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# **Sport and the Media in Ireland:**

## **An Introduction**

Seán Crosson and Philip Dine

The symbiotic relationship that has existed since the mid-19th century between sport and the media – from the popular press, through newsreels and radio, to television, and beyond – is so well established as hardly to require comment. However, the very familiarity of this long and successful marriage should not blind us to its abiding, and abidingly remarkable, affective power, both for individuals and for communities, real and ‘imagined’, of all kinds. We may thus legitimately pause to reflect on the key role played by the media in establishing the local, national, and international significance of what are inherently ephemeral and objectively trivial corporeal practices. Whether it be through the national football cultures of England and Scotland, or the national cycling cultures articulated through Spain’s *Vuelta*, Italy’s *Giro*, and, especially, the *Tour de France*, sport annually continues to mobilize millions of spectators, whether physically present or, especially, by means of the mass media. This is even more obviously true of such major international competitions as the World Cup, European Championship, and European Champions League competitions in association football. To pursue a little further the example of the *Tour de France* – an event launched in 1903 by the specialist sports newspaper *L’Auto*, as part of a combined commercial and political circulation war with its rival *Le Vélo* in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair – we might even argue that France’s ‘great bike race’ is actually and annually brought into existence by the media. As Jacques Marchand, one of the event’s most seasoned reporters, once remarked: ‘cycle road racing

does not really have spectators, it has readers above all' (Marchand, 11). For Marchand, the fleeting vision of the race itself meant little to the crowds massed on the roadside. Indeed, they only became conscious of its significance – as lived experience, rendered comprehensible and thus comprehended – when the event had been variously reconstituted, and thus effectively translated, by its only permanent spectators, i.e. the accompanying journalists.

This special number of *Media History* is conceived as a contribution to the ongoing scholarly analysis of sport's social significance, as a set of mass-mediated practices and spectacles giving rise to a complex network of images, symbols, and discourses. Its specific aim is to examine the distinctive contribution of a variety of sports – as communicated by a variety of mass media – to the creation of modern Irish identities. The constituent essays thus seeks to explore, and ultimately to explain, the processes of representation and mediation involved in the sporting construction, and subsequent renegotiation, of local, national, and, increasingly, global identities, paying particular attention to the national specificity of both the sports and the media under discussion. For sport inhabits a central place in Irish life. More possibly than in any other country in Europe, sport provides a central and defining element in many Irish people's sense of themselves and their country. Indeed, one might suggest that given the loss of an indigenous language to most Irish people and the increasing secularisation of the country, sport is as important as a distinct marker of identity now in Ireland as at any point in the country's history. And this in a country in which the emergence and consolidation of Irish nationalism and the emergence of the Irish state were inextricably linked with sport, in particular the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), still the largest sporting organisation

on the island. Indeed, uniquely again in International sport, Gaelic games (essentially amateur in ideology and practice) continue to be the most popular sports followed and participated in Ireland, despite the significant and growing popularity of non-indigenous sports such as soccer and rugby. Given the recent celebrations in 2009 to mark the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GAA's founding, it is thus particularly appropriate that we should focus on a parish-based institution that is present in all thirty-two counties of the island of Ireland, and thus north and south of the still contested international border.

Yet while sport has occupied a central position in Irish life, one cannot underestimate the role of the media in popularising and affirming this position. A recurring subject of the contributions that follow is the impossibility of appreciating the position of sport in Irish life, particularly since the mid-19th century, without considering the role of the media. The movement of sport's representation, as in other countries, has encompassed the print, radio, cinematic, televisual and virtual (via the internet) media, and this progression is charted here in our contributions particularly as it developed from the early to mid-20th century. However, in Ireland, the relationship between sport and the media has been complicated by the fact that much of this media emerged, and continues to emanate, from non-indigenous sources, particularly Britain and America, and there is an intriguing encounter here apparent, as Crosson and McAnallen note in their contribution to this special number, with indigenous sport. Indeed, in his 1884 letter of acceptance to Michael Cusack to become the first patron of the GAA, Archbishop Thomas Croke of Cashel indicated his awareness of the popularity of British media in Ireland when he remarked on what he called the 'vicious literature' which 'we are daily importing from England' and the need for 'our national journals ... to give suitable

notices of those Irish sports and pastimes which your society means to patronise and promote’ (‘To Mr Michael Cusack, Honorary Secretary of the Gaelic Athletic Association. The Palace, Thurles, 18 December 1884’).

Sport already had a number of publications dedicated to it in Ireland prior to the foundation of the GAA in 1884, namely the sporting papers the *Irish Sportsman and Farmer* and *Sport*, though neither gave coverage to Gaelic games but focused rather on sports such as hunting and horse-related activities, rugby, tennis and cricket (Rouse, 54). Within a few short years of the foundation of the association, there were two more, *Celtic Times*, founded by the GAA’s founder Michael Cusack and *The Gael*, both, though short-lived, a testament to the growing popularity of Gaelic games in this period (Duncan, 106-107).

In post-partition southern Ireland, the state control of the media played a significant role in affirming and promoting a particular, and quite insular, version of Irishness. In this context, Gaelic games played a pivotal role as a marker of Irish culture – particularly as distinct from that of Britain, evident in the frequent broadcast of Gaelic games from the founding of 2RN, the first radio broadcasting station in the Irish Free State, in 1926, and the exclusion of perceived non-Irish games such as soccer and rugby. In the north of Ireland, the BBC began transmitting from 1924, though its efforts to advance distinctive local cultural practices, such as sport, were hampered ‘by intense political and public hostility to anything suggestive of an “Irish” identity’ (Connolly, 471). Though the contributions to this volume are focused primarily on the relationship between the media and sport in the south of the Island, the challenges that partition brought for sport and the media are also aspects of the contributions, including Conor

McCabe's analysis of the tensions surrounding the administration of association football in Ireland post-partition.

While radio in the south of Ireland was quick to exploit sport as a means of attracting audiences, Irish newspapers were slower to realise its importance. However, with the launch of the *Irish Press* in 1931 and its growing popularity, contributed to considerably by its extensive coverage of sporting events, particularly Gaelic games, both the *Irish Independent* and *Irish Times* increased their coverage of sport in Ireland substantially (Oram, 173). The *Press*, in particular, played an important role not just in affirming the antiquity and centrality of Gaelic games in Irish life, but also the position of sport in general in Ireland as an important marker of identity. As Raymond Boyle has noted 'The effects of radio and newspaper coverage of sport were twofold. They elevated awareness of sport while also contributing to the building of the country's national passion for sport' (Boyle, 1992, 631-632).

The relationship between sport and the media has been an area of increasing international research with scholars such as Goldlust (1987), Whannel (1992, 2001) Wenner (1998), Rowe (1999), and Blain and Bernstein (2003) all underlining the central role that the media plays in 'producing, reproducing and amplifying many of the discourses associated with sport in the modern world' (Boyle and Haynes, 8). When we speak of the media's role in broadcasting or communicating sport, it is a role that goes beyond merely relaying sporting events to an audience; radio and other media have a crucial role in influencing how such sports will be received by the manner through which they mediate the sports they broadcast. This is a recurring concern of the contributors here. Radio in particular affirmed the popular communal engagement with Gaelic games

as they grew in popularity in Ireland, with the Kilkenny versus Galway All-Ireland senior hurling semi-final the first live broadcast of a sporting event in Europe, when transmitted by 2RN on 29 August 1926. The prominent images of families gathered around a radio in the first indigenous cinematic coverage of an All-Ireland final by the National Film Institute, in 1948, reflected both an awareness of the importance of radio to people's engagement with sport, but also the fact that many people in the audience would probably have listened to the match live on the radio in the first instance.<sup>1</sup> The hiring of Michael O'Hehir to provide the commentary for this footage – famous across Ireland for his sporting commentary on radio since 1938 – further affirmed this connection.<sup>2</sup>

In the Irish context, the relationship between sport and the media remains significantly under-researched. Where work has been done in this area, including by Raymond Boyle, Marcus de Burca and Luke Gibbons, it has emphasised the crucial relationship between sport and media particularly in terms of the popularisation of sport in Irish life. Boyle, in his pioneering study of the relationship between Irish radio and Gaelic games post-partition noted how:

Sports coverage played a key role in the formative years of Irish broadcasting. The selective treatment given by radio to specific sporting events not only helped to amplify their importance, but actually played a central role in creating national events and organisations (Boyle, 1992, 623)

The chief beneficiary here was the GAA, and the sports the association promoted, particularly Gaelic football and hurling, which continue to enjoy considerable popularity

in Ireland today. As Gibbons has also observed ‘both radio and the press contributed substantially to creating a *nationwide* audience for Gaelic games, thus establishing the Gaelic Athletic Association as a truly national organisation’ (Gibbons, 1996, 73; de Burca, 217). Boyle was also keen in his study to stress the ‘important interrelationship that exists between radio and newspapers in helping to construct *national* pastimes. They transform sport from a simple rule-governed game into a tangible activity which can generate a degree of collective sensibility that in turn helps to legitimize more abstract political structures such as “state” and “nation”’ (Boyle, 1992, 624). Thus, political and economic factors are crucial to understanding the development of the relationship between sport and the media in Ireland. This is also a concern of our contributors, who note the important role that the media played in both popularising and legitimating the GAA as the promoters of *the* Irish sports. In contrast, Conor McCabe notes how a publication such as *Football Sports Weekly* argued strongly for the recognition of the preferred sport of its publishers, association football, as equally entitled to be regarded as a hugely important part of Irish people’s identity.

These issues indicate how sport in Ireland, as elsewhere, has had an importance beyond that of a mere recreational activity for some time, and the focus of several essays in this issue is sport’s political relevance in the formative period of Irish team sports. While the position of Gaelic games as one of the most popular sporting pursuits in Ireland today is undeniable, this was, of course, not always the case. Jeff Dann’s study here charts the popularity of British sports in Ireland in the later 19th century in his examination of magazines published in elite Irish schools of the period. He finds here, as others have noted as regards the emergence of sport in the same period in Britain, that



there was a close relationship between sport and theories of personal development, clearly articulated within an imperial context. Playing British sports, particularly rugby and cricket for those who contributed to these magazines, did not conflict with people's sense of patriotism and Irishness, though this was an Irishness that was imagined, unlike that promoted by those who promoted Gaelic games in the same period and subsequently, clearly within an imperial context. Dann's analysis of the mediation of these sports in these publications indicates the complexities of evolving identities in this period.

The Gaelic Athletic Association was founded at a point when Gaelic games were in considerable decline, with the distinct possibility that they would not survive beyond the turn of the 20th century. Indeed, the ban on members or players of the association attending or participating in foreign games was at least partly a response to the growing popularity of sports perceived as 'British', such as cricket, in Ireland throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a matter also remarked upon in Croke's acceptance letter to Cusack quoted above. A crucial ingredient in Gaelic games' development was the role of popular media, particularly newspapers and sporting publications of the 1880s and 1890s, and the fortune that the association had in attracting journalists of the highest calibre to write on its games. Indeed, as Paul Rouse observes in his contribution, at least three of the seven (though as Rouse notes there may have been up to fourteen) people, including its first secretary Michael Cusack, at the celebrated founding meeting of the association in Hayes's Commercial Hotel in Thurles on Saturday 1st November 1884 were journalists. Their contributions, particularly those of Cusack, were crucial in spreading the word regarding, and thus popularising, Gaelic games in Irish life. Rouse's article also highlights the fascinating and tumultuous period in which the association was founded

and the many challenges it faced, including that of an initially largely hostile media towards the association and its aims.

While Rouse provides an insight into the role the print media played in the emergence and popularisation of Gaelic games, Crosson and McAnallen explore the important information provided by surviving newsreels on these sports and Irish society in the early 20th century. Produced entirely by foreign newsreel companies with a strong focus on the British market in particular, these films provide a fascinating insight into the encounter between colonial representation and indigenous Irish culture. Drawing inspiration from Mike Huggins' work on the role newsreels played in the promotion of association football – published previously in this journal – Crosson and McAnallen argue for these fascinating, if short and sometimes misleading (with respect to the heavily accented English commentary), depictions in terms of the explanations that they offer today of the changing aesthetic of the sports depicted, their role in promoting and maintaining the status quo, and the reaction of the Gaelic Athletic Association to the modern media and its representation of its games.

While Crosson and McAnallen chart the emergence of newsreels up to the outbreak of World War Two, Michael Cronin examines a seminal moment in GAA history that would instigate the first indigenous cinematic coverage of All-Ireland finals, the 1947 All-Ireland senior football final between Cavan and Kerry, played at New York's Polo Grounds. Cronin offers an insight into the role the media played in the broadcast and the consequent engagement of Irish people with one of the most legendary moments in GAA history, particularly through the medium of radio. This event thus is a

significant memorial site, offering compelling evidence of the media's central contribution, as Cronin indicates, to the affirmation of an 'imagined community'.

While an analysis of the media offers unparalleled insights into the development of various sports in Ireland in this period, the various means of communication themselves played a crucial role in the popularisation of sport in the country, and indeed, in the case of soccer particularly – as Conor McCabe observes – effectively affirmed the division of the Island politically. Crowd problems reported at soccer matches in the 1920s suggest that sectarian tensions were also in evidence at sporting occasions, while abuse of referees would appear to be far from a new development in the game of soccer. McCabe's analysis of the weekly sports newspaper, *Football Sports Weekly*, between 1925-1928, reveals the tumultuous and challenging circumstances that surrounded the emergence of association football in Ireland. Condemned as 'imperial' and 'un-Irish' by nationalists, and particularly many leaders and supporters of Gaelic games in Ireland, *Football Sports Weekly* played a crucial role in defending soccer and asserting its relevance to Irish identity. As McCabe indicates, soccer in this period did grow rapidly across Ireland, though unlike rugby, and Gaelic games, it arguably articulated the political tensions and divisions on the island more than any other sport, as rival associations emerged north and south of the border to administer the sport. In this context, the media played a crucial role in both documenting and affirming the emerging sporting – and to some extent political – identities across the island.

While the popularity of association football in Ireland is aided significantly by the huge following among Irish people for soccer clubs in England and, to a lesser extent, Scotland, rugby, particularly through the success of Ulster, Munster, and Leinster in the

Heineken-sponsored European Rugby Cup, would appear to have adopted and incorporated some of the central, and most clearly defining, aspects of Gaelic games, particularly the relationship between place, people and team. Having since 1995 adapted successfully to a system of professionalized provinces – which itself both parallels the time-honoured province-based structures of the GAA and draws affective strength from popular investment in the island’s ‘Four Green Fields’<sup>3</sup> – Irish rugby has attracted both mass spectatorship and media enthusiasm through its skilfully marketed show of locally rooted authenticity. However, as Liam O’Callaghan outlines in his essay, the ‘tradition’ of Munster rugby is very much a media creation of the past ten years, and one that is not supported by the historical practice of rugby in the province. Indeed, as O’Callaghan argues, for much of the preceding century, the province was characterised by bitter rivalries between the main heartlands of Cork and Limerick, both at club and regional administrative level, where the club game was of far greater importance, with provincial ties poorly attended and attracting often negative comment in the press. Yet it is the press itself, particularly following the professionalisation of rugby in 1995, and the successes of Munster in the Heineken cup from 2000 onwards, that played a crucial role in popularising the myth of the proud and ancient tradition of Munster rugby and its attendant qualities, as much moral as material.

The articles that follow together explore the historically symbiotic relationship of sport and the media, elucidating the mechanics of that mutual support against the backdrop of the very specific cultural politics of Ireland. In the Irish context, the central importance of the Gaelic Athletic Association in the development of cultural and political nationalism – and in the subsequent establishment and consolidation of a distinctively

Irish state – can hardly be overstated. As a particularly clear exemplar, the case of the GAA underlines the broader value of the academic study of the history and sociology of modern sports, and particularly of its specific contribution to the imaginative life, and thus the identity politics, of European (and other) nation-states. The combined associative and affective functions of sport over the past century and a half are unimaginable without the simultaneous emergence of the mass media, in Ireland as elsewhere. The present case study thus seeks to contribute to the ongoing elucidation of that still essential structural and perceptual linkage.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Footage of this game between Cavan and Mayo is held in the Irish Film Institute.

<sup>2</sup> The intimate linkage between the media and the very profitable state encouragement of gambling on horse racing – on which O’Hehir also became a regular commentator, as did his son Tony – is also illustrated by the establishment in 1930 of the Irish Free State Hospitals’ Sweepstake, which ran in various guises until 1986.

<sup>3</sup> A celebrated folk song by the Irish musician Tommy Makem, *The Four Green Fields* (1967) celebrates the island’s land and people, while lamenting the British colonial presence in the north-eastern province of Ulster (specifically in six of its historic nine counties).