



# Sport in Society

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## Introduction to the special issue—sport, the media and Ireland: intersections of gender, class and geography

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### ABSTRACT

The seven articles in this special issue of *Sport in Society* explore constructions and intersections of gender, class and geography in Irish sport media. Drawing on theoretical and methodological approaches from a variety of disciplines, ranging from sport sociology to film and cultural studies, the articles encompass both established ‘mainstream’ print and broadcast media, and alternative media platforms. They examine the cultural politics of sport media institutions, forms of representation, and media production and sharing, tracing how hegemonic intersections and hierarchies are both reproduced and negotiated in this national context. Although focused principally on the Republic of Ireland, the issue will be of interest to international readers as the articles variously identify the role of media and cultural contexts in the shaping of popular understandings and experiences of transnational sports; or have an internationally comparative dimension; or deal with transnationally circulating ‘Irish’ sport media texts within international networks.

### KEYWORDS

Irish sport; media; gender; class; geography

Ireland has a unique status, geographically, politically and culturally. It is an island whose British colonial legacy of an internal border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland has become increasingly vexed and central to Anglo-European relations since the 2016 Brexit referendum (McCall 2021; Hayward 2018). It lies within the Anglophone world, with a substantial diaspora in Britain (Hickman 2021) and the United States (Kennedy 2021). It is also connected with the continent of Europe in ways that overlap with and differ from the United Kingdom: both politically, through the European Union (Murphy and O’Brennan 2023), and culturally, through the historical influence of the Catholic Church especially (Maclennan 2023). The Republic<sup>1</sup> is frequently described as a ‘small open economy’ (Begg 2016), and a neoliberal state whose economic development from the late twentieth century onwards has been facilitated through transnational corporate movements of capital and people (Mercille and Murphy 2015). Yet it is not merely an abstract space, a globalised economy through which capital flows, but also a nation state in which individual and collective identities are highly localised and articulated via attachment to specific places.

Ireland is distinctive too in sporting terms, given the role of indigenous ‘Gaelic games’ for those who live on the island, for the Irish diaspora and other international communities who engage with ‘the Irish abroad’. These games include a unique form of Gaelic football, together with hurling and camogie (Liston 2014). Gaelic games reflect a distinctive urge to community in Ireland, but all sports are one of the most powerful transfer mechanisms for culture. The meanings given to sport, and to its material, physical and emotional experiences, have changed over time (Liston and Maguire 2022b). And, at its core, the social fabric of sport acts as a constitutive force for identities. This includes the media through which sport is framed and (re)presented. Historically, for instance, there was a role for sport in augmenting national cohesiveness, reputation, and status, though on a divided island this has been complex and contested. Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Éamon de Valera, lobbied a British Foreign Office representative about the national team designation in advance of the 1948 London Olympics. 50 years later, Northern Ireland First Minister, David Trimble, and other unionist members of the UK parliament, backed an early day motion in support of the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation’s right to govern cycling. And, as recently as 2021, David Campbell, chair of the Loyalist Communities Council, wrote that it was not acceptable for competitors from Northern Ireland to compete under the Tricolour,<sup>2</sup> which was to him a foreign flag (Liston and Maguire 2022a, 2024). The sports-media production complex is integral to these processes.

The configuration of sport in Ireland and its imbrications with sports media are correspondingly both nationally specific and illustrative of trends within the globalization of sport. Its most popular participant and spectator team sports are the aforementioned Gaelic games, which are amateur sports played mainly in Ireland and among the global Irish diaspora. These are typically organised around parishes and counties and epitomise the role of sport in the localisation of identity (Rouse 2017). However, Irish professional athletes have long moved within the transnational sports economy too, including both prominent and lower ranked players in the various English football leagues (Curran 2017) and such global sporting stars as Conor McGregor (McIntyre 2022, 115–132) and Katie Taylor (Free 2015). Irish media ownership is heavily concentrated and the extent of transnational corporate investment in the sector is growing (Flynn 2020a). Public service broadcaster RTÉ has been struggling to maintain sports broadcasting rights that are crucial to the cultivation of sport as a vehicle for national identity in post-independence Ireland (Flynn 2020b). However, while the Irish media sphere has also become transnationalised in an age of online platforms, the consumption of Irish broadcasting and print sport media endures in the rituals of everyday life, including as focal points of social media use in Ireland and across the diaspora (Dwyer 2020, 2023; McMahan 2021). The idea that global or Irish sport media are dominated by a single monolithic ideology can be disregarded in favour of an approach to sport media that recognises contending discourses and ongoing struggles for meaning and legitimacy.

Comprising seven articles, this special issue of *Sport in Society* seeks to explore how constructions and intersections of gender, class and geography are played out in Irish sports media, both established ‘mainstream’ print and broadcast media and alternative platforms. It follows a foundational volume in this field (O’Boyle and Free 2020) in examining the cultural politics of sports media in an Irish context, and tracking some of the ways in which social and cultural identities and power relations are reproduced, negotiated and contested. It also reveals a transformative impact of media on the parameters of sport and how it is framed and discussed by participants on and off the field.

The issue encompasses theoretical and methodological approaches from a variety of disciplines, ranging from sport sociology to film and cultural studies. It commences with three articles that offer unique perspectives on how sport media, in Ireland and internationally, may reproduce, negotiate or challenge gender hierarchies in sport. Katie Liston, Linn Hellstrand and Clíona O'Leary offer critical reflections on efforts within Irish and Swedish public service television to increase the volume of coverage devoted to women's sports and to attain gender equal coverage. Their article draws on a dialogical exchange between sport sociology and elite women's sports (represented by Liston) and the lived experiences of her co-authors, Hellstrand and O'Leary, as senior figures in Swedish (SVT) and Irish (RTÉ) public service television, respectively. All three are also actively involved in the promotion of women's sports. They identify the challenges of measuring and expanding coverage, and the lived experiences of women in public service television who have to negotiate male dominated sport/media organizational cultures. Both SVT and RTÉ also operate in distinct national contexts. While rights to screen sporting tournaments and events have been increasingly dominated by corporate bidders with private subscription funding models, European public service broadcasters are funded by television licence or comparable charges that effectively operate as a tax, and can therefore (in theory) be subjected to moral leverage to represent their national populations more fairly. However, television sports departments are interconnected with the institutions of sport and commercial sport media. They compete directly with the latter and non-sport broadcasts for audiences, so that they occupy a twilight zone between fulfilment of a wide remit of information, education and entertainment and the more typically commercial imperative to maximise audiences. This is especially the case in the Irish context, where RTÉ, from its inception, has been part-funded both by advertising and by a licence fee that has been increasingly difficult to collect, as it is subject to widespread evasion, and has been frozen at the same level since 2008, despite inflation and a rapidly transforming media environment (Horgan and Flynn 2017). The theoretical moral leverage towards gender equality in sports coverage is thus faced with interdependent obstacles—not only is there institutional sexism of sport, but this overlaps with the working assumptions of many sport media practitioners and how market 'realities' of male sport dominance constitute a counter-leverage within public service broadcasting (PSB) organisations. That Swedish PSB is more advanced than Irish PSB in actively promoting gender equal coverage reflects both cultural differences, unevenly distributed 'allyship' with male colleagues in positions of power, and relative autonomy from enduringly gendered sport and sport media environments whose ideological nature is obscured by the notion of these objective 'realities'. Nonetheless, Liston, Hellstrand and O'Leary make the point that gender equal sports coverage requires small, consistent daily acts and reflexivity on the part of all those working in public broadcasting because equality gains are never fixed.

Drawing on interviews with women sports reporters and contributors, Aoife Sheehan and Niamh Kitching examine the challenges faced by women sports journalists, reporters and contributors in the male dominated sphere of sport media in Ireland and the UK, including dealing with sexist remarks, both from colleagues and on social media. While their presence is illustrative of (limited) progress towards gender equality in sports representation and onscreen presentation, their experiences evince an enduringly difficult, sometimes openly hostile organizational cultural environment. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) in the wider world of sport encompasses both performances of masculinity and

gender hierarchisation on the field of play, and what Eve Sedgwick (1985) calls 'homosexuality' in the fine detail, the nitty gritty and ease of intimate friendships and exchanges between men. The female sports media professionals in this research describe being frozen out, sometimes explicitly, by being objectified in overheard third person references, but also more implicitly through the sedimentation, over many decades, of a predominantly masculine cultural environment, 'fitting into' which becomes their individual responsibility and a challenge likely to be exacerbated through recourse to complaint. Hence uneasy compliance and the self-containment of discontent. Simultaneously, their experiences illustrate what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) identifies as the dialectic of 'popular feminism' and 'popular misogyny'. The broadening gender inclusivity of onscreen presenters and pundits can be read as indicative of the former, while female journalists are frequently subjected to misogynistic online abuse in the poorly regulated world of social media. Such experiences illustrate the limitations of 'empowerment' as visibility. The socially transformative aims of the several 'waves' of feminism and the advocacy of women's sports are potentially co-opted to a rather neoliberal, individualistic model involving self-marketisation, self-branding and concomitant adjustment to the typically precarious economic environment of broadcasting, including public service, within a cultural environment (heavily gendered in sports media) to which they are conditional additions. Sheehan and Kitching identify a consistent pattern across public service and commercial media.

The third article, by Conor Heffernan and Joseph Taylor, examines Irish media coverage of an Irish sportswoman who has attained international status, both as an athlete and as a carefully cultivated character in the sport/theatre hybrid world of wrestling. Becky Lynch has achieved considerable success in WWE, working against the sexualisation and objectification of women wrestlers by casting herself as 'the man', but within wrestling's playful theatrical tradition. In a 2020 WWE commercial she disrupts an oddly genteel all-male wrestler cocktail party by crashing downwards (rather than upwards) through a literal glass ceiling (WWE 2020). Male wrestler Roman Reigns greets her with the remark: 'nice work, man'. While this may be read as a pragmatic co-option and commodification of the popularisation of 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser 2018) to maximise market exploitation, Heffernan and Taylor emphasise the agency of Lynch's performativity. Her 'inhabitation' (Butler 1998) of an athletic, muscular body undergirds the theatricality and humour in such staged encounters, legitimating her gate-crashing presence in wrestling as a gender transgressive figure while she clearly invokes 'fighting Irish' qualities stereotypically associated with Irish-American masculinity (currently marketized in the US by pugnacious former MMA champion Conor McGregor – McIntyre 2022, 115–132). However, Heffernan and Taylor note that the bulk of Lynch's coverage in Irish media is concentrated in the entertainment rather than sport pages, and that Lynch's athleticism and efforts to promote her 'Irish fighting identity', key to her celebrity profile in wrestling and US media, are ignored, thus somewhat delegitimising her status in Ireland. This may reflect wrestling's marginality to 'legitimate' sport as (being staged) it lacks the key ingredient of contingency and unpredictability. However, it may also be an example of both the marginalisation of a female sports competitor from the sports pages and the framing of female athletes in domesticating, feminising terms in the entertainment pages.

Lynch may additionally illustrate how an emigrant phenomenon ('making it' by trading, in part, on an Irish-American understanding of 'the Irish in us' (Negra 2006)) indirectly highlights the implicit parameters of sport in a national context. In Ireland amateur Gaelic

games continue to predominate, both as participant and spectator team sports, and in sports media coverage. Although at elite level their athletes effectively train as professionals, and can both avail of expenses payments and benefit commercially from their celebrity status, Gaelic games competitors are depicted as loyal servants to the communities in which they are embedded. Hence, the eulogising of well known players who doubled as ‘frontline workers’ in their ordinary jobs during the Covid 19 pandemic (Crosson and Free 2021). Athletes often become popular national icons and/or are promoted within mainstream national media because they resolve social and cultural tensions and contradictions in both their on-field performances and how they ‘carry themselves’ off-field. The brashness of figures like Lynch and McGregor marks them as emigrant exceptions whose relative invisibility within mainstream Irish sport media proves an implicitly normative ‘rule’, a hegemonic construction of the Irish athlete, male and female in terms of what Free (2015, 1156) calls an ‘Irish sporting habitus’, an embodied and socially monitored principle of not ‘getting above’ or ‘losing the run of yourself’ (Free and Scully 2018) that in turn can be related to a ‘deeply embedded culture of self-denial and self-deprecation’ in a country heavily influenced by the Catholic Church’s policing of the body (Free 2015, 1156).

The next two articles concern the ways in which masculinity is constructed in Irish media representations of rugby union. Matthew Nesbitt examines the tensions in Irish media representation of sports-related concussion in men’s rugby between the acceptance of scientific research-informed caution in the handling of injury and return to training and play, and the inevitable acceptance of a degree of risk for players seeking to further their careers. Nesbitt notes the specific association of rugby with hegemonic masculinity as an underpinning factor in these tensions. His article also illustrates the dynamic relationships between players and rugby journalists. In distinctive but related ways they are required to negotiate the tensions between the implications of scientific research and recommendations, and their professional investment in the playing and promotion of a dangerous sport in which concussion injuries are a constant risk. The context of European rugby competitions (the annual Six Nations tournament and the European Champions Cup—whose name has varied since its 1990s inception), the raised financial and career stakes for players since rugby’s professionalisation in 1995 and the dramatic increase in rugby’s appeal as a spectator sport are such that the same journalists who report the scientific evidence and debates regarding safety protocols are also aligned with players keen to dispel concerns regarding the impact of these injuries.

Marcus Free’s article further explores Irish media’s relationship with the minority participant, but increasingly popular spectator sport of rugby, an index of which is that Ireland’s quarter-final exit from the men’s 2023 World Cup was the country’s most watched sports broadcast that year. Free focuses on the striking contrast between the narrowly elite social class origins and education of most of the national team’s leading players and the sport’s broadening popularity. Adopting a Bourdieusian theoretical approach and examining both print media and broadcasting he argues that the competition of Ireland’s four regional provinces as clubs in European rugby facilitates a displacement, in Irish media representation, of evidence of social class difference onto regional differences and varieties of masculinity, thus obscuring the enduringly predominantly elite nature of the sport in Ireland. Free notes the constructive role of Irish rugby journalism in this displacement and the role of humorous representations in downplaying the ways in which rugby is representative of class hierarchy in Ireland.

Both rugby focused articles reveal how the context of professionalism and European international competition has impacted the domestic game in Ireland. In Free's case, rugby is seen to have impacted on the cultural geography of the sport, but also the country, popularising notions of provincial difference and rivalry although the provinces were not, ordinarily, regularly competing sporting entities of great significance prior to professionalisation. Northern Ireland, within the UK, comprises six of the nine counties of Ulster, while the other three are in the Irish Republic. Competition between the provinces-as-clubs and international competitors somewhat reifies the notion of difference. A further feature of these articles is how they demonstrate the homosocial culture of masculine camaraderie and interaction in Irish media from which, as the first three articles explore, female competitors, journalists and pundits have been marginalised, or to which they have been permitted access in a process of 'diversification', but with the challenges of transforming the wider cultural environment of Irish sport and sport media remaining. 'Characters' in Irish sport, as elsewhere, are predominantly male players whose status as athletes and off-field performances, especially post-career as coaches, pundits and 'legends' is fuelled by the sedimentation of heavily mediated collective memories. Likewise, collectively understood sporting 'traditions', which may actually have a short history, rely, for that collective investment, on shared memories of media (especially broadcast) consumption. Aspiration towards equal distribution of men's and women's sporting events and the gender identities of on-screen participants faces an additional challenge of imbalance in archival recordings. Sports broadcasting so often involves whetting appetites for forthcoming events by situating them historically, especially rivalries between previous iterations of teams. Commemoration is a form of co-memory, of shared and mediated memory. Thus, hegemonic masculinity is entwined with the hegemony of men's sporting events and teams within both the broadcasting archives and memories of committed and casual sports fans.

The last two articles examine aspects of the 'sportization' of the natural environment in Ireland through processes of visual media representation – 'sportized' rather than 'sportified' in that these environments remain intact as such while also, with varying degrees of frequency or organization, becoming settings for sporting contests. Stephen Boyd's study of Irish surf films critically assesses their poetic celebration of the waves on Ireland's Atlantic west coast (currently marketed to potential tourists as the 'Wild Atlantic Way') as a refuge from the commerciality of global surfing culture, highlighting its post-sport, or even anti-sport potential. However, promising a retreat from ersatz commercialisation this romance also appeals to the transnational white tourist and in one of his examples becomes a vehicle for the marketing of branded goods. Combining a concern with the cultural politics of representation and the political economy of the sport/leisure/cinema intersection, Boyd identifies the contradictory outcomes, actual or potential, in these films' circulation and appeal. These outcomes also connect with how the Irish west coast, whose rugged beauty has a long history of romantic artistic representation in Ireland (Gibbons 1987/2013), has been co-opted to a neoliberal project of commodification in the marketing of the 'Wild Atlantic Way'.

In the final article, Ciarán Ryan's study of video blogs ('vlogs') of Irish trail and mountain running shared through YouTube highlights their often dizzying individualised narratives and point-of-view camera transformations of the sportized environment. Using Caillois' (2001) categorisations of play, Ryan explores how these vlogs convey the 'postsport' experience of this form of running. He also examines the impact of recording and sharing on

its sporting dimensions, for example completion time and competitive placing in more formal race events. Vlogging also appears to introduce an additional dimension, as vloggers seek approval from viewers, and effectively compete to better earlier efforts of their own, if not others – both features of sport. Vlogging, of course, has a distinctly visual dimension, too. The surf films reproduce, or resonate with an Irish west coast version of what John Urry (2002) termed ‘the tourist gaze’, which is characterised by a broad vista. Although some vlogs incorporate drone footage, the disorientating vicarious sensuous experience of vertiginous immersion is the hoped for outcome of vlog sharing. Vloggers are thus connected in a transnational virtual community disconnected both from the spatiotemporal bounding of sports in designated arenas and the framing of conventional sport within national contexts and constructions of national identity.

Both articles also suggest significant class and possibly gendered dimensions to these activities. The search for remoteness, the pursuit and drive to share socially decontextualized sensuous experience and the repudiation of the vulgarity of commerciality and ruthless competitiveness are reminders of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1978, 824–825) writing on the ‘aristocratic philosophy of sport as a disinterested practice, a finality without an end, analogous to artistic practice’ that evinces a ‘disposition utterly opposed to the plebeian pursuit of victory at all costs’. ‘Soul surfing’ and mountain running are highly individualistic forms of escape characterised by a desire for ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu 1984), both from ‘plebeian’, arena-bound team sports and from such elite individualistic sports as golf, skiing and tennis. These romantic deviations from sport’s beaten tracks and use of platforms like YouTube and Vimeo suggest the shared cultural sensibility of a transnational middle class fraction. Boyd also highlights the predominantly ‘male, straight and white’ world of surfing to which the relatively undiscovered Irish west coast is appealing. While Ryan does not specifically focus on gender, his predominantly male participants’ will to convey mountain running’s embrace of suffering, pain and unpredictability is akin to what David Savran (1998) calls ‘reflexive sado-masochism’, the self-submission to pleasurable suffering. Savran’s title, *Taking It Like a Man*, suggests that an ideal of infinitely durable masculinity is unattainable, but that the willingness to ‘take’ the ‘it’ of suffering facilitates an approximation (‘like’ a man).

In conclusion, we should stress that this special issue is exploratory in spirit and in practice. It expands upon a relatively underdeveloped field in Ireland, while seeking to examine how the nationally specific articulates with the transnational. The intersections of class, gender and geography illustrate these complex articulations, but they are as yet suggestive, given the emerging rather than developed state of sport media research in Ireland. It is hoped that this special issue can provide the impetus for further research examining the relationship, and specificities, of sport and media in Ireland, but also their interconnections and intersections with international sport and media.

Given the discussions in this issue on gender issues, the intra-organisational experiences of women in sport media in Ireland and internationally also require much more consideration if the industry is to continue to attract and retain a diverse workforce. If public service broadcasting may yield to internal and exterior pressure to move progressively towards forms of gender equality, the complex ecology of sport media poses additional challenges. It also encompasses both purely commercial media and sports organisations, which may be more impervious to such pressures, as well as the pervasive intersecting worlds of social media platforms. The sexism and misogyny faced by women athletes and journalists in sport and sport media has been exacerbated by online hate, the prevalence, content and

impact of which (both gendered and otherwise) is a significant focus of current research (Kearns et al. 2023; Kilvington et al. 2023; Kitching and Sheehan 2023).

All sports journalists additionally face challenges from large sports organizations themselves, which are increasingly active agents in sport media, variously seeking to block, steer, restrict, and bypass their work (O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023). This special issue highlights the potential intersecting conflicts of interest for professional rugby, players and rugby journalists in a national context as they negotiate the precaution-risk continuum in the sport. Objective distance is a requirement of journalists, but they are also potentially compromised or challenged by proximity to the sport and players' own underplaying of the severity or impact of injury in their 'professional' interests. Given the complex dynamics between journalists, media organisation news cycles, sports organisations and elite players, there is clearly scope for more research on the role of media in both shaping awareness of sports-related brain injury and in sedimenting the precaution-risk continuum that operates in most individual and team sports and physical cultures. Here, as in other areas of critical media engagement with sport, this would ideally entail extensive analysis of media representation, but also empirical research on journalists' lived experience of the sports media complex as they negotiate competing demands.

Equally, researchers must be attentive to the role of new media in sportization processes and in broader dynamics of modern sports production and consumption. On one hand, social media and new media platforms appear to have 'democratized' and transnationalised participation in sport, transcending the national frameworks and boundedness of organized sport, especially, perhaps, in the cases of alternative, or 'postsports;' yet their use also raises ethical questions around privacy, data tracking, commodification, and environmental impacts. While surf films and running vlogs are considered in this issue, there remains considerable scope for further research on other niche sports, in these and other respects, such as mountain biking and potholing.

Finally, while the focus here is on sport, media and Ireland, and mainstream Irish media (including sport media) is predominantly white and Irish in the composition of its workforce, it should be noted that the population and demographics of Ireland are currently undergoing rapid change. The 2022 census revealed that 20% of the Republic's population was born outside the island of Ireland. While extensive demographic changes are currently being reflected, both in sport and other cultural spheres, there is, as yet, little research on the lived experiences, including racism, of athletes with migrant backgrounds (Conner 2017; Mauro 2018), and the impact of migration on sport, media, and national identity in Ireland (Free 2024). As in other countries (Van Sterkenburg and Spaaij 2015; Van Lienden et al. 2021) there is scope for extensive research on how intersections of gender, class and geography in sport media production, representation and consumption are further intersected by migration within and beyond sport, and how the national specificity of Ireland compares with other national contexts.

## Notes

1. The island of Ireland is divided into the Republic of Ireland, which obtained independence from the United Kingdom, initially as the Irish Free State, in 1922, and Northern Ireland, which remains within the UK. Most of the media considered in this special issue are published and circulated within the Republic. Henceforth, "Ireland" refers to the Republic of Ireland.

2. The green, white and orange tricolour is the flag of the Republic Ireland. The Union Jack is the flag of the United Kingdom, which includes Northern Ireland. Many sports in Ireland are organized on an all island basis, with the tricolour being used at international events such as the Olympic Games.

## Disclosure statement

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