

Immigration and Integration – Sport as a valuable instrument

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Abstract: The 21st Century has encouraged a mingling of cultures, lifestyles and identities. Such movements of course have positive and negative effects on the local and immigrant population. The sport of Gaelic football has traditionally been an Irish focused sport, and yet, today the sport is played on 5 Continents with an ever-increasing number of non-natives playing, especially in Asia. It is the researchers' belief that sports such as Gaelic football, can help to create an avenue for integration and an opportunity for the exchange of cultures that breaks down any preconceived barriers.

Keywords: Asia, Culture, Integration, Sport

I. INTRODUCTION

Individuals are immigrating to many different areas in the world in search of work, leisure, and a new life. Populations are no longer constrained by an arbitrary line on any maps. Areas such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Japan, China, and Korea are prime destinations for many “Western” immigrants today because of low cost of living and improving economies. [1] While, likewise, many people are immigrating to Europe or North America in search of economic stability or safety. This movement of permanent and temporary immigrants from historically first world countries to developing countries and vice versa has brought an influx of not only economic and cultural values but also sports and sporting values yet these newly arrived immigrants remain isolated or alienated from their new countries partially based on ethnic and racial differences.

There are many difficulties to this challenge such as language, values, history, and beliefs but the movement of people will continue despite such challenges. [2] Specifically in homogenous societies the challenges can lead to xenophobic and racist prejudices. [3] [4] A review of popular news and research has highlighted many concerns in relation to the influx of immigrants into these homogenous societies and the problems stem from mistrust and fear. [5] Nevertheless, the mobility of people in today's society will continue and the challenge to the concept of “other” and how to address those potential issues will also continue. There are many difficulties addressing the “other” such as fear, ignorance, and beliefs but the search for new home or new

beginning for people will continue despite such challenges. [6] The question is how such challenges be overcome without animosity, hostility or even violence. One factor that can potentially overcome these barriers is sport. Sport, be it in many different forms and organization is played in most countries in the world for centuries and as such can be an excellent vehicle for social cohesion. [7] Indeed, while countries have changed politically, economically, and socially the one constant in many of those countries has been sport. Sport participation can also be utilized as a vehicle for practical social integration for new immigrants and as a form of cultural exchange with local communities. This paper will focus on how the use of Gaelic sport, a traditional Irish sport, as a tool that can create a community spirit for expatriates and how local sport organizations can encourage positive cultural exchanges.

II. IMMIGRATION AND ASPORT

As stated, one of the greatest challenges in society today is immigration. Perusing newspapers or news programs today one can see the fear and ignorance related to this development. In Europe and North America, the movement of people has brought forth new challenges in relation to how to integrate newly arrived immigrants, who many times, are not viewed as the same as the local population due to demographic differences. According to Booth, Cusimano, Easton-Calabria, and Kuhn sport has been one concept that can help with the idea of social change and integration. [8] Indeed, there are many national and international organizations involved in using sport as an integration tool – the Governments of the United Kingdom, German, United States of America and Australian. [9]

Kennett in his work showed that in Europe an influx of Non-Europeans has been happening for the past decades. [10] In Today's society, the rate has increased substantially and as such there are more cultural and ideological clashes. The public sphere is no longer homogenous for many countries, with multiple languages being spoken and often multiple ethnicities working and residing in large and small cities. Though while this is a benefit to countries, it also presents many risks if those newly arrived do not integrate and likewise the host country does not appear to welcome them. Though Kennett spoke solely of Europe, the same issues and concerns are happening around the world in many nations.

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[11] Therefore it is imperative that any country or region should look to establish programs, such as sports, to help immigrants and local's establish contact and engage in understanding each other's values and customs.

Like Europe, Australia has seen an influx of immigrants from different ethnicities and races. While, white immigrants may more easily culturally assimilate than non-white, they still do have many problems. Civitillo highlighted that in Australian though immigrants have helped to develop its economic engine they still face many barriers to full participation within Australian society. [12] Despite being a multicultural society, Australia still lacks a successful national strategy in integration. One way that Australia has been successful is through the promotion of football or soccer clubs. In his research Civitillo showed that football clubs had a positive effect for immigrants [13]. The football clubs have given immigrants an opportunity to diminish social barriers, to create new social networks and develop relationships. This has allowed these immigrants to become more culturally and economically stable and at the same time learn about local values and customs.

Using sport as integration tool of course can produce positive and negative reactions and Krouwel, Boonstra, Duyvendak, and Veldboer highlited this concept when they stressed that the competitive nature of sport could lead to aggression and violence. [14] Though sports can be competitive and aggressive, research has also shown that sports can be an essential tool in helping immigrant's develop many positive social benefits such as health, fun, and a sense of purpose in their new home. What is important in helping to develop positive social benefits is the objectives and goals of those organizations. If an organization is focused on winning, being overly competitive, and focusing on a specific identity then certainly there will be limited benefits. On the other hand, if the organization focuses on integration goals and the building of social capital and open communication then the building of positive community development can be achieved.

III. CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND SPORT

One of the major avenues to overcoming prejudices and helping integrate new immigrants into societies is through embracing and celebrating cultural differences. Fear and ignorance is a driving force for ignorance and xenophobia, it is also a driving force in not accepting the "other." As such, it is important that any organization or Government focus on dispelling those fears through cultural acceptance and integration. Bush, Rose, Gilbert, Ingram stated that the exchange process is one of the most important factor in developing cultural communication despite the potential risks involved. [15] Raymond and Hall stressed that this exchange process can contribute too roadblocks in cultural exchanges which are based on miscommunication. [16]

To overcome these potential roadblocks, sport, sports

teams, or sport events can be utilized as a vehicle for cultural exchange. Sport brings together people from all colors, languages, and values and sport has proven to be an ideal way of breaking down barriers. [17] The desire to watch or play sports at times can supersede language and even culture. This is the attraction that sports have over many other avenues. Sport plays a principal role in many individuals' lives in relation to people having fun, embracing friendship, enjoying competition, and being healthy. No matter how you define sport, whether it is playing on a street or in an organized team or competition, sport can be a form of social glue that can be used to bring together communities divided racially or culturally.

Immigrants must deal with a new set of cultural values and customs and these individuals must interpret a different culture and assimilate into it to achieve success and remove themselves from being the "other." One problem for newly arrived immigrants is the social stigma of being different and as such immigrants will be less likely to attempt to integrate if they believe they are being alienated due to these differences. Thus, finding an opening to limit these potential problems is imperative to ensuring that immigrants have a positive experience. Sport offers this opportunity and while there are potential negative cultural exchanges at sporting events due to the primary language being spoken is English, sport is an avenue that allows people of different cultures to communicate through non-verbal exchanges.

One such sport that is now being used to cross cultural barriers is Gaelic Sports, which are a traditional Irish amateur sport but now played on five continents by peoples of all nationalities, races, and creeds.

IV. THE GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION (GAA)

The GAA is an amateur sporting organization that was and is a fundamental part of Irish culture and Irish identity. It is a community based sporting organization that is the bond that holds many communities together in Ireland and more recently overseas communities. The organization was formed as vehicle to maintain Irish culture during a time when Ireland was becoming being colonized by the British. [18] [19] [20] The sport grew and the organization became synonymous with being "Irish." It has been this way since its inception and the organization provides a sense of identity for those involved as volunteers from within the community run it. The organization maintained its "Irish" identity for many decades until recently. As with many countries in the late 20th and early 21st Century, Ireland saw a he increase in immigrants from all areas of the world. Ireland was always known for its young people leaving in search of a better life and now it had to deal with an influx of people searching for that same better life on its shores. These new immigrants were not cultural or ethically similar to the Irish communities. Many of these new immigrants came from non-English speaking countries. [21] This increase led to a

plethora of social challenges and the government has had a tough job attempting to integrate them into local communities. Since the GAA is the main organization in many local communities it attempted to be the one organization at the forefront of positive change.

Sensing a change in the societal make up and potential challenges the GAA became an important component in integrating newly arrived immigrants through the use of sport. The organization through its governing body membership enacted policies and strategies to broaden its appeal and make it more welcoming to new immigrants who maybe unfamiliar with the concept of Gaelic games. The GAA realized that sport was a universal tool that young people were attracted to and as such embraced policies that made playing the game easier (such as free practice and lessons on the game; having events with the local communities to welcome new arrivals; and most importantly offering a safe space and welcoming space to families). This concept has been expanded on in the overseas clubs and communities and thus, the GAA is one organization that has the ability to help integrate new immigrants into a native society and create a bridge for cultural exchange.

According to the GAA club Manual [22] a main aim of the organization is to foster an anti-sectarian and anti-racist atmosphere within its clubs and members and to maintain its stance as an open and inclusive sporting organization. The many different sports within the GAA all have a common structure that promotes inclusiveness, respect, and community. The GAA believes sport brings people together and helps to build communities and in this way, can foster inclusion and citizenship and bring individuals and communities together. The GAA in Ireland has now become a much more multicultural and accepting sporting body and this transformation has fueled its growth overseas.

V. GAELIC SPORT OVERSEAS –ASIAN REGION

From its inceptions in 1844, the founding members of the GAA could not have foreseen what their organization would become. While it started as a body to solely preserve Irish Culture and Identity, it has now been transformed to include a multitude of nationalities, ethnicities, and religions. The GAA has over 500 clubs overseas and it has governing bodies in North America, New York, Europe, Asia, Britain, and Australia. Within these regions, are thousands of players from all different regions, nationalities, and religions playing sports. The expansion of Gaelic football overseas has been happening since the mid twentieth century due to emigration from Ireland but only recently has it taken a foothold in many of the cities due to an increase in local people playing. Asia is one area that has seen an explosion in Gaelic sports and it is growing at an incredible rate. Today, there are over 15 countries throughout the Asian region with men, women, and youth teams. These participants are attracted for several reasons. The first is the fun nature of the sport and the desire

to challenge themselves, which is especially enticing to the local population. The second reason is that many expatriates utilize the sport as a way to acclimatize to their new country and to help them acculturate to their newly adopted home countries. This acclimatization happens at the team or club level, where a lot of hard work is put forth to make the sport a vehicle for cultural exchange.

A. Clubs

The local clubs are the essence of the GAA throughout the world and at the focal point in creating a community. The founding of these clubs is usually based on several Irish people who may have recently moved to a new area and are interested in creating a sports club to help them adjust and limit the concept of culture shock. The desire for a “piece of home” is an immediate concern for many who immigrate to a new country and are not aware of the customs, values, or language. The GAA offers people a sense of identity and connection with other immigrants who maybe in a similar situation. It is not just about the physical activity but also rather about the connections that people make and the socialization value of the sport club.

Clubs in such places as Shanghai, Seoul, Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam have all embraced an identity that revolves around their new “home.” The clubs feature not just Irish and non-Irish expatriates but also a large number of local players. This is especially true for the women’s game, which has become an extremely popular sport to play because of the lack of sports for women in many of these areas. Gaelic sport gives women an outlet to participate in sport in areas with many barriers and a lack of opportunity for participation for many women. The popularity has increased to such an extent that at many adult competitions these teams are composed primarily of the local population and very few expatriates.

These clubs do not just play sport but get involved in local schools with exhibition sport days and organizations such as orphanages and charities as a way to improve communication between locals and foreigners. The clubs also devote a large amount of time and energy in creating a kids program that focuses on the local residents and getting them to play Gaelic sports. This has been a huge success in these areas and resulted in school competitions and organized trips to Ireland for the local populations. For example, in Vietnam and Thailand, there are annual high school Gaelic sport competitions that feature nearly all-local teams and in Seoul there is an annual trip to Ireland for parents and kids of the Seoul Gaels youth teams. This is an excellent example of using sport to create communities and build cultural connections.

Recently, new clubs have been formed in Myanmar, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. These clubs have been formed by Irish and Non-Irish immigrants and increasingly local residents have been heavily involved in founding these clubs. The club

in Myanmar is a great example of using sport as a focal point of community building. Myanmar has long been inaccessible to foreign immigration and has recently opened its borders to companies and education professionals. This influx of new immigrants created a need for “a piece of home,” and a way to connect with the local community. The Myanmar club has now become involved in non-sporting activities and has embraced local organizations and schools to improve the connection with the local communities.

Recently, there have also been several teams set up by Universities based in Shanghai and Beijing. The Beijing team is solely made up of Chinese nationals who joined the local GAA club and this has also allowed the foreign residents to play and socialize alongside the Chinese residents. What this has allowed is for the foreign residents to slowly acculturate into Chinese society. The University is also a major proponent of this team as it allows the students to familiarize themselves with non-Chinese residents. Likewise, the Shanghai team has similar objectives and is fully supported by the University and the local GAA club. This team was actually started by a Chinese resident who lived in Ireland and fell in love with the GAA. This is the embodiment of the concept of sport and integration.

B. Tournaments

Over the past few years, the level of integration of communities around the world through Gaelic has grown tremendously. The Asian GAA has been at the front of using the GAA as an integration tool. An example of this is an initiative of starting a University team in Ireland solely made up of non-Irish students. This team has now grown to over 60 members and has attended three Asian Gaelic Games. These students arrived in Ireland and thanks to the GAA have embraced Ireland as a “home away from home.”

In 2015, the GAA initiated a new tournament – The GAA World Games. Each continent has its own national game that incorporates all the different players involved. The 2015 GAA World Games had teams that incorporated players from South Africa, South America, Asia, Middle East and Europe – teams from these regions were made of non-native Irish and embraced the concept of the GAA. In 2016, the numbers involved in the tournament increased and this concept looks set to continue.

In 2016, the ACB realized that they had a large number of children (both foreign and local) playing GAA. Therefore, they decided to start a new youth tournament – this tournament was called the GAA Asian Youth Championship (AYC). The AYC was organized and hosted in Vietnam and had over 150 youths playing GAA. The demographics of the participants were varied from Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Irish, Australian and European. Another positive that the tournament produced was the media attention it received in Vietnam, China, and Korea in their native languages. This media attention in the native language was significant in

helping to showcase that foreign and local residents can engage in friendships and develop stronger relationships. The weekend tournament gave all the children and their parents the opportunity to not only participate in sport but more importantly to socialize and remove potential social barriers. Thus, potentially removing the concept of the “other.”

These tournaments highlight the potential that sport and in particular the GAA has in helping immigrants adapt and integrate into new cultures. The clubs involved in these tournaments are made up from all nationalities and are based in a multitude of cities. Thus, the GAA serves all participants in all regions. The 2016 GAA unequivocally embraces its vision statement, which is:

“Our vision is that everybody has the opportunity to be welcomed to take part in our games and culture, to participate fully, to grow and develop and to be inspired to keep a lifelong engagement with our Association.” [23]

VI. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper has highlighted that sport potentially can have a positive influence on immigrants adapting to a new country or area. Sport itself and sports clubs can help to breakdown social and cultural barriers. Additionally, individually, sport can help new immigrants gain confidence, create social networks, establish new friendships that can help them overcome social isolation and homesickness. What is important is that structurally sport teams or sport programs can help immigrants adjust to new values and customs.

Gaelic football has traditionally been an Irish sport, today though, this idea has been transformed. No longer is the sport viewed as being only for the Irish but rather as being a vehicle that encourages differences and uniqueness and in fact, celebrates such difference. The GAA in its beginnings probably never believed of the prospect that Gaelic games would be played by people from a non-Irish background or being played by overseas and, yet today this is where the game is growing the most. The organization has been noted as being the largest amateur sporting organization in the world with over 2 million members and today it can add the idea of being the most culturally diverse as well.

In Asia, the promotion of Gaelic and the concept of cultural exchange have become intertwined and benefits both the local population and new immigrants. The adult games include sport for men and women that offers fun, socialization, and as an outlet to overcome participation barriers. The clubs not only promote sport but also embracing local schools and organizations as an avenue to create a sense of connection with the local communities and to create an identity for the expatriates. In addition, the clubs spend a lot of their time working and promoting the sport in schools as a way to highlight foreign culture and improve relations with the local populations.

The GAA is over 125 years old as an organization and

today it truly is embracing a new era – the “new GAA” may not have been envisioned in 1884 but it is now an important part of the organizations future. Gaelic sport overseas is not just a sporting organization but also an organization that has enormous potential for increasing cultural awareness and importantly offering an vehicles for cultural exchange and a “piece of home away from home.”

A final note should be addressed to policy makers for governmental or non-governmental organizations. Developing sports programs should be an integral component of any national strategy to target new immigrants. Building trust between different groups is paramount to ensuring that they adjust no matter what nationality, race, or ethnicity. Therefore, any attempt to develop such programs should be fully resourced, recognized, and funded as an important role in the overall social development and integration within the country. Sport is a universal language and as such it can be the bridge not only bring people together but can also be the social glue that can bind people together in a way that embraces differences and similarities.

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