Sports development, nations and nationalism

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Nation states and stateless nations alike contribute to the development of sport for many and varied reasons, amongst them domestic solidarity, international prestige, and the physical and psychological well-being of their people. With specific reference to nationalism as a political ideology, the most common motivations have been imperialist expansion and anti-imperialist resistance. The purpose of this chapter is to examine ways in which nationalism has made a vital contribution to sports development. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the relationship between sport and nationalism, with special attention being paid to the British (or, to be more precise, the English) experience and to the diffusion of sport as an imperialist project. The main focus of the chapter, however, is on two particular case studies – Ireland and Taiwan – with the aim of demonstrating the complex relationship between sport, nationalism and post-colonialism in relation to sports development. The chapter ends with a commentary on the threat posed by globalisation to the traditional linkage of nationalism and sports development.

Sport and nationalism

At the most basic level of analysis, it is easy to see the extent to which sport, arguably more than any other form of social activity in the modern world, facilitates flag waving and the playing of national anthems, both formally, at moments such as medal ceremonies, and, informally, through the activities of fans (Hoberman 1984; MacClancy 1996; Cronin and Mayall 1998; Bairner 2001; Smith and Porter 2004). Indeed, there are political nationalists who fear that by acting as such a visible medium for overt displays of national sentiment, sport can actually blunt the edge of serious political debate (Jarvie and Walker 1994). No matter how one views the grotesque caricatures of pseudonational modes of behaviour and dress that so often provide the colourful backdrop to major sporting events, one cannot escape the fact that sport and nationalism, no matter how that concept is understood, are closely linked. It is important to appreciate, however, that the precise nature of their relationship varies dramatically from one political setting to another and that, as a consequence, it is vital that we are constantly alert to a range of different conceptual issues (Bairner 2008, 2009).

For example, like the United Nations, sport’s global governing bodies, such as the International Olympic Committee or the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA),
consist almost exclusively of representatives not of nations but rather of sovereign nation states. It is also worth noting that pioneering figures in the organisation of international sport, such as Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics movement, embodied a commitment both to internationalism and to the interests of their own nation states. Thus, whilst de Coubertin could write enthusiastically about a sporting event that would bring together young (male) athletes from across the globe, he was also specifically concerned with the physical well-being of young French men in the wake of a demoralising defeat in the Franco-German War. As Hill (1992: 6) observes, ‘it was not primarily because he was an internationalist that Coubertin pursued the Olympic ideal; rather, he saw this as the best way of promoting sport of the finest type, his efforts to balance intellectual and physical education in French schools having failed’.

As for the Olympics themselves, it is worth noting that although the Cold War is normally understood as a contest between the rival ideological visions of capitalism and communism, nationalism also played its part not only in terms of international competition between the United States and the Soviet Union but also within the Soviet bloc. Hungary and Czechoslovakia’s rivalry with the Soviet Union in water polo and ice hockey, respectively, although provoked by ideological differences and their consequences, were also rooted in national pride. Indeed, simply by becoming an international competition in 1908 as opposed to one that sought only to bring together competitors representing no one but themselves, the Olympic Games have had a major subsequent impact on ensuring that sports development and the nation are inextricably linked.

It should also be recognised that sport has contributed hugely to gendering the nation. Whereas the relationship between gender and national identity in general has been relatively underexplored, the role of sport in the context of that relationship has been almost totally ignored, even by sports scholars. Yet, Jennifer Ring (2009) draws our attention to the anomalous description of baseball as ‘the national pastime’ of the United States in relation to gender. Noting that, on 21 June 1952, Commissioner Ford Frick banned women from playing minor or major league baseball, Ring (2009: 20) comments, ‘If baseball is the national pastime, the implication is that women are not part of the nation.’ Similarly, in England, the Football Association instituted a ban on women’s football on 5 December 1921, which was not lifted until 29 November 1971 (Williams 2003). Thus, another national sport was formally reserved for male members of the nation. Traditionally women have either been excluded from sport or encouraged to play for their own sakes—principally for the sake of their health. There has been little sense that female athletes carry with them the hopes and ambitions of the nation. Like war, sport has customarily been regarded as men’s work. There have been some notable exceptions to this general rule, primarily emanating from state socialist societies such as the German Democratic Republic, Rumania and the Soviet Union itself. Indeed, the most interesting contemporary example is provided by the female boxers (Lee 2009) and footballers of North Korea, and with the failure of that closed society’s men’s football team at the 2010 World Cup Finals (Lee and Bairner 2009), the propagandist value of women athletes may well remain high, at least in the short term.

Whilst in most cases the nation states that constitute the membership of international sporting bodies such as the International Olympic Committee are coterminous with nations, the fact remains that numerous nations throughout the world, as well as other forms of collective belonging, are stateless and thus denied representation in international sporting competition just as they are in the corridors of global political power. Here too the Olympic movement has ensured that sports development and nationalism are interwoven. For example, despite the fact that the right to host the Games is granted to individual cities, those cities themselves are generally also seen as representative of their respective nation states. In the case of host cities such as Montréal and Barcelona, however, the opportunity arose to promote the sporting, and
concomitantly the political aspirations of what are seen by many as the submerged nations of Québec and Catalonia, respectively (Kidd 1992; Hargreaves 2000).

As the examples of Montréal and Barcelona reveal, when considering the relationship between sports and nationalism, it is important to think in terms both of nation states and of nations. This also provides the means whereby sport’s connection with nationality and also with national identity can be separately explored. It is also useful to bear in mind that sport often acts as a window through which we are able to examine a whole range of social developments and to test a variety of theoretical concepts and perspectives. With specific reference to the relationship between sports and nationalism, observing the world of sport offers insights into the relevance and reliability of such concepts as ethnic and civic nationalism and the validity of explanatory approaches to the rise of nations and nationalism such as primordialism and modernism. Sport can also provide important insights into varieties of imperialism, the cultural politics of anti-imperialist struggle and postcolonial legacies (Bairner 2008). However, despite a growing literature on the relationship between sport and nationalism, the precise impact of nationalism on sports development has received little attention. One way of trying to understand this impact is to look at the ways in which sport has developed (or has been developed) in societies in which the struggle for national identity has been a major political concern over extended periods of time.

There are two extreme ways in which nationalism can impact on the development of sport. First, national ambition can be instrumental in sport’s diffusion. In the case of the United Kingdom, for example, diffusion took place in two directions – from England to the other constituent parts of the nation state, from members of the upper classes to subordinate groups in British and Irish society and, finally, from Britain to the various corners of its Empire. Educational institutions played a vital role in the emergence and rapid growth of modern sport in England, as did organised religion. Indeed the two often worked hand in hand inspired by Christian headmasters in the public school system – hence the origins of the term, ‘muscular Christianity’. As Dunning (1990: 91) points out, ‘whatever the degree of adequacy of this hypothesis, it is certainly the case that public schools were the central loci of the development of embryonic forms of soccer and the rival rugby code.’ Subsequently the diffusion of British games, at least in the formal British Empire, owed much to Christian missionaries as well as to official functionaries of the Empire.

The alternative manner in which nationalism can influence sports development is through the ring fencing of certain sports in the interests of national purity. Although cricket is still closely associated with Englishness, neither the English nor the British more generally used this particular strategy, such were their expansionist aims. More recently, at one level the United States has witnessed the construction of a relatively insular sporting culture. But that too has been influenced by expansionist ambitions, both political and sporting, not least in relation to the spread of baseball, traditionally described as America’s ‘national pastime’ but now played with skill and enthusiasm in such disparate societies as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Japan and South Korea. Rather it was with the formation of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in 1884, in direct response to the diffusion of British games in Ireland, that there emerged what was to become one of the most successful of all attempts to harness sport to a nationalist cause and, in so doing, to develop sport in interesting and successful ways.

Gaelic games and the origins of sports development in Ireland

By the 1880s, a number of British sports were already well established in Ireland – scarcely surprising given the island’s close proximity to Britain and the close family and other personal
ties between the British and the Irish, particularly within the Anglo-Irish Establishment. As with the development of modern sport in England, the role of educational institutions was vital. Upper-class Irish boys attended boarding schools in England and subsequently Oxford and Cambridge universities where they were exposed to the feverish process of sports development that had begun in nineteenth-century England. They returned to Ireland eager to pursue their interests particularly in cricket, rowing and rugby. Meanwhile, the British army’s presence in Ireland created a growing interest in the so-called ‘garrison games’ of association football and hockey, whilst in the north-eastern corner of Ireland, Protestant working-class men in Belfast, influenced by developments in the west of Scotland, also embraced football (Bairner 1996). However, it would be wrong to assume that British games were only taken up by the Protestant Irish upper classes, functionaries of the British state and the unionist workers of what in due course was to become Northern Ireland. For example, there is growing evidence of cricket being played by lower middle-class Catholics (Bracken 2004; Hunt 2007), whilst the leading Catholic schools were as likely to encourage British games as were their Church of Ireland counterparts, and urban Catholics also began to take up football (Cronin 1999). Indeed, the founder of the GAA, Michael Cusack, was himself an enthusiastic cricketer and rugby player, as were numerous other major figures in the history of Irish nationalism, and had taught his pupils these sports before deciding on a new course of action (Rouse 2009). It was against, and in response to, the backdrop of the growing popularity of British games in Ireland that the GAA emerged.

Again, it is important to recognise the influential role played by schools and teachers, like Cusack himself, and also by religion, although unlike in England, where the Catholic Church had tended to follow the example of Protestant denominations in relation to sport, in Ireland it was the Catholic Church, despite intermittent concerns about some of the more politically radical figures in the Association, that would assume the leading, and increasingly exclusive, role as far as Gaelic sport was concerned.

Gaelic games, according to Cronin (1999: 116), ‘have played a central role in definitions of Irish nationalism.’ Indeed the GAA’s contribution in this regard has been twofold – first, to provide cultural ballast to the efforts of a constitutionally submerged nation to achieve statehood and, second, since partition in 1921 to help to consolidate and promote the Irish Free State (and, subsequently, the Republic of Ireland) whilst simultaneously providing an important vehicle for the continuing expression of a distinctive Irish national identity within the nationalist community of Northern Ireland. These aspects of the GAA’s history are instructive for a wider debate concerning the relationship between sport and the construction and reproduction of national identities in other parts of the world. As David Daiches (1952: 9) wrote, in a different context, ‘there are two ways in which a baffled and frustrated nation can attempt to satisfy its injured pride.’

It can attempt to rediscover its own national traditions, and by reviving and developing them find a satisfaction that will compensate for its political impotence; or, accepting the dominance of the culture of the country which has achieved political ascendancy over it, it can endeavour to beat that country at its own game and achieve distinction by any standard the dominant culture may evolve.

(Daiches 1952: 9)

In challenging the emerging hegemony of British games, the GAA clearly eschewed the latter course of action. But it went even further than the former by its insistence that political independence rather than compensation was one of its key objectives. To that end, not only were
most of its activities to be distinctively Irish, its approach to sport would also differ from the British model, not least through an emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between sport and community.

The GAA, community and sports development

The leaders of the GAA, fearful that their activities might be unable to compete with more established sports, adopted a policy of banning from the Association members who had been found guilty of playing or watching foreign games. This particular rule was not removed from the GAA’s statutes until the 1960s, by which time it was apparent to all that Gaelic games had firmly established themselves in the nation’s sporting culture. Indeed, in the years that have followed, the GAA has become a modern, self-confident governing body, capable of transforming Dublin’s Croke Park into one of Europe’s most impressive stadia and of showing magnanimity – for the sake of the nation – by modifying another of its rules in order to allow rugby union and soccer international matches to be played at Croke Park during the reconstruction of Lansdowne Road. Anomalies remain, however, and are explicable only by exploring what arguably represents the GAA’s unique contribution to sports development.

Within the overall context of sports development and specifically in relation to high-performance sport, it is remarkable that it is theoretically possible for the best Gaelic footballer in Ireland to be playing for one of the weakest club sides and for a county with no real expectations of winning a major trophy – ‘no hopers’, if you like. Only when the relationship between the player, his community and parish, and his Gaelic club is explained does this make any sense. Also unfamiliar to a non-Irish audience is the extent to which Gaelic clubs are more than places where sports are played. Birthday parties are held in them, concerts, engagement parties and so on. Indeed in Belfast, and other towns in the north of Ireland during the so-called ‘troubles’, Gaelic clubs were widely regarded (erroneously, in some cases, as tragic events were to prove) in nationalist communities as safer and more easily accessed leisure spaces than downtown bars and clubs.

The relationship between sport and community is, of course, by no means confined to the GAA. In England, for example, many professional football clubs were formed by churches, eager to strengthen the bond between religion and the people who lived in a particular town or city district. As Brown et al. (2009: 2) note, ‘many of today’s most successful clubs and particularly the longest established clubs have their origins in “community organisations” such as churches, social clubs or work’s teams.’ Even more illuminating in terms of the overall context of this book is the manner in which grass-roots sport and elite sport have long enjoyed a symbiotic and mutually supportive relationship in the social democratic societies of northern Europe (Meinander and Mangan 1998). There are echoes of this phenomenon in the organisation of Gaelic games. Certainly, unlike modern professional soccer clubs in England, the GAA has never had to act self-consciously in relation to local communities. Gaelic clubs have been and remain integral parts of their respective communities and, as such, have provided an example that clubs in other sports, in Ireland and elsewhere, have seldom, if ever, been able to emulate.

Links with the Catholic Church although greatly diminished in importance still remain, with most Gaelic clubs inextricably associated with the parish and with the schools that serve it. Thus, in Ulster, Gaelic football’s MacCrory Cup is a prized goal for the Catholic grammar schools that annually contest it. In addition, the all-Ireland Sigerson Cup, competed for by institutions of higher education, confers on its winners a status that far exceeds that which is associated with awards in British university sport. Thus, teachers have over time replaced the
clergy as dominant figures in developing Gaelic games, whilst the GAA and its member clubs have themselves introduced more modern coaching structures so that the continued development of the sports for which it has responsibility can be assured. As noted above, given the popularity in Ireland of football and, to an only slightly lesser extent, rugby union, it has never been possible for the GAA to become complacent. Its early attempts to ban those who were found to have played or watched foreign games were irrefutable indications of a protectionist, perhaps even a paranoid, perspective. Today, however, although other sports have also evolved in relation to coaching and development, there is a greater sense within the GAA that the nation can be served by a variety of sports, albeit maintaining that Gaelic games remain the purest expression of sporting Irishness – a concept that in itself is constantly evolving as the GAA seeks to develop its games within the immigrant communities made up of the so-called ‘new Irish’.

Colonialism and the origins of sports development in Taiwan

In terms of the study of national identity and more specifically the relationships between sport and national identity, Taiwan (or the Republic of China – ROC) provides a fascinating case study. According to Roy (2003: 1), ‘Taiwan’s present circumstances are peculiar and intriguing’ – scarcely surprising given the island’s complex history. Equally, it should come as no surprise that a country with such a unique past has also experienced a complex history in terms of both sports development and the construction of national identity and the relationship between the two. The country has been influenced by a long and remarkably varied experience of colonialism. The link between this experience and sport was first established with the arrival of European and American Christian missionaries and educators who sought to make sport and games integral to the education process in imitation of their own western experience.

For example, in 1882, Dr George Leslie MacKay founded the Oxford Study Hall (the predecessor of today’s Taiwan Theology College), and later launched the Tamsui Girls High School (the predecessor of today’s Tamsui High School). In 1885 the English Presbyterian Church established the Presbyterian Church High School (the predecessor of today’s Chang Rong High School). All of these schools, like many schools in Ireland, were subsequently to enjoy an outstanding reputation for sporting excellence. The question of whether there had been a conscious effort on the part of schools to promote modern exercise and physical education prior to the Japanese occupation remains unanswered.

What is undeniable, however, is that, when the Japanese began their occupation of Taiwan in 1895, the sports curriculum in schools began to play an important role in promoting a Japanese identity. This approach was further advanced during the era of Japanese colonialism, most notably with the introduction of baseball, itself ironically having been introduced to Japan as a consequence of American expansionism. The sport’s popularity grew rapidly in Taiwan. However, this was no simple exercise in sports development. As in numerous other colonial contexts, sport was used to create dutiful citizens, willing to accept the colonists’ authority and values. This was particularly apparent in the treatment of the island’s aboriginal population. It can legitimately be argued that, to a significant extent through baseball, not only was armed resistance crushed but cultural indoctrination through systematic (re)education was also imposed on aborigines to the extent that their own identities were much eroded. After being co-opted by the state, aborigines transferred their legendary courage onto the diamond and played an important role in the development of Taiwanese baseball. In addition, baseball helped to enhance mutual understanding through games between opponents from different ethnic backgrounds. For example, the Jianong (Kano) was a tri-ethnic competition involving Han Chinese,
Japanese and indigenous peoples, with Ami aborigines accounting for a high percentage of the players. Furthermore, as we shall now see, attempts to use sport to promote the assimilation of aboriginal people did not end with Japanese rule (Yu 2004).

Defeated by the Communists in mainland China, the Kuomintang (KMT) under the leadership of the Chiang Kai-shek government decamped to Taiwan and thus began the contestation between the governments of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and of the ROC, which persists to the present day. One of the main objectives of the KMT leadership has been to ensure that the Taiwanese people identify themselves as Chinese and, just as the Japanese colonial rulers sought to use baseball to maintain obedience to their rule without quite making the population Japanese, so, in subsequent years, baseball has been used to underline Taiwan’s Chinese identity (Yu and Bairner 2008). It is particularly instructive to note the ROC’s use of Little League Baseball (LLB) competitions in the United States as part of its nation-building process. It is clear that the KMT, the governing party throughout this period, used LLB as a cultural resource to achieve its political objectives. Young players were hailed as role models for the ‘Chinese Nation’, with which Taiwanese people were proudly identified, and through which the ethnically divided society was integrated. In addition, LLB triumphs were used to indicate to overseas Chinese, and also to the outside world as a whole, that the ROC represented a more genuine Chinese nation than did the PRC.

With the emergence of a major opposition party in the form of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which is more interested in raising a distinctive Taiwanese consciousness, there has been yet another development. Just as the island’s aboriginal people are valued ideologically as a factor in the case for independence, their disproportionate contribution to Taiwanese baseball has not gone unnoticed (Yu and Bairner 2010).

Enlisting Taiwanese aboriginals for the sporting nation

The Japanese wanted to transform ‘savages’ into civilized beings. The KMT, in turn, used baseball to enhance international visibility and construct an overarching notion of a ‘Chinese Nation’ so as to win the support of overseas Chinese, consolidate its rule in Taiwan, and Sinicize the aborigines (Yu 2007; Yu and Bairner 2008). More recently, the pro-independence DPP administration, which took office for the first time in 2000, like the KMT before it, albeit with very different objectives, has also recognised the potential role of baseball. International success for Taiwanese teams combined with the personal achievements of Taiwanese players in Major League Baseball in North America become valuable factors in the construction of a distinctively Taiwanese identity. Regardless of the political party in power, all of this has implications for the development of baseball and, in particular, for the education of young aboriginal players.

Recognising the sporting potential of aborigines, not least in terms of promoting national pride and unity of purpose, the KMT government established two Physical Education (PE) Experimental High Schools, in Taidong and Hualian, in the late 1990s to allow pupils to focus their attention on sport. Both of these are full of tribal athletes. Some teachers have warned of the dangers of condemning student-athletes as young as thirteen to be little more than sport machines with no additional skills. It seems that, on one hand, the government conveniently extracts the cheap labour of aborigines to achieve its goal of international visibility. On the other hand, aborigines become more and more convinced that sport is the most likely, perhaps the only, way for them to obtain fame and earn money. It is a familiar story. Comparisons can certainly be made with the experience of young African American athletes (Hoberman 1997). Moreover, unlike in the United States (Hoberman 1997) and Australia (Tatz 1995), where
racism also exists but where sport is valorised by many, in Chinese society all occupations relating to physical labour tend to be despised. Yet, acculturation supported by racial stereotyping has shaped aboriginal thinking into accepting that Han Chinese are academically superior while they themselves are better athletes (Yu 2004).

While many local tribal people applauded the move to set up PE schools, it is important to examine the trajectory of their alumni. In 1996, Taidong PE Experimental High School accepted its first 28 junior high players, only two of whom were Han Chinese. Only seven still play baseball and not all of them are likely to progress to the professional game. The rest are now at the bottom of the social scale, working as street vendors selling sautéed periwinkle, truck drivers, or bricklayers (Yu and Bairner 2010). This drop out rate is very high. However, there is a widespread tendency to focus on the success stories and to ignore the plight of those who have dropped out of baseball. Indeed, officials use the successful examples to uphold the PE school policy. Since sports performance can mean promotion for education officials, it is not surprising that baseball teams are encouraged to win championships both domestically and internationally.

There is considerable evidence, therefore, of the close relationship that has existed in Taiwan over an extended period of time between sports development and the construction and reproduction of various national and quasinational identities. Whilst the central concern of generations of politicians has undeniably been with the identity issue per se, it cannot be denied that partially as a consequence of their various ambitions, sport, and in particular baseball, has been substantially developed. To return to the political issue, however, although sports development has certainly been conceived as part of a national project, questions remain as to which nation is at stake, to whom that nation belongs and who pays the highest price.

Conclusion

It would be an oversimplification to argue, not least on the basis of only two case studies, that nationalism has been a major driving force in sports development. At the same time, it is clear even from the examples offered in this chapter that nationalism has undeniably been deeply implicated in the processes whereby sport has been accepted and then further developed in particular societies. Whether the nation will continue to loom as large in the future is another matter.

Despite the resilience of traditional pastimes such as pelota in the Basque country and sumo in Japan as well as organisations such as the GAA, many would argue that there are strong grounds for believing that the link between nationalism and sports is becoming weaker and that the very existence of international competition is threatened by the twin forces of globalisation and consumer capitalism (Miller et al. 2001; Giulianotti and Robertson 2009). Athletes migrate from one nation state to another in rapidly increasing numbers and not only to play for different clubs (Maguire 1999; Lanfranchi and Taylor 2001). In many cases, the move also involves the adoption of a new sporting nationality. This process has been notably exemplified in the global movement of Kenyan and Ethiopian runners – representing their ‘real’ nation at one major event and oil-rich countries such as Qatar and Bahrain or even the United States at the next. Furthermore, it is increasingly believed that, whilst most professional athletes in team sports continue to represent the nation states of their birth, their true feelings of loyalty are for their clubs and even for their corporate sponsors. This leads to concerns that in soccer the European Champions’ League has now virtually surpassed the World Cup in terms of its significance for players and that, in most sports, major competitions will in the long run involve representatives of Nike, Adidas and a host of other corporations, with nations and even long-established sports
clubs having greatly reduced importance. At present, the Ryder Cup in golf pits golfers from various European nation states against their counterparts from the United States, providing a relatively rare opportunity for the expression of American sporting nationalism prompted by international, or more accurately intercontinental, competition. But how realistic are fears that competition between nations is in the process of being superseded by a transnational, global sports culture?

First, we should always be cautious when we talk about the transformation of modern society into globalised post-modernity. Throughout the history of modern sport, which is itself not much older than that of most of the world’s nation states, players have moved from one country to another. Furthermore, ‘national’ teams have always reflected the movement of peoples and the creation of diasporic populations. Indeed, the fact that some nation states now select representatives on the basis of the place of birth of one or more of their grandparents is little more than a reversal of that particular trend. If the host state’s national selectors show little interest in a particular athlete, then it becomes increasingly likely that another set of selectors will. All of this suggests that, whilst there may indeed be more anomalies than ever before with respect to who represents the nation, the actual phenomenon of representing a nation that is not fully one’s own (whatever that actually means in relation to the idea of authenticity) is in no way new. Between the 1940s and 1960s, it was possible for one of the greatest soccer players of his time, Alfredo Di Stefano, who was born in Argentina into a family of Italian immigrants, to play for three different national teams – Argentina (7 caps), Colombia (4 caps) and Spain (31 caps). The life of this one sportsman alone is indicative of the extent to which modern sport has always thrown up issues surrounding the concepts of nationality and national identity.

The question of whether or not to cast the net wide in order to improve national representation in various sports is an interesting one not least in relation to sports development. In rugby union, for example, the recruitment of players born in New Zealand, Australia and South Africa to northern hemisphere national teams and of Pacific islanders to New Zealand’s All Blacks can be seen as part of an attempt to maintain high standards, which subsequently helps to create ‘national’ role models and increased interest in the sport from young people. In this sense, the strategy can be presented as an aid to sports development. Alternatively, this practice might also be seen as one whereby young native-born people note what is happening and infer that it is increasingly unlikely that they and their like will ever represent the nation in the face of competition from outside. Hence, they are lost to the sport, the indigenous, grass-roots development of which inevitably suffers. It is a difficult balancing act and one that will continue to be addressed by governing bodies so long as national performance in international competition continues to be an important measure of sporting success. It should be added, however, that for the most part, throughout this period, the overwhelming majority of people who have represented their countries at sport have had remarkably strong ties with the nation state in question. In most instances, that is where they (or at least their parents) were born or else they have come to live there at some stage in their lives and have acquired citizenship and with it a legally recognised nationality. In addition, as suggested earlier, an even greater majority of fans have always been irrevocably tied to their respective national teams and representatives.

This is not to deny that it is easier than ever before for sports fans to watch, to support and to wear the colours of nations other than their own. Yet most choose not to do so. One can understand the decision of a Kenyan athlete who opts to represent Qatar. Sports fans who are motivated to any degree by the relationship between sport and nationalism are largely stuck with the nation or the nation state to which through national identity and/or nationality they can be said to belong. It should be added though that this type of fan is also most likely to be attracted to team sports or to major events, such as the Olympic Games, at which athletes
compete as representatives of their nation states. As far as more individualistic high-level competition is concerned – in tennis, for example, or golf – it becomes easier for a fan to celebrate the achievements of a chosen player regardless of his or her place of origin. Once again though it is fair to say that this has always been the case; it is not the consequence of increasingly influential forces of globalisation or of the chaos that is believed by some to characterise the post-modern condition.

There is no denying that sport is constantly affected by social change. Sports that were once played only in certain places – national sports according to one set of criteria – are now played throughout the world. American influence, whilst insufficient to allow sports such as baseball and American football to supersede soccer in most parts of the world, has clearly impacted on the ways in which a sport such as soccer is now played, packaged, mediated and observed. The fact remains, however, that sport is still far more likely to contribute to the perpetuation of strongly held, local regional and national identities than to the construction and consolidation of a homogeneous global culture (Bairner 2001). This is scarcely surprising since sport is central to the construction and reproduction of particularistic identities that are very different from the idea of a global culture that is so often heralded but which evokes so little emotion. For the time being, the relationship between sports and nations remains strong, although it is equally apparent that this relationship manifests itself in a wide variety of ways. Sport can help to promote the image of a nation state but it may also bring shame and financial ruin. Sport can unite a nation state; but it may not. Sport can often be the most important symbol of the continued existence of a submerged nation. Sport can allow nations and nation states alike, as well as regions and other localities, to resist cultural homogenisation. Yet it can also serve the purposes of global capitalism. Like nationalism itself, sport is Janus-faced (Nairn 1997). Perhaps for that reason alone their continued relationship is secure.

Sports development has clearly been aided by the links between sport and nationalist ambitions, whether expansionist or resistant. Nationalism has not been the only political ideology to contribute to sports development in this way. But arguably it has been one of the most persistent and, despite the pressures of globalisation, it remains the most robust.

References


