The relationship between sports and national identity in Europe in 20th century

Harem Hasan Ahmed Baban¹,²

¹History department, University of Raparin, Kurdistan region, Iraq
²Universityof Salahaddin. Erbil, Kurdistan Region Iraq
Email: haremranya58@raparinuni.org

Abstract

Sports and national identity are extensively known to have a considerable relationship with each other. The link between Sports, nationalism and national identity is one of the most questionable cases in the modern world. Many scholars have discussed the usage of sports, as a tool for increasing national feelings, nation building, growth of the nation state or assisting cultural power. This essay is an effort of additional consideration on how they run on parallel routes and their impact on each other. According to Jeremy MacLean, sports can be used as an identity tool, giving people a feel of difference and a way to categorize themselves amongst other nations¹. On the other hand, in the present time, it is claimed that the relationship between sports and national identity after the post war period has not been steady, especially in the early 1960s. For instance, there has been an increase in maintaining the culture and ethnic variety amongst the population of England, along with other growing nations, which have been influenced less by sports and have varied identities through their literature and music. Thus, it is clear that in the present time, the connection between sports and national individuality has decreased. However, during the late nineteenth century and until the mid-1990s, the two played a significant role among nations. The aim of this essay is to evaluate the most important aspects in the relationship between sports and national identity, which have been discussed by many sport historians and contemporary scholars. Moreover, it shows some

considerable examples at each point, as well as scrutinize the usage of sports to serve national identity and how nations have succeeded to enhance their identity by utilizing sports. This work consists of four key points. First of all, the essay talks about the different rules and factors in the relationship between sports and national identity in different nations along with some examples. Secondly, it discusses how nations can use sports as a tool for nation building, also describing the higher level of identity felling of a nation, in the sport events, which causes violence and racist thinking. Finally, the importance of sports in the demonstration of culture, language, symbolism and national signs at the time of inauguration of sport occasions has been discussed. Further, the assessment of how national deterioration can further develop in various sport occasions and events has been done, along with the importance of mass media in the rising national felling in sport events.

**Keywords**: sports, national identity, Europe, 20th century

**The relationship between sports and national identity**

At the outset, if we talk about the relationship between sports and national identity, it is clear that this phenomenon is different for all nations. Where, in some countries, this relation is much stronger, in others, it may not be that effective. According to Alan Bairner, who has examined the relationship between sports and Scottish identity, this relationship can be monitored in two ways. First of all, by identifying the limitations of the process of existing Scottish separation and secondly, the characteristics of the existing Scottish. Whereas, the aim of this concept is not meant for participating, but being a common sporting experiment. However, it would not be challenging for researchers to bring forward the reasons behind the relationship between sports and Scottish culture. As Roddy Forsyth argued that, ‘sports claim of not only to have been the most popular manifestation of Scottish within Scotland, but actually to have been its distinct assertion of nationality’. There are some reasons why Jarvie claimed that

---

“aspects of Scottish sport are strongly related to nationality”, independent of Scottish sport association, Scottish football league and football international. This especially holds correct when its football team has a match against England which involves a considerable amount of violence phenomenon\(^3\). Even the relation of sport with national state is different, not just between nations, but also sometimes it is different in one specific country. For example, the state of Irish nationalism was not the same as Scottish nationalism, since the Irish are mostly committed in using sport as a political vehicle, in the growth of national identity and are stronger than the Scottish. This is due to the differences between the two political states. For instance, in Ireland, sport has been an important committee with the national struggle and its engagement has seen participation in different forms. It was not only for relationship with sport \(^4\), but also the changes in Ireland’s connections with the United Kingdom and the last developing rules\(^5\).

**Sport as a vehicle of nation building**

Using sport as a vehicle for building nations is one of the most essential factors in the connection between sport and national identity. According to Maguire, sport can form one of the most important fields that nations develop more real. Specific sports drives represent the nations. The relative link of sport with national documentation made a significant canal for the sentiments of co-operative displeasure and popular awareness. The most commonly debated and published political function of sport is the fake increase in national identity through, for instance, the common collection of cultural signs like national anthem, flags and colours, armed forces and Olympic sports’ to exhibit their independence. Further, the achievement in sport actions and especially

\(^3\) Ibid, p.52.
\(^4\) (The members of the Ulster Unionist Party, the political party in Northern Ireland that is supported mostly by Protestants. They believe that Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK): Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English: [http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/Ulster-Unionists](http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/Ulster-Unionists) the last accessed in 24/4/2013.

\(^5\) Alan Bairner, *Sport nationalism and globalization*, p.68.
hosting of sport events can contribute considerably towards national success and pride. As Dauncey and Hare argued that France winning the 1998 world cup could provide a significant chase to prove it’s public worth and an achievement for the French around the globe. Sports has provided a great pull and acted as a tool for building various nations. Therefore, governments have constantly been attempting to domination of sports, especially in Africa, where sport has been symbolized as one of the most noticeable streets of confession of nations. In South Africa, sport took a cultural shape for identifying whites, a fact which can be both confirmed and challenged.

One of the major factors in the link between sport and national individuality in the 20th century, was that some nations had their own sport. This meant that they played a particular sport which was known as their national sport, in order to differentiate them amongst other nations. For instance, most of the sports being competed in Ireland, and Irish has their own national sports and competed by the Irish nations. Apart from this, there were other global sports which were contested in some countries such as, England, Australia, Canada and the United States. It is quite certain that, Ireland used to abide by its Owen sporting custom which preceded the estate and the outline of the British foreign rule. Also, it can be seen that, there was a huge restoration in Gaelic games which was led by the Gaelic Athletic Association, as a straight answer to the effective introduction of sports in Britain in the past. Furthermore, when nations felt that they would not be able to succeed by using sport to enhance their nationality, they selected other sport to play and to win the completion. After the disappointment of Scots over the dominance of England in football, they thought about other typical sport to highlight their nationhood. For example, recently, a Scottish player claimed about the Scottish football team and rugby, which is the icon of the Scottish nation. He admitted that ‘we have been chosen for this match to set right the ills of Thatcherism, the tax collection

---

7 Martin Polley, Sport and national identity, p.96.
8 John Sugden and Alan Bairend, Sport Nation: Sport, Sectarianism and Society in divided Ireland, (Leicester, 1993), p.46.
and the Westminster government. Along with that, one of the main causes of the development of Rugby in the Scottish sporting nationalism was that, since 1989 football did not become a common game within England. While, the Scottish rugby is played against England, every year in the six nation’s championship, the teams had also met in the Rugby World Cup.

The effects of sport on racism

Another factor which has been significant in the connection between sport and identity is exaggeration of this link between sport and national identity, which causes violence and racism. The route of competition between England and Scotland in the late 20th century demonstrated some clashes between the two nations. One such example is a match which took place in Wembley, 1996, in the European national finals, which was hosted by England. In this game, Scotland defeated England by 2-0, therefore, making the Scottish spectators upset and caused a little violence.

Moreover, this attempt by nations, for using sport for national aims has never passed without creating any political problems and protests by dominance nations. Another example is in the period of Franco regime, when the Spain government tried to demolish all clubs which tried to be regionalists or separatists and burnt Catalan and Basque flags. Finally, demonstration of such racist phenomenon has been contributed in the sport stadiums. This factor imposes the maximum difficulties between sport and national identity which can eventually destroy the means and sport activity and change sport to cause wars. As seen in the instance of El Salvador, who played Honduras in 1969, when they contended for the 1970 Mexico World Cup, which the press calls, the Football War.

Indeed, this match did not ignite the war, but it acted as the canal for two different nations, clashing against each other and ending up in political and economic

---

10 Alan Bairner, Sport nationalism, p.65.
disagreements. After this game, the Honduran Policy, in the land reform was a great threat to eject Salvadorian, who lived in Honduras, because Honduran wanted to reorganize their lands for native Honduras citizens. Moreover, according to media reports, after the game was over, some considerable violence took place, when Salvadorian fans killed some Honduran fans, leaving many fans injured as well. Finally, on 14th July, 1969, Salvadoran occupied Honduras, causing a war for five days. Consequently, thousands of people died along with destruction of some places, leaving thousands of people homeless. This is not a surprise in the history of football, because as Sugden and Tomlinson claimed that sport in general and specifically soccer, always push nations to grow their national feelings in sport events. Even in the football sport, Athletic de Bilbao, which was the team of Basque in 1919, introduced a new policy of accepting players who were just born in the Basque region. Furthermore, they decided on accepting players who were born in Basque only. This example showed more extreme identity felling between the city and the football club. This idea was assisted by the movement of Basque at that time.

According to observations, the concept of anti-Englishness in Scottish sport has played the main role for the unity of the Scottish identity. For instance, Andrew Ohagan has explained this phenomenon in the Guardian, ‘Scotland’s dislike of England, for the most part is just a sort of Hogmanay blether England’. However, he claimed that this idea cannot be generalized for everyone in Scotland. In some respect, the relationship between sport and national identity could have a negative impact on nations in the world. In the case of former Yugoslavia, due to a lot of violence in the game between Dynamo Zagreb (Croatia) and Red Star Belgrade (Serbia), a considerable amount of violence took place between both nations. As a result, the Yugoslavian nation prevented to play in several international competitions such as the 1992 European

---

15 Alan Bairner, Sport nationalism, p.65.
Championship\textsuperscript{16}. According to Adrian Smith and Dillwyn Porter, the year of 1974, was an of icon of Scottish football nation. One example for the same can be seen was when Scotland won against England by 2-0 and this result was an opportunity for Scottish to express their opinions. They demonstrated their feelings in a very restricted way by saying ‘we hate England’. However, members of the Scottish team did not agree with this chant. For example, a Junior Minister at the Scottish office claimed after a while that, this chant displayed unrepeatable attitude of Scottish nationalism. Although, there is no doubt about the idea of tundra feelings which were existing amongst the Scottish fans, especially towards the English nation\textsuperscript{17}. Furthermore, it contributed to the growth of nationalist emotions connected with a considerable amount of anti-English feelings. This was prevalent in the period of 1976 home national competing. An example to prove this is when England went to Hampden; the spectators welcomed them by the national anthem, which, in some respect, was a result of the refusal of the Scottish Football Association to accept flowers of Scotland as its private anthem\textsuperscript{18}. In some cases, even the nations are afraid of using a typical sport which is originally known as the national sport in a particular country, because they believe that it would be a great threat on other nations. For instance, in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, British games in Ireland expanded dramatically. Therefore, nationalists in Ireland saw the British domination as a great threat on the Ireland identity and they argued that, these extensions were the result of deteriorating the Irish identity and the demand of separation\textsuperscript{19}. Therefore, in some cases, players in specific nations have difficulty for playing any role in other nations. For example, the opposition between England and Ireland caused none of them to accept their cooperation into sports. For instance, in the year 1986, Jack Charlton, who was the former England international player became the manager of the Republic of Ireland team and in his early stages, the Ireland spectators were not happy with him.

\textsuperscript{16} Dusko Bogdanov, ‘Influence of National Sport’, p.51.
\textsuperscript{17} Ronald Kowalski,’ Cry for Us, Argentina’, p.65.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, P.75.
\textsuperscript{19} Alan Bairner, Sport nationalism, p.72.
being an Irish manager. In addition, some of the sport inspectors in England did not revealed their feelings about him\textsuperscript{20}.

**Demonstrating national culture and its influences**

*Other important point is the increase in the identity felling in various sport occasions.* The occasions of international sports are great opportunities for nations to express their nationality and demonstrate their love for their nations. In some respect, this route of exhibiting feelings of national identity might be an alternative for taking more explicit political shapes. As Morgan suggested that, the extremist shapes of Welsh nationalism projected acceptance of Rugby as a tool of victory for them. This was true, especially in winning over England and in these example events, people have talked about their enormous pride for their countries’ appearance\textsuperscript{21}. Furthermore, the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games presented a great chance to evaluate the connection between Olympics and nationalism. Barcelona was not only the host city of the games but was also, the capital of Catalonia, which had been a historic nation with the greatest feeling of cultural identity. Especially, known for the relationship between Barcelona and Real Madrid, when during the Civil War, Barcelona had contested against Franco\textsuperscript{22}.

*Mass media in the relationship between sport and national identity.*

Another factor which can highly contribute to the connection between sport and national identity is mass media. As Allison debated that, national identity is the main saleable output in sports. The initial reason for this phenomenon is that when a sporting event makes it to the level of national request, it demonstrates much advanced ratings on TV. Therefore, when scholars will conduct a research in the relationship between sport and national identity they highly depend on mass media. This is true especially in the case of

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 92.  
the greatest sport event such as the Olympic Games, which the television can influence in the growth of a national identity\(^{23}\).

Other characteristic in the relationship between sport and national individuality is looking back on the origin of nations. There have been many players who were born and grew up in a country but they have been attempted to express their feelings for the nation which belongs to their origin and it has been observed in their biographies and interviews, they introduce themselves as a member of that origin. Take John Aldridge, for example, who was born in Liverpool, but he played for Ireland because his grandmother originated from there and he claimed that he felt Irish and he was raised with an Irish background and his parents have always supported the Irish team\(^{24}\). Hence, it is clear why some spectators, within a nation, do not support the team of the country they live in and have a passport of. Another instance is that, on 10\(^{th}\) October 1988, when Turkey’s team defeated Germany in the completion of the European championship, there was nearly celebrations in those German cities which had Turkish immigrants. Hence, it is quite evident that, the Turkish settlers who were born and resided in Germany are not real Germans and their feelings still belong to their original identity\(^{25}\).

Demonstrating culture and its parts during a sports event is a great opportunity to serve nations and represent national culture. For instance, at the both start and end of the Barcelona Olympics, both the Spanish and Catalan Anthems were played, along with showcasing both the national flags in the stadium. This was for the first time that the Catalan national symbols showed equality with the Spain symbols\(^{26}\). The Catalan folk custom was presented at the time of the opening ceremony, initiated with the remarkable castles de xiquet, (human towers), which is a traditional sport in which a team of boys and girls attempt to compete by building the highest tower. Moreover,


\(^{24}\) Michael Holmes and David Storey, ‘Who are the boys in green?’, p.96.

\(^{25}\) Alan Bairner, Sport nationalism, p.169.

there were some songs, music, memories and the Catalan artists showcasing the Catalan culture. An example for the same is ‘cant dels ocells’ (the song of the birds) which became extremely popular among the spectators\textsuperscript{27}.

Another point which can be considered in the identity is usage of national languages. For instance, Catalan language in Barcelona Olympic Games was one of the four official languages of the games. This language was used in the official speeches, the award ceremony and in various other information about the games. Most importantly, at the beginning of the games, when the King announced the opening, the first word used was in Catalan, ‘Benvinguts tots Barcelona’, which means “welcome to Barcelona”\textsuperscript{28}. Furthermore, Football, more than any other type of sports, exhibits major national symbolism such as the demonstration of the national flag, clothing and colours of the national team. This can be used in a way of enhancing unity, which can lead to the growth in nationalism. For instance, fans of the Brazil team perform Samba which is their dance symbol\textsuperscript{29}. According to John Hargreaves, by the end of this competition, it would be a great fault if we think that this demonstration of language, flag, National song and various other culture aspects are just plain and simple activities. He argued that, demonstrating and publishing the national symbols around the stadium gave an immediate connection to the essential issue of Catalonia’s autonomy with both Spanish and Catalan identities. As well as, he claimed that those characteristics were more significant than attaining victory in the games\textsuperscript{30}.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, p.103-104


On the other hand, not only some nations, do not attempt to use sport as a tool for their identity, but they also represent a centralist system rather than a specific region. In some respect, there is competition between members of the same nation in sporting events. Some of them represent the centralist system and others play on behalf of the nation. For instance, in the city of Barcelona, the contest between Barcelona and Española is almost the same as, between Real Madrid and Barcelona, the reason being that the Catalane fans see Española as the representation of the centralist system in Catalonia. This point belonged to the Spanish Civil War period. It was seen that in the 20th century there were some clashes between those teams. As a result, for subsequent two years, matches between those clubs were prevented. However, sometimes two teams represented one nation like for instance, Real Sociedad was other club which represented the Basque identity but the difference was that the Sociedad policy for accepting players was more flexible than Atelic. They accepted players who were born in Basque and did not care about where their parents originated from. Not only Barcelona have been represented by a different identity in the Spain sport events, but also according to Vic Duke and Liz Caolley, this example of Basque shows that they were as passionate as the Catalans in growing both nationalist and regionalist emotions in the game of football. Both the examples of national identity, except the one of different nationality, relate to the economic factors as due to the steps of industrialization taken by both the regions. The people of Basque, similar to the Catalan people thought that, they were more advanced and modern than the all other parts of Spain. It is claimed that, the Barcelona team is a massive political party which has independent ambitions. In addition, this team uses the Catalan customs like nationalist advertising against the Spanish government. Furthermore, until now Barcelona is a major source, of which the Catalan people are very proud of.

Finally, in such complex situations, there are many nations who represent their nations and are not ready to play for a country’s team. One of the obvious examples in this existing phenomenon is of the United Kingdom which has one Olympic team, four national football teams and one of their national rugby team. In the Soccer competitions, England, Wales, Scotland and North Ireland contribute through different teams, while all of them belong to one country. This situation demonstrates that in the United Kingdom, each nation wishes to represent individual nations.

To sum up, it can be argued that, there are considerable amount of relationships between sport and national identity. Some of this phenomenon can be seen in the present time, however, due to globalization, political and social changes worldwide, the connection between sport and national identity has not been stable. As mentioned above, at present, many factors in this relationship still exist in the sport competitions but the most important link between sport and nationality is using sport for nation building. However, this concept will differ between various countries. While, even in these days, existing violence, usage of racist signs towards different nations have created considerable problems in the link between sport and identity as it gave way to exaggerated demonstration of nationality which causes riots in the stadiums. Whereas, the felling and supporting of national identity in sports is a normal phenomenon because it is a part of a nation’s freedom. It can also be seen that, the most interesting and positive link between sport and identity is the demonstration of cultural diversity as all nations have the opportunity to showcase their signs, symbols and customs. This factor can highly assist in the enhancement of identity and never create any trouble in the stadiums.

---

Finally, it can be said that the relationship between sport and national identity is estimated to continue in the future since the feeling of nationality resides in the heart of both the players and the spectators.

References

- Unpublished Secondary Sources:

- Published Secondary Sources: Books
  
• Sugden, John and Bairend Alan, *Sport nation: Sport, sectarianism and society in divided Ireland*, Leicester, 1993.


• Secondary Sources Internet:


پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به خدمت‌تکمیلی ناشناخته‌ای نیشتمانی به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا

هیرم حسن احمد

پنامکی

و مزدیری و ناشناخته‌ای نیشتمانی به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌нموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نما و مزدیری به سه‌دری به‌بسته‌می‌نموموادا و پیروی‌نما و به‌کارگیری‌نма...
له تهوردهی یهکم، باس له روئ و فاکته و جیوادهکانی پهیوئندی نیوان و درمش و ناسنامه نیشتنمانی دنکه له نیوان نهتهوکانو، بهو پیش پهیوئندی نیوان نههم دوویلیمهنه لهداوه هموو گلالان و وناماندا چونهیهک ندبوه له تهوردهی نوویمدا یهی دنکه لیسهکی و نمایشکردنی سیما نهتهوک و دیئیتیهک کاراوه له بونهو بوداووه و درمشیهکاندا، له گهله دنرمقتنی لایهنه کنترولهکانی نهتهو له بونه و درمشیهکاندا. هرهچی تهوردهی سی یهنه؛ تاییته به بکاریگرهکانی به کارهیمانی و درمش له لایهنه گلانوه به مهبهستانی زیادکردنی هستئی نهتهو و پیی. تهوردهی چویمیشی بیاس لایهنه نیسپهیهکانی به کارهیمانی و درمش و کاریگرهزه لهسر هنیوه کراوه، له گهله ناماسیزان به کاریگره ندرپنیهکانی و درمش لهسر ناسنامه‌ی نیشتنماني.