

BRINGING A COMMUNITY TOGETHER THROUGH SPORT- USING SPORT IN DIVIDED COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Abstract— Northern Ireland has a long history of segregation based on religious discrimination. Mistrust and hatred has been passed through generations because of this segregation in everyday life. One potential tool to overcome these social and cultural issues is sport. Sport has recently been utilized as a vehicle for helping societies overcome social and cultural divisions. Sport governing, governments, and the United Nations have all become involved in programs geared towards grass roots actions to challenge social and cultural divisions based on fear and mistrust.

Index Terms—Sport, Culture, Northern Ireland, Divisions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Establishing a community that is peaceful, prosperous, and safe requires all people to welcome and be open to diversity. In Northern Ireland, after decades of sectarian trouble and violence, a semblance of peace has returned but yet not everyone or everywhere has welcomed this change. The history of violence and mistrust is not just forgotten overnight and the sectarianism long part of society will need to be addressed head on to help overcome the intolerance of the extremists within the community. The challenges facing any divided community or society is who to fight these issues to create a shared and cohesive community that while remembering the past does not embrace the past. Northern Ireland's history is one of division and mistrust (Fitzduff & O'Hagan, 2009). The history of Northern Ireland highlights a religiously segregated and discriminatory society. The society was highly segregated in education, housing, and social life (Bairner, 2004; Fitzduff & O'Hagan, 2009; Hassan, 2001). Specifically, in the major areas of Belfast and Derry, the segregation and animosity resulted in violence and hatred among the segregated Catholic and Protestant communities. The sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland were common in everyday social life that affected young and old, man and woman, and rich and poor. The issues regarding the divisions between Catholics and Protestants created a fear and suspicion that resulted in generations of Northern Ireland residents never speaking with the "other side."

II. NORTHERN IRELANDS TROUBLED HISTORY

The history that has troubled Northern Ireland over the past half century has deep historical roots (Fitzduff & O'Hagan, 2009). From its early beginnings after the partition of Ireland in 1921, the two communities (Catholics and Protestants) have been segregated along many different areas. In the major cities roads, housing estates, and areas were segregated based on your religion and "no-go" areas for the other religion. Northern Ireland had become a country riddled with sectarian problems due to religious discrimination with Belfast and Derry City were hardest hit with sectarian violence (Bairner & Shirlow, 2000). The countries institutions and society were organized and maintained

through a dominance of individuals who were of the Protestant religion to such an affect that many Catholics were denied basic civil liberties (Cronin, 2001). The conflict became extremely explosive by the early 1960's when sectarian violence became widespread and commonplace in the everyday lives of most residents. Violence became ingrained into society and as stated by Cronin (2001) it was a cycle that was hard to escape from. The troubles had become so explosive and the possibility of normality so futile that in the end, man communities became segregated through walls or fences and hardly anyone crossed into areas where they did not 'belong.' This was common in the larger cities such as where Catholics remained in Catholic areas and Protestants remained in Protestant areas. Even schools were segregated based on your religion and within those schools; the sports people played were defined by your religion with Catholics playing traditional Irish sports such as Gaelic football and hurling while Protestants played traditional British sports such as Rugby and Hockey (Bairner, 2004; Cronin, 2001; Sugden & Bairner, 1993). The one sport that both communities played was soccer but yet this game was segregated and you played on teams based on your religion.

By the 1990's, while animosity and fear was still prevalent, a semblance of normality had returned and a new era of limited trust had appeared. Indeed, by 1998, both sides had agreed in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) to move forward towards a peaceful future (Bairner, 2004). The results of the GFA are still ongoing but for the first time in a century, the political parties are now interacting. While this has been a positive step, there are still historical concerns between Catholics and Protestants that have yet to be overcome.

III. SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

One avenue that has created the potential to overcome community mistrust and fear is that of sport. The United Nations and other National Governing Organizations (NGO) have adopted the use of sport as a mechanism to address development issues at a local, national, and global level (Kidd, 2008). Of course sport in itself cannot overcome community issues, rather, sport should be included in a mixed approach to bridging community divisions. Sport programs that are well designed to include people of all ages and ethnicities can be used to overcome intolerance and increase understanding between communities. Sport is a universal language and can bridge different genders, religions, and races. The use of sport has long been heralded as a tool for social integration for immigrants in new countries (Sugden, 2010).

Sport is a form of soft power, which was coined by Joseph Nye (Nye, 2014) and has been used at the international level to change the attitudes towards nations.

Similarly, sport at the local level is a form of soft power, in that; it is used to encourage understanding and tolerance of the 'other.' Sport programs can be used to encourage many different aspects within societies such as health, mental development, and social inclusion (Krafchek, 2012).

IV. USING SPORT TO HELP COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

It is this social inclusion and community development that is important in overcoming the divisions with the communities in Northern Ireland. The political and economical divide that has blighted the Northern Ireland community for the last 50 years has left significant scars on the communities that continue to remain to this day. Despite the longevity of mistrust within the communities in Northern Ireland, many NGO's and sports organizations have attempted to overcome differences and create a sense of united communities. The Irish Football Association (IFA), the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the Irish Rugby Union (IRU) and private bodies such as football 4 peace (F4P) have instigated programs to help bridge the divide and create an understanding within the communities. The concept of using sport in these communities is to encourage social inclusion and the results have been positive (Schubotz & McCartan, 2008).

The IFA is at the forefront of change in Northern Ireland. Programs have been developed that challenge long held sectarian beliefs at a young age. Working with the European Unions PEACE III organization, the IFA's football for all program has helped to break down the cultural barriers of mistrust and hatred between people from both sides of the religious divide. The program has had the support of the Northern Ireland government, the local councils, and importantly, the local people. According to the IFA, "the project will continue to focus on using football as a hook to promote peace and reconciliation, develop partnerships and build capacity within clubs, fans and communities" (IFA, 2013). Similarly to the IFA, the GAA, through its Ulster provincial body has also instigated programs that encourage Protestant and Catholic school children to play sports together. These programs, which are supported, by the IFA, Ulster rugby, and other sporting bodies are called the 'interface games' and involve a sports camp that includes multi-sports. The GAA has also encouraged young Protestant children to take part in Gaelic sports and have attempted to reduce the over nationalistic atmosphere that keeps Protestant from playing the sport (Ulster GAA, 2013). The organization F4P in conjunction with the IFA and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) has used sport to increase cross community relations. Since its beginning in 2007, the program has targeted boys and girls from both communities and have established games as a source of helping the communities learn about each other and to provide opportunities for cultural understanding.

An analysis of evaluations of these programs have shown then to have been successful in engaging communities in having more cross community interaction. The cross community events and games provided by the different bodies both public and private have had a positive reflection on cross community relations. According to the F4P final evaluation report (McTeggart & Gormally, 2011) it has been successful in increasing interest and in challenging perceptions of racism and sectarianism between the communities. Both participants and organizers who took part in the F4P events believed that F4P was very successful in

bringing once marginalized and alienated children from both communities together in sport.

V. CONCLUSION

Building a peaceful and constructive society takes many different forms and sports is one of the most recognizable forms to engage in. Sport is a world language that can be used to break down barriers, encourage communication, and bring people together towards a common goal. International and national governing bodies such as the United Nations and football federations all believe in the use of sport as a tool for development and peace. In Northern Ireland, a country ravaged by sectarianism, sport offers a unique opportunity to overcome the historical hatred and mistrust. Sporting bodies within Northern Ireland, from the IFA, to the GAA, and private organizations have all started to use sport at the local levels to encourage inclusion, support, and bringing people together. The results of the programs have highlighted that they can be successful but there is a long way to go before communities in Northern Ireland are inclusive and peaceful. Yet, sport provides a flicker of hope and to encourage positive relations a flicker of hope is all you need to begin.

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