response to the marked qualitative emphasis of the overwhelming majority of research on sport in Northern Ireland, and indeed the paucity of primary research of any kind. As is the inherent limitation of the survey approach, the results reported here are a snapshot; as the first survey of its kind, the findings provide benchmarks that will allow the all-important longitudinal study of public attitudes to sport, inclusion and political change. Furthermore, since meaning and causality are not always apparent from the descriptive statistics, the findings are contextualised with analysis of media sources and a variety of pertinent available research. Although gender, age and class were also investigated and analysed in the research project, the focus in this article is on the impact of religious community background, specifically on attitudes to sport and peacebuilding and to the three main stadium sports and governing bodies, soccer, Gaelic games and rugby union, the sports which have been most associated with national identity politics.

### **Sport after the 1998 Agreement: signs of a new inclusivity**

The peace process catalysed several significant 'top-down' initiatives and reforms in the sporting world. Perhaps the most direct result of political change was the GAA's repeal of its rule excluding the security forces from membership. This occurred in November 2001 in response to the enactment of measures to make the police force more accountable,

transparent and representative of the Catholic community (Hassan, 2005). Since then, a Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Gaelic football team has been formed. In April 2011, the GAA's very public show of support at the funeral of a police officer, Ronan Kerr, who was murdered by republicans opposed to the peace process, and who was a GAA member, demonstrated the extent to which the organisation had embraced and endorsed the new political dispensation (Hassan and Telford, 2014). The GAA has also made efforts to develop links with the unionist community through forming cross-community teams and, in a hugely symbolic gesture, welcomed Queen Elizabeth II to the home of the GAA, Croke Park in Dublin, in June 2011. These developments, unthinkable in the past, should be understood in the light not solely of the GAA's traditional exclusivism but also the problems the organisation experienced due to the actions of loyalist paramilitaries and state security forces during the Troubles (Hassan and O'Kane, 2012).

Soccer has also undergone a process of self-examination in tune with the political times. Windsor Park, the home of Northern Ireland international soccer, has since the onset of the Troubles been viewed by some as a bastion of working-class unionist identity (Bairner, 1999), but a spike in sectarian trouble in the early 2000s led to a high-profile community-relations campaign, 'Football for All', funded by the European Union (EU) peace programme, aimed at eradicating sectarianism from the game, particularly at home internationals. Independent evaluations found the campaign to be extremely effective (Wilson, 2005, 2011). Although the least politically tainted of the three sports, rugby too has evolved, in that the professionalisation of the game and increased television coverage have broadened the sport beyond the traditional social networks embedded in privileged, mainly Protestant, schools. The Ireland international team has always included players from North and South of the border, and in an effort to be inclusive, since 1995, a specially commissioned neutral anthem, 'Ireland's Call', neither British nor Irish, has been used at matches, although the anthem of the Republic of Ireland is still played at home games (Clerkin, 2015). Since 2012, the three largest sports have been working in partnership through the Northern Ireland government-funded programme, 'Sport in the Community', with the aim of shared learning towards improving volunteering, club development and cross-community relationships (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2012).

Meanwhile, sport has acted as the vehicle for a number of significant 'bottom-up' peacebuilding projects. Peace Players International has been active in Northern Ireland since 2002, using basketball, a 'neutral' sport in the region and many other conflict zones, to develop contact between young people from differing political backgrounds (see Tuohey and Cognato, 2011). The organisation has implemented, in conjunction with the three main sports, the 'Game of Three Halves', a programme which exposes young people from different backgrounds to all three sports in combination with community-relations education. Furthermore, in symbolic acts of outreach across the sectarian divide, leaders from the main unionist and nationalist parties have taken the unprecedented steps of attending sports associated with the other community. However, Sinn Féin Minister Carál Ní Chuilín took her seat at the Northern Ireland match which she attended after the British national anthem had been played, and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) Minister Edwin Poots took his seat at the GAA match he attended after the Irish anthem had been played (*British Broadcasting Corporation*, 2011).

In support of these developments, our survey found that an overwhelming majority of respondents (84%) agreed with the proposition that 'sports in Northern Ireland are more open and inclusive than ten years ago'. Moreover, a similar proportion (86%) agreed or

**Table 1.** 'Thinking about some of the main organisers of team sports in NI, do you think that the following organisations are taking active steps to welcome all traditions in NI?'

		Yes definitely (%)	Yes probably (%)	Don't know (%)	No probably not (%)	No definitely not (%)
The Gaelic Athletic Association	Catholics	20.0	40.2	15.7	20.4	3.7
	Protestants	5.5	24.3	25.9	31.4	12.9
	No religion	6.2	25.6	37.0	24.6	6.6
	All	11.6	31.0	23.7	25.7	8.0
The Irish Football Association	Catholics	14.6	40.6	21.6	19.2	3.9
	Protestants	9.0	39.0	25.7	21.4	4.9
	No religion	6.2	35.5	34.1	21.8	2.4
	All	10.8	39	25.5	20.6	4.0
Ulster Rugby	Catholics	21.0	41.6	23.3	12.0	2.1
	Protestants	17.1	44.7	24.1	12.7	1.4
	No religion	21.3	32.7	33.6	11.8	0.5
	All	19.5	41.3	25.5	12.2	1.5

Source: ARK (2014).

strongly agreed that 'sport is a good way to break down barriers between Protestants and Catholics'. Such figures should give added impetus to the focus on sport as a peacebuilding tool contained in the power-sharing Executive's current community-relations strategy, *Together: Building a United Community* (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2013). More specifically, we sought to gauge the public perception of the three main sporting bodies' inclusivity efforts by asking 'Thinking about some of the main organisers of team sports in NI, do you think that the following organisations are taking active steps to welcome all traditions in NI?'

As shown in Table 1, regarding the GAA, 42.6% of the sample responded 'yes definitely' or 'yes probably' and 33.7% responded 'no probably not' or 'no definitely not'. Many more Catholics than Protestants held a positive view of the inclusivity efforts of the GAA: 60.2% compared to 29.8%. Regarding the Irish Football Association (IFA), governing body of soccer in Northern Ireland, 49.8% of the sample responded 'yes definitely' or 'yes probably' and 24.6% responded 'no probably not' or 'no definitely not'; in terms of religious background, 55.2% of Catholics and 48% of Protestants were positive. And in relation to Ulster Rugby, 60.8% of the sample responded 'yes definitely' or 'yes probably' and 13.7% responded 'no probably not' or 'no definitely not'. This included 62.6% of Catholics who were positive and 61.8% of Protestants.

While all the sporting bodies were viewed more positively than negatively, the GAA, notably, has much further to travel in terms of securing cross-community confidence. Unsurprisingly, Catholics held a more positive view of the GAA than Protestants, although it is significant that a large minority of Catholics (24.1%) believed that the GAA was not doing enough to welcome all traditions. Interestingly, Ulster Rugby has probably taken the fewest 'active steps' to welcome all traditions, but scores well here because it enjoys the positive cross-community regard within which rugby is viewed. It is also striking that Catholics held a more positive view of the IFA than Protestants. This suggests that the efforts of the IFA to eradicate sectarianism from the Northern Ireland international game have been recognised within the Catholic community.



## **Sport after the 1998 Agreement: the persistence of communal exclusivity**

Despite the change in the sporting world stimulated by the peace process, there is evidence that patterns of separation persist in sport, patterns which reflect broader and enduring social divisions. At the most basic level, the religious community background of the support bases of the main sports appears to continue to follow traditional lines. For instance, we investigated levels of television viewing of Gaelic games, soccer and rugby. Only 1.3% of Protestants reported watching ‘a lot’ of Gaelic games on television, compared with 30.5% of Catholics. A figure of 22.8% of Protestants had watched Northern Ireland international soccer ‘a lot’ compared with a much smaller proportion—9.8%—of Catholics, while 17.9% of Catholics and 28% of Protestants had watched Ulster rugby matches ‘a lot’.

These differentials are consistent with research into attendance at live sporting events which shows that in 2011/2012, 20% of Catholics attended a live GAA match compared to fewer than 1% of Protestants (Mallon, 2013). Similar numbers of each community—11% of Protestants and 8% of Catholics—had attended a live soccer match. A total of 9% of Protestants and 4% of Catholics had attended a live rugby match, and these tended to come from the least deprived areas. Hockey and cricket were attended almost exclusively by Protestants. In our survey, a majority of the sample actually appeared to be unconcerned by the principle of separate sports for separate communities. In response to the item ‘There is nothing wrong with different sports or teams being for Protestants or Catholics’, 57% of people agreed or strongly agreed, with little difference in the opinions of Protestants and Catholics.

Moreover, the ongoing constitutional question continues to impinge upon sport. As indicated by the pointed absences of the politicians during the playing of the anthems at the matches they attended, the playing of the British national anthem at international soccer matches and the Irish national anthem at some GAA matches continues to create a chill factor for the ‘other side’. This is symptomatic of wider cultural tensions; as McCall (2006: 313) states plainly, the mutual uncertainties instituted by the peace have meant that ‘culture has become a primary site for the perpetuation of the unionist-nationalist ethno-national conflict’. While Northern Ireland is officially part of the United Kingdom, nationalists have argued that limitations should be placed on the display of British state symbols out of sensitivity to the (Irish) identity and culture of Catholics. This contention has led to a series of post-1998 disputes over the appropriate display of flags and emblems, the most bitter of which was the decision in December 2012 by Belfast City Council to restrict the display of the British flag from City Hall which precipitated months of street protests by unionists (see Nolan et al., 2014).

The present research shows opinion closely divided on the topic of anthems in sport. Thus, as shown in Table 2, 35.4% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that ‘national anthems should not be part of sport in Northern Ireland’, while 42.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 52.8% of Protestants disagreed compared to 36.6% of Catholics and 31.8% of the no religion group. These differences may be expected given how many Protestants have felt their identity and culture to be threatened by the peace process, especially in the wake of the flag dispute. The divisiveness of the issue suggests, first, that change in the use of anthems may need to be negotiated and synchronised between sports and, second, that any change must command the support of the political parties and the

**Table 2.** 'National anthems should not be part of sport in Northern Ireland'.

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Catholics	9.8	32.2	21.4	28.7	7.9
Protestants	7.0	20.7	20.5	35.3	16.5
No religion	11.5	27.6	29.2	25.5	6.3
All	8.9	26.5	22.4	31.0	11.2

Source: ARK (2014).

wider public, and take place in the context of greater consensus at the party-political level in relation to cultural expression.

At the same time, greater mixing in social life continues to be hamstrung by the ongoing sectarian division of territory. Paramilitary control persists in working-class areas, as does sectarian rioting, especially in 'interface' zones where Protestant and Catholic areas meet, meaning that territorial awareness continues to be regarded as important for personal security. Territorial division is at its most stark along the so-called 'peace walls', barriers separating Protestant and Catholic housing designed to prevent rioting and attacks. Research on attitudes to peace walls found that 78% of people across Northern Ireland believe that the territorial segregation of Protestants and Catholics is common even where there are no peace walls (Byrne et al., 2012: 27). Allied to this is the fact that 93.5% of school children continue to be educated in predominantly Protestant or predominantly Catholic schools and thus remain subject to different sports curricula (Nolan, 2014: 120).

What impact does territorial division have on the inclusivity of the three big sports? Our survey posed a scenario in which respondents were offered free tickets to each of the three main sporting venues. Casement Park, the GAA stadium, is in nationalist West Belfast and was in close proximity to a number of violent incidents during the Troubles. Furthermore, the eponymous Roger Casement was a nationalist hero of the Irish revolutionary era at the start of the 20th century; other GAA grounds have been named after individuals whom unionists regard as Irish republican terrorists. Ulster's provincial rugby ground, Ravenhill, is in a predominantly unionist area of Belfast, although it has never been associated with sectarian trouble. The national soccer stadium, Windsor Park, is located in a traditionally hard-line unionist area of South Belfast and has been the scene of highly publicised anti-Catholic chanting by a section of fans.

In response to the question 'Suppose you were given tickets for a GAA match in Casement Park in Belfast, would you try to go?', twice as many Catholics (77.6%) as Protestants (38.8%) said they would go, as shown in Table 3. By contrast, asked the same question in relation to Ravenhill, home of Ulster rugby, 69.3% of Catholics said they would go compared to 66.3% of Protestants. Regarding willingness to attend Windsor Park, the national soccer stadium, 56.4% of Catholics said they would go compared to 60.2% of Protestants.

Despite the explanatory limitations of these figures, the trends are nonetheless noteworthy. The sharp religious difference in willingness to attend Casement Park is expected, given the divided geography of Belfast, and poses a challenge to the GAA. Rugby has always been the least divisive of the three sports and the stadium is in an area with a relatively untroubled history, but the slightly higher proportion of Catholics

**Table 3.** ‘Suppose you were given tickets for a match at these venues, would you try to go?’.

	Casement Park—GAA		Ravenhill—Ulster Rugby		Windsor Park—NI international soccer	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Catholics	77.6	22.4	69.3	30.7	56.4	43.6
Protestants	38.8	61.2	66.3	33.7	60.2	39.8
No religion	56.9	43.1	73.7	26.3	61.5	38.5
All	58.2	41.8	68.9	31.1	58.9	41.1

Source: ARK (2014).

GAA: Gaelic Athletic Association.

willing to attend is still eye-catching, given the traditional Protestant associations of the sport. Regarding the soccer ground, the fact that only slightly fewer Catholics would be willing to attend is also striking. It reinforces the impression noted above that the IFA’s attempts to make Northern Ireland international soccer matches more inclusive have met with some success.

Undercutting the impact of territorial division on sport was one of the rationales of the plan to build a new stadium shared by all three sports on the site of the now-defunct Maze prison which held paramilitary prisoners during the Troubles. The potential symbolism of the shared location, built in space previously associated with violence and division, was obvious and would have likely made the other venues of sports more welcoming to people from all backgrounds. However, the plan collapsed in 2009; significantly, the three sports were in support, but the scheme was abandoned due to lack of political consensus on the proposal to build a ‘conflict transformation centre’ also on the site which unionists worried would become a ‘shrine to republican terrorism’. Thus, as Hassan and O’Kane (2012: 399) observe, ‘a stadium that had the potential to encapsulate a new beginning to life in Northern Ireland was sacrificed due to a failure to properly draw a line under its disputed past’.

## Discussion and conclusion

The peace process has facilitated a number of significant evolutions in Northern Ireland sport and these developments have fed back into the process of social and political change through their fulfilment, to a degree, of the three peacebuilding functions of sport outlined above: in-group socialisation; building social cohesion across inter-group divides; and the symbolic, sportive expression of new, shared identities. Taking in-group socialisation first, it was noted that it can take two forms: building a democratic culture of peace and strengthening group identity and confidence. The former could be said to have been advanced through the positive and courageous steps taken by the three main sports away from their exclusive sporting and organisational identities and towards fostering a more democratic ethos of tolerance and diversity among their support bases. Rule changes and outreach in the GAA and soccer’s Football for All campaign exemplify this progress. In this way, the sports were acting as what Brewer (2010: 55) calls civil society ‘institutional spaces’ of peacebuilding, showing leadership through modelling, to political leaders and the grassroots, the peace process values of accommodation and togetherness. These developments have fashioned more open personas for the sports

and contributed to their ability to engage non-traditional constituencies, and the willingness of 'others' to engage with them.

The second peacebuilding function of sport, social cohesion, has been active through initiatives which have used sport as an explicit vehicle for community-relations education and cross-community contact among young people with the aim of building a shared and cohesive society, reversing the segregation and mutual suspicion which sharpened during the years of violence. This effort includes youth programmes run in concert by the three main sports such as the 'Game of Three Halves' and the high level co-operation of the three sports in mutually advantageous initiatives such as 'Sport in the Community' through which they have shared practical knowledge and expertise. As for the third peacebuilding capacity of sport, symbolically expressing new identities, sport has provided a platform for shows of respect between the leaders of unionism and nationalism, albeit momentary and somewhat equivocal, with politicians showing displeasure at the respective national anthems. Here, what was arguably the most potent moment took place outside of Northern Ireland: the visit of Queen Elizabeth to the GAA's Croke Park.

However, the limitations on the operation of the three peacebuilding functions are manifest. Despite moves towards inclusivity and openness, sports continue to fulfil a more insular version of in-group socialisation. The society-wide sectarian system in which community, locality, church, school and sport are linked sustains the *de facto* single-identity nature of much sport indicated by our findings. This system undermines the ability of inclusivity policies or outreach to upset the demographic make-up of sports, and sports continue to facilitate the separate socialisation of Catholics and Protestants, and fail to advance, in a substantial way, cross-community social cohesion. Moreover, aspects of sports which remain unchanged, such as anthems, symbols and ethos, continue to speak to traditional and exclusive identities. The finding that 57% of people believe that 'there is nothing wrong with different sports or teams being for Protestants or Catholics' recalls Sugden and Bairner's (1993: 136) comment, over 20 years old, that many sports participants simply do not want sports cultures to change: 'Generally, cultural division is way of life in Northern Ireland to such a degree that most of the population derive comfort from the totems of the separate civil societies'.

Furthermore, the potential for sport to serve a symbolic reconciliatory function through representing the new post-Agreement realities has been drastically inhibited by the nature of the Agreement and the structure of the conflict. South Africa provides an instructive comparison, where such a function was possible because national sports teams could represent a deeply divided society in a state whose borders were uncontested. This is not the case in Northern Ireland where the state, and symbolic representations of the state, remains controversial; this contingency notably hamstringing the most promising focus of shared fandom, the 'national' Northern Ireland soccer team (Bairner, 2013). Moreover, the opportunity for perhaps the most profound symbolic representation of change—a shared sports stadium—was lost due to political dissensus on outstanding 'conflict legacy' matters.

In sum, while the Northern Ireland case bears out the peacebuilding functions of sport, it also reveals two powerful contextual constraints. First, the building of cross-community social cohesion through sport is circumscribed by the fact that the largest sports are themselves part of a divided civil society which reproduces division and are embedded in group cultures shaped by the conflict; the contradictory 'bonding' and 'bridging' impacts of the sports occur simultaneously. The cross-community work of the main sports could be regarded as mere tinkering at the edges of large and resilient single-identity sporting

blocs. It is this persistent contradiction which prompts Mac Ginty (2011) to characterise Northern Ireland civil society as a ‘hybrid civil society’. Demonstrating how liberal peace assumptions have been distorted by local realities and requirements around the world, Mac Ginty’s portrayal of post-1998 civil society in Northern Ireland highlights how liberal peace actors (the British and Irish Governments, the United States and the EU) have co-operated with, funded and lent credibility to certain divisive and arguably illiberal civil society actors (the GAA, Orange Order, ex-combatants, churches), apparently to enhance community-building capacity and encourage moderation, but with limited success in spurring bridge-building across the sectarian divide.

Second, all three peacebuilding functions are constrained by the nature of the political context. Unresolved facets of the conflict—residential segregation, territorial division, educational separation, appropriate transitional justice mechanisms and cultural contestation—continue to limit the extent to which sports can reach outside their traditional domains. Given that it is in the mutual, electoral self-interest of the power-sharing parties to maintain distinct identity blocs, incentives to resolve outstanding conflict issues are limited. Indeed, separate sports for separate peoples are not necessarily problematic to a peace process informed by consociationalism which affords some degree of autonomy for identity groups (Lijphart, 1977). Tonge’s (2014: 194) assessment of consociational prescriptions for ethnic conflict resonates with the Northern Irish case:

a belief in an organic approach to reintegration is justified in the years following conflict, but when unaccompanied by a longer-term plan for societal integration, does not offer the promise of movement towards reconciliation, instead leading to the restatement of difference.

This study suggests two valuable avenues for further research. First, the Northern Ireland case demonstrates the pertinence of further and comparative research on how features of comparable divided contexts—from ‘successful’ transitions like South Africa and Bosnia and Herzegovina to stalled or failed peace processes such as Israel–Palestine, Sri Lanka and Lebanon—release, or close down, the peacebuilding capacities of sporting organisations. As noted at the outset, this is a blind spot in the sport and peacebuilding literature, and as Paffenholz (2014) observes, context is key to the capacity of civil society to contribute to peacebuilding.

Second, Northern Ireland contains a cluster of sports-based inclusivity measures which may well be applicable to other contexts. The proliferation of peace processes in the post-Cold War era led to an accumulation of international knowledge on political interventions and societal healing processes, with the transfer of inspiration and practical tools between contexts (Darby, 2008; Tonge, 2014: 13–15). Similarly, further research on how Northern Ireland’s experience in the sporting world can contribute positively in other conflict arenas is worthwhile. The Football for All campaign has received international attention, and indeed, this study adds support to its effectiveness. The (admittedly failed) plan to create a shared sports stadium raises the questions of how shared sporting space may contribute to post-conflict peacebuilding elsewhere. One of the most striking recent developments has been the co-operation, on peacebuilding and practical matters, of the three governing bodies—a counterpoint to the often fractious interactions of the power-sharing political parties. The means and methods by which this co-operation was achieved and is sustained deserve further academic scrutiny in order to ascertain the extent to which it could provide a model for sporting organisations in other divided societies.

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## Note

1. See Technical Notes on Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) website. Full details on the methodology of the survey are available at <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2013/tech13.pdf>. Results of all survey modules, including an SPSS file of the data, are available on the NILT website.

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