The ‘silent’ Irish – football, migrants and the pursuit of integration

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Much has been written about life and sport in Ireland. In Northern Ireland, such discourse has rarely strayed from the issue of identity politics and all aspects of society appear, even in an era of peace, to reflect some degree of partisanship, including within the realm of association football. In the Republic of Ireland, the emphasis has increasingly been on the growing multiculturalism of that state and at present there exists a real challenge to all aspects of civic society to do more to integrate ‘new arrivals’ into Irish life in a more convincing manner than has been the case to date. And so, this is essentially what this article intends to examine – the role football authorities in Ireland can and do play in utilising the game as a means of integrating ethnic minorities into everyday life. There are examples of impactful work already taking place in this regard – notably on the part of the Irish Football Association’s (IFA’s) innovative World United programme, whilst there also remains shortcomings around the approach adopted both by the IFA and the Football Association of Ireland and these are critically engaged with throughout this article. Finally, in the spirit of finding a constructive way forward, the somewhat recalcitrant and authoritarian approach to granting eligibility to some of the very best young footballers on the island, including those living in the Republic of Ireland’s designated refugee centre north of Dublin, is afforded due recognition.

Introduction

One of the defining features of football in Ireland over at least the last three decades has been the issue of national identity and, arising out of this, the approach of the two governing bodies for the game on the island, the Irish Football Association (IFA) and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), concerning the contested matter of player eligibility and selection. There has been fulsome coverage of this dispute across a range of public forums during this same period, including much within the academic domain.\(^1\) The greater part of this discourse coheres around questions of ethnic allegiance yet, in totality, this focus has achieved little by way of ameliorating an increasingly strained relationship between the two football administrative bodies on the island.

Seemingly lost amid this increasingly fractious debate are those ‘new arrivals’ into Ireland, some of whom are refugees or asylum seekers. Others have similarly chosen to migrate to Ireland in search of better socio-economic conditions for themselves, to secure work and, for a small minority, to merely lead out a life of
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The article, directed especially towards these themes, as follows:

According to the information from the FAI, the Republic of Ireland, when considering the issue of racism, is very much aware of the potential for such incidents to occur, and in response, has implemented a comprehensive set of measures. However, it's important to note that the presence of racism is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach.
majority Unionist (with Britain) and Protestant community, tends to be understood as a ‘Protestant problem’, whilst racism in the south, where the population remains overwhelmingly Catholic, is principally seen as an issue for sections of that community. Yet, as has been outlined, there also remains a degree of commonality between racism in the north of Ireland and in the south, especially if a wider definition of racism, as that incorporating the two dominant communities in Northern Ireland, is employed. There have been instances of people from Northern Ireland being identified and verbally abused in the Republic of Ireland because of their place of residency and vice versa. In fact, Fulton’s (2005) work on the experiences of fans from Northern Ireland when supporting the Republic of Ireland team, as has emerged as a phenomenon in its own right since the mid-1980s, is an insightful examination of this issue in the sporting realm. Moreover, it is apparent that racism in Ireland is not some localized derivative of either British or American racism; instead, Irish racism is predicated on the strength and efficacy of community and, for some, a threat to its continuing integrity.

In Northern Ireland, this relationship has been conditioned and refined through sectarian conflict and social exclusion, which marked life in that part of the UK for much of the second half of the twentieth century. As increasingly homogenized communities sought comfort amid their own insularity, ‘outsiders’ – or at least a perceived threat to the make-up of these communities by minority ethnic groups, especially migrant workers – became a source of malcontent for some. In this regard, minority communities are categorized as ‘alien invaders’ involved in ‘taking jobs from the indigenous people’, transient and therefore uncaring, devoid of an interest in integrating (assimilating), and not sufficiently aware of local mores and values. The net result of these crude portrayals and stereotypes is that minority populations have increasingly been subject to all forms of abuse, including physical attack and, for some, enforced repatriation.

Even following a series of high profile and racially motivated incidents in Belfast and elsewhere in Northern Ireland between 2009 and 2011, many linked to sport and association football in particular, popular discourse somehow managed to blame the victims rather than the perpetrators of such attacks. The suggestion was that by wilfully transporting themselves into these communities, such ‘new arrivals’ were threatening a well-established way of life. In fact, the same is true in what limited work has been undertaken into racism within domestic football in Northern Ireland. The authors of a report detailing the IFA’s response to UEFA’s 10-point plan, designed to address racism within European football, argued that compared to the scourge of sectarianism ‘there has been less evidence of racism within Northern Irish football, but this may in large part be due to the small numbers of non-white and non-UK or Irish nationals involved in the game’. The implication was clear – racism was not an issue because there were very few members of ethnic minorities playing the game in Northern Ireland. In this case, the absence of players from non-indigenous backgrounds is paralleled with an absence of racism generally. However, this conclusion is drawn in such a matter-of-fact manner as to constitute a troublesome point of departure for those intent on tackling discrimination and prejudice within the Irish game. Sadly, it is reflective of a report that barely highlights the real issues surrounding racism and sectarianism in Northern Ireland football (notwithstanding the established terms of reference) and arguably does a disservice to the body of work undertaken by the IFA and some of its member clubs in addressing these issues ‘on the ground’.
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promoting greater levels of integration and sharing in a post-conflict setting; and, on the other, the need to offer a sufficiently informed response to the growing diversity apparent across the country following a significant increase in the numbers of foreign nationals attracted there in light of the systematic expansion of the European Union. In short, the transformation of Northern Irish, and indeed Irish, society from an essentially mono-cultural collective to one more accurately defined by diversity and relative liberalism has not been without its challenges. Indeed, one of the most obvious barriers facing those wishing to advance the cause of ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland is their patent lack of political agency or even, in many cases, representation in the public sphere.13

**Ethnic intolerance and the response of football authorities**

Thus, the reality is that despite considerable advancements aimed at addressing decades of division and with it suspicion in Northern Ireland, the country remains deeply divided along ethno-sectarian lines. This predilection towards myopia and, in some cases, resultant xenophobia has meant that Northern Ireland has constituted far from a welcoming environment for many new arrivals into the country. This view was borne out in 2007, when the results of a 23-country survey into attitudes towards immigrants and the aspirations of foreign workers revealed respondents in Northern Ireland to be those least likely to welcome such individuals as neighbours. This prevailing view is further reinforced by a seemingly growing number of attacks on foreign nationals in Northern Ireland. For example, over the course of the decade 1997–2007, the number of reported racist attacks in Northern Ireland grew by over 500%. The overwhelming majority of these attacks have taken place in the eastern half of Northern Ireland and, perhaps not surprisingly, specifically within inner city, predominantly working-class, parts of Belfast. Coincidentally, it is often within these locales, and amongst their communities, that support for the game of football is at its most pronounced.11

As such the existence of racism in football, and indeed Northern Irish society as a whole, is an extremely complex matter. Few clubs in the country’s domestic league have been unaffected by racist activity, and the response from the game’s governing body and the government department with responsibility for sport in Northern Ireland, Sport NI, has been largely unconvincing, certainly until relatively recently. It highlights one obvious correlation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in terms of football governance, which is the incapacity, even on occasions the apparent unwillingness, of those with responsibility for the sport to tackle racism in anything resembling a convincing manner.12 This certainly captured the mood up until 2000 when, in the wake of sustained sectarian incidents around Northern Ireland football and with no apparent solution in sight, the IFA launched its Football for All campaign. It would be wrong to imply that this community relations campaign somehow offered an immediate remedy to the ills that had beset football in Northern Ireland. Less than 2 months later, for example, Neil Lennon, arguably the side’s best player and then team captain, responded to a death threat he received prior to a friendly international at Windsor Park by retiring from the international scene, never again to don the green shirt in competitive action. However, the promotion of the IFA’s Football for All initiative did begin a process which very gradually resulted in a comparatively normal atmosphere at Northern Ireland’s home games taking hold, albeit many Catholics continue to absent themselves soon after the final whistle.

To return to the notion of the predominantly male-dominant, virtually mono-cultural world of football teams in a context where the political landscape offers an uncertain and constantly shifting prospect.
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offers, presents an invaluable outlet for new arrivals into any unfamiliar setting. By 2012, the club had a roster reflecting a truly diverse group of recruits, with players from as far afield as Somalia, Qatar and Iran. Whilst the team was not necessarily established to meet the needs of the indigenous community, some locals have also joined, and the club’s governance remains the almost exclusive preserve of locally sourced volunteers.

Whilst there is undoubtedly some way to go in ensuring Northern Ireland as a country can consider itself a wholly welcoming environment for people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, small-scale initiatives like World United F.C. do offer hope that sport, in this case football, can offer some assistance in what is a setting defined by a multiplicity of identity issues. For slightly different reasons, and certainly in more contemporary times, very similar concerns have been occupying the minds of football authorities in the Republic of Ireland, of which a closer examination is now provided.

Republic of Ireland

In preparation for ‘The Ones that Got Away’, a 2004 television documentary featuring footballers who qualified for the Republic of Ireland but declared instead for other countries, a series of interviews was carried out that revealed a tendency for players, with at least one Irish grandparent, to opt for a cap with the green shamrock when a direct approach was made to them by FAI officials or fellow club players acting on its behalf. The latter process proved fruitful when Alan Kelly Snr., the former Republic of Ireland international goalkeeper and Preston North End icon persuaded his Lancashire-born teenage protégé Mark Lawrenson to ‘naturalise’ by way of his mother’s birth right.14

The practice of using this so-called ‘Granny Rule’ as a calling card on potential players was initiated in the Irish context as far back as 1965, with the selection of Manchester United’s Shay Brennan and has continued, to exponential effect, to this day. Such provision in the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act was stretched to near breaking point in the case of Michael Robinson whose third-generation Irish mother invoked her right to Irish citizenship to allow him to play for the Republic of Ireland soccer team in international competition. Prior to this case, high-profile players, including the Everton midfielder Peter Reid (grandfather), Johnny Byrne (both parents) and Manchester City’s famed goalkeeper Joe Corrigan all qualified under the Article, but found instead that their allegiance lay with England. In the case of Corrigan, as both his parents were born in the Irish Republic, it was the Roman Catholic chaplain of his youth club in Manchester who attempted to persuade him to declare for the land of his ancestral heritage. In a subsequent interview, Corrigan admitted that he would indeed have declared for the Republic of Ireland if the FAI had approached him directly. The Manchester City veteran retired with only nine senior caps for England, whereas he would almost certainly have gained multiples of this number had he decided to side with the Irish instead.

With the arrival of Jack Charlton as manager of the Republic of Ireland in 1986, this ‘Granny Rule’ was exploited to the full. When the team of players stood to attention for Anjrnan na bhFhiann, the Irish national anthem, in the Neckarstadion, Stuttgart for its opening Euro ’88 championship game, eight of the 11 players on show were born in the UK. The success of the national team then, and its further successes at the World Cup tournament, Italia ’90, was in the main, secured by a blend of Anglo-Irish
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whose remarkable story is captured elsewhere in this collection following the ethnographic research undertaken by Max Mauro. This 17-year-old midfielder who came to Ireland with his parents as a child, was nominated by referees on no less than 19 separate occasions as ‘man of the match’ during the course of the season 2011/2012, yet despite winning the league and cup ‘double’ with his club, Raheem was never selected to join his league’s representative team, nor was he ever selected for the Republic of Ireland schools team. Lately, he has come to the attention of Glentoran FC of Belfast and a number of clubs in Belgium and looks certain to leave Ireland, never having represented the country where he has lived most of his life to date.

Raheem’s compatriot, Chukwuemeka Onwubiko, has been capped by the Republic of Ireland from U16 up to U19 levels; but, due to his residency status, the games in which he has participated have been confined to the territory of the Republic of Ireland. This restriction also affected his employment at the highest level of the English game after he had successful trials with Manchester City and West Bromwich Albion, but could not secure a work permit to move to the UK on a full-time basis. Eventually, after years of inactivity and a restricted football career, he was granted Irish citizenship and played abroad for his adopted country. Less fortunate was another Nigerian-born teenager, Ismahil Akinade of Bray Wanderers F.C. This player made his debut for the ‘home-based’ Republic of Ireland U21 team in a friendly game in Dublin in 2012. Even though he has lived in Ireland for the last 11 years, he still awaits confirmation from the Irish Ministry of Justice to grant him an Irish passport that would allow him to play abroad.

Further complicating the qualification issue has been the passing (by referendum in the Irish parliament) of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 2004. Under the provisions of this Act, children born of certain foreign national parents on or after 1 January 2005 are not automatically entitled to Irish citizenship. Children born on the island of Ireland on or after 1 January 2005 are entitled to Irish citizenship, if they have a British parent or a parent is entitled to live in Northern Ireland or the Irish State without restriction on their residency. Other foreign national parents of children born in the island of Ireland on or after 1 January 2005 must prove that they have a genuine link to Ireland. This should be evidenced by their having three out of the previous four years reckoned residence on the island of Ireland immediately before the birth of the child. On proof of a genuine link to Ireland, their child will be entitled to Irish Citizenship and can apply for a certificate of nationality.

This latest barrier to Irish citizenship has not gone unnoticed by overseas football clubs who have been making enquiries about a number of players participating in the country’s U10 leagues. One player who has progressed through this category is the South African-born Robin Windvogel. This 12-year-old protégé began his career with Albert Johansson FC, which in turn emerged from the Direct Provision Centre for Refugees-in Waiting at Mosney, County Meath. The club, named in honour of the first black South African to play in the English professional leagues, has representatives from fourteen different countries who are living at the refugee centre. Interestingly, in light of the often troublesome relationship between the FAI and IFA over player eligibility, Windvogel’s talent was soon recognized by the Emerging Talent Academy in Northern Ireland, which, in contrast to their southern equivalents, does not have an issue with his South African nationality. The player has been invited on trial by Sporting Lisbon of Portugal later in 2013 but, in contrast, the prospects of him playing for the Republic of Ireland appear slim.

While their grants are frozen, they are allowed to travel on a EU/EEA family registration card. They are not allowed to work and they are not allowed to enter the Republic of Ireland unless they hold a visa. The policy is based on the assumption that, without work or education, family may not make the assessed contribution to the economy. However, it also has the effect of depriving family members of the right to work or access to education. This is seen as a violation of their human rights. Similar policies are in place in other EU countries. For example, in the UK, the Tier 2 visa is available to workers and students. However, this visa is subject to strict rules and employers must be approved by the Home Office. This means that some employers may be unwilling to hire workers or students who hold a Tier 2 visa. This can make it difficult for family members to find work or access to education. This is seen as a violation of their human rights.
The objectives of the program are to increase access to education, particularly for girls, by building schools and providing educational materials. The program is implemented in rural areas, aiming to reach 70% of girls in the target regions. The program also includes teacher training and the provision of educational materials.

The program has been successful in increasing access to education, with enrollment rates for girls increasing significantly. The program has also contributed to the reduction of dropout rates and an increase in the number of girls completing secondary education. The program is supported by international donors and has received recognition from various organizations for its achievements.

The program has faced challenges, including funding constraints and the need for additional resources. However, the program continues to receive support and is expected to achieve its goals in the coming years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the program has made significant progress in increasing access to education, particularly for girls. The program has received international support and recognition for its achievements. However, there is still a need for additional resources to support the program's objectives. The program's success highlights the importance of providing access to education, particularly for girls, as a means of promoting development and social progress.

References

[Provide a list of references for the program's achievements and challenges.]
latter fielded players born in Ghana, Zimbabwe and Portugal. Young migrants who are active in school sport are, therefore, limited in their chosen pursuits. The GAA, as the largest sporting body on the island, has through its Inclusion, Diversity and Integration Office made strides in promoting a ‘school to club’ transfer of players, whereas games such as volleyball and Olympic handball continue to struggle in gaining access to schools, even if some of the young people attending these schools may have a particular talent for these pursuits. SARI has attempted to address the ‘school to club’ transfer through its bespoke ‘Soccermity’ programme, which engages migrant youth in a unique education through sport initiative facilitated by African and Italian coaches and educators.

Conclusion
Internationally, the Irish are renowned, if only stereotypically so, as genial, fun-loving and welcoming. For the most part, this is a reasonable portrayal of this nation’s people, even if it does mask regional differences. But Ireland is not immune from racial intolerance and the ill-effects of racism. This article has not only examined in detail the genesis and contributing factors that give rise to these issues on the island, but also highlighted examples of good practice regarding how certain football organizations are addressing the challenge presented by growing numbers of migrants arriving on to the island.

Yet, alongside this, there is also evidence of marked inactivity on the part of certain institutions to wholly embrace talented young footballers living in Ireland. By failing to adequately promote the latter’s full integration into Irish life, there is a danger in unnecessarily prolonging their social and sporting exclusion. Thus, as migration into Ireland continues to grow on an annual basis, including on behalf of those seeking asylum or refugee status, it appears the capacity of sporting authorities to properly take account of the identities and needs of the ‘new’ Irish will be a defining aspect of their practice in the time ahead.

Ultimately, however, football in Ireland, North and South, is in a reasonably good position. Plans are afoot to build a new stadium for the game in Northern Ireland whilst the Republic of Ireland’s national team is re-emerging as an international force. It is noteworthy though that the former’s rude health is in part a factor of the strength of the profile it enjoys following the success of its Football for All initiative, whilst the latter is fielding players born and raised in Northern Ireland. What these developments suggest is that the future face of football on the island will continue to evolve and this inevitably means members of ethnic minorities from abroad representing both parts of the island in international football.

Notes
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