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‘This Sporting Life: Anything to Declare?
Community Allegiance, Sports & the National Question’.

By
Thomas Paul Burgess

In 2012, a young, mild-mannered - lower middle class, Controlled Grammar school educated - County Down man, (Roman Catholic by religion for those interested in such matters) inadvertently reminded us of the depth of significance that the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland still place on stated sporting allegiance and all that this might imply.

In a wide-ranging interview with *Sportsmail*, the then 23-year-old - whose Northern Irish roots made him eligible for both British and Irish representation - had spoken candidly about this dilemma.

> “Maybe it was the way I was brought up, I don’t know, but I have always felt more of a connection with the UK than with Ireland. And so I have to weigh that up against the fact that I’ve always played for Ireland and so it is tough. Whatever I do, I know my decision is going to upset some people but I just hope the vast majority will understand.”

Whether his aspiration was realised is a matter for conjecture.
However, for a significant number of opinion formers in the media and on social networking sites, they most assuredly did not understand.

And golfing icon Rory McIlroy learned a salutary lesson in regard to the place that sports, sporting success and allegiance hold in the collective national psyches of both traditions in Ireland, North and South.

What was perhaps most depressing about the subsequent outpouring of vitriol, jingoistic tub-thumping and rash editorial comment, was the unforgivably thoughtless filicide of a new and emerging post-conflict generation in Northern Ireland.
One uncomfortable with the traditional religio-political stereo-types foisted upon them and refreshingly honest in their opinions based on their own lived experiences.

McIlroy enjoyed a largely middle-class upbringing, provided by the herculean efforts of his working class parents, who sought to create a non-sectarian environment for themselves and their son. Enjoying a religiously mixed social and educational setting and growing up in an area relatively free from social unrest, ensured that young Rory was able to take pleasure in the interests and enthusiasm of his peers.
Supporting the Ulster Rugby team, following Manchester United, representing Ireland in his chosen field - whilst declaring for team GB in the golfing Olympics - were all

passions that he pursued without the encumbrance of believing that he had to belong to one side or the other.

Rather than lamenting him for his political naïveté, the popular and sporting press should have been lauding him as the successful face of an emerging, post conflict Northern Ireland. Someone who fought shy of the minefield of nation statehood and undoubtedly saw himself as first and foremost, *Northern Irish*.

But we can't allow that in Ireland… now can we?

Living and working in the Republic for some twenty years now, I was appalled at the irresponsibility of journalists, broadcasters, social commentators and casual acquaintances alike, who decried McIlroy for daring to describe himself as (technically anyway) 'British' and declaring for '*them*'.

Had he come from a Protestant or Loyalist tradition, then this might have been accepted or understood. (There was no axe to grind regarding Darren Clarke or Graham McDowell for example).
But that the youngest and most talented of them – a Northern Nationalist by birth - should have seemingly denied his Hibernian birthright and '…took the soup'?
For some it was nothing short of treachery.

The incident was a timely reminder of how the whole panoply of sporting life on this island remains mired within the history and perceived culture of the two main traditions. And how 'ownership' of successful sporting individuals and their achievements can be used as a celebration or affirmation of community identity.

Within the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist tradition, sporting devotees can be just as rabidly possessive of their sporting heroes as their nationalist counter-parts. Those two icons of Northern sporting culture, George Best and Alex 'Hurricane' Higgins are revered as flawed geniuses and celebrated on many a working class gable wall mural. That their battle with alcohol addiction (a stereotypical cliché more often associated with generic '*Irishness'*) is oft times overlooked, begins to hint at wider confusion of associations from outside this community.
Whether they like it or not, the probability is that for a majority of their fellow British citizens on the mainland, Ulster's sporting heroes are frustratingly just as likely to be designated as 'Irish' rather than '*Northern* Irish'.
That both of the individuals in question rarely if ever engaged directly with the thorny issue of national identity or political allegiance – often preferring broadly to be defined in regard to their working class roots – perhaps accounts for their largely uncritical acceptance by sports fans in ROI.[1]

Other notable sporting success from this community; Dame Mary Peters and Mike Bull (Athletics); Jackie Kyle, Mike Gibson, Syd Miller and Willie John McBride (Rugby);

[1] The one notable exception to this is Higgins's now infamous threat to have Loyalist paramilitaries shoot Dennis Taylor.

Norman Whiteside and Harry Gregg (Association Football); Darren Clarke; Graham McDowell (Golf); Joey Dunlop; Eddie Irvine (Motor Sports Racing); Dave 'Boy' McCauley; Wayne McCullough (Boxing) have in the main fought shy of overtly aligning themselves with the accepted cultural associations or political stance of the community from which they come . Indeed many have comfortably settled for the mantle of simply being 'Irish' when competing internationally or being categorised by the media.
Whilst there has been examples of sports people from the Protestant community (particularly in athletics and equestrian events) declaring for the Republic of Ireland for opportunistic reasons, this *Flag of Convenience* 'belt and braces' approach is not pronounced.
Often it is the history of the local and national sporting associations in each of the individual disciplines that have influenced the development (or lack of it) of cross-community ownership of sporting success in the province.
And by extension, at times stymied the unfettered or liberated sporting celebration of the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities in ways that are not automatically rejected as triumphalist or sectarian.

This is particularly evident in relation to Association Football on the island of Ireland.

Association Football

As with Rugby Football, Association Football or 'Soccer' was (and still is in some sections of the Nationalist community) traditionally viewed and subsequently rejected as a 'Garrison Game' introduced to Ireland by occupying British soldiers. This stance is particularly ironic given the massive interest in the English and Scottish Premierships by millions on the island of Ireland – North and South – who would consider themselves as Irish Nationalists.
Furthermore, recent controversies concerning the 'poaching' of young Northern players (predominantly from Nationalist backgrounds) who have enjoyed the full benefits of Irish Football Association (IFA) coaching and training, by the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), adds further irony upon irony.

Drawing from an already drastically diminished pool of eligible talent – and despite a proud history of international achievement in major competition which pre-dates their Southern neighbours – Northern Irish football and the IFA perhaps face an unprecedented crisis.

To view the relative fortunes of each association by current form and fortune, one might be excused for thinking that the 'junior' partner in this arrangement was the IFA. However, a brief review of the origins of the organised game in Ireland reveals otherwise.

Association Football was originally administered from Belfast and was largely confined to Ulster in the early years. Clubs in the Belfast area came together to form the Irish Football Association in 1880 and it operated as the organising body for football across all of Ireland for forty one years.

Three years had elapsed before the first club outside of Ulster affiliated, the Dublin Association Football Club which was formed in 1883. The development of the game outside of Ulster was accelerated when the Leinster Football Association was formed in 1892.

The clubs based outside of Ulster were often dis-satisfied with the decisions of the administrative body. There was always the belief that the Belfast based clubs exerted undue influence, especially when it came to selecting teams for international matches. The political events of the time and the rise of Nationalism after the Easter Rising of 1916 undoubtedly exerted an influence as the southern affiliates grew more demanding in their dealings with the IFA. The Leinster Football Association were backed by the Munster Football Association in instigating the meeting at which decisions were taken that led irrevocably to a split between the Irish Football Association in Belfast and the Southern football organisations who would go on to form the FAI.

As with so much else on the island, sport again mirrored wider political and religious allegiances, with the prospect of any 'reunification' of the Associations or the teams as remote today as it has ever been. On the rare occasions that the teams have met in competitive fixtures, the level of rivalry has been pronounced.
Even putting aside old enmities in some unlikely manifestation of a shared proposal for one national team (along the model employed by The Irish Rugby Football Union), the purely pragmatic questions of where games would be played, who would select the team and what anthem would feature , seem insurmountable. Not to mention the clearly sectarian attitudes that still exist within a significant number of supporters from both camps and that are often manifest in club allegiances, (particularly Rangers and Celtic) flags, emblems and party songs.

For those supporters hailing from the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities - irrespective of current form or prospects - the continuance of the IFA and the fortunes of the Northern Ireland football team have become synonymous with those wider and deeper feelings regarding their perceived national identity and any threat to it.

Club Affiliations & Allegiances

Away from the national team with its historical vagaries and territorial baggage, one might assume that club affiliation – whether in Northern Ireland or in GB – could offer an opportunity of respite from purely political or sectarian allegiances by supporters.

To some extent this is true in regard to the top Premiership teams in England. For example, Manchester United and Liverpool enjoy significant support from both communities in Northern Ireland, the former due perhaps to a high proportion of Northern Irish (and Republic of Ireland) players historically associated with the club. However, despite the cosmopolitan nature of the modern game, if the bigot is so inclined it is possible to dig deeply enough to find spurious reasons within a club's history and origins to designate it sympathetic to either Protestant or Roman Catholic allegiances.

I have variously heard claims that Everton are "…the 'Fenian' club in Liverpool." And that Manchester City are the 'Prod' club in Manchester.

This propensity for Ulster football fans to project community allegiance – real or imagined- onto unwitting clubs knows no bounds.

Occasionally though, there appears to be some tangible credibility for these claims.

In London, a section of Chelsea supporters seem to share a common fan base with some followers of Rangers FC and certainly show an active affiliation with aspects of English/British Nationalism.
Arsenal, largely due to a significant proportion of Irish immigrant support and their fielding of a large number of ROI players during some of their most notable triumphs, became known for some as 'London Celtic'.
More recently, the Irish consortium who bought Sunderland FC and appointed Niall Quinn and Roy Keane, obviously engendered a favourable response from ROI supporters. However, what was viewed as a benign enough development took on more serious undertones for Ulster Loyalist/ Protestant sports fans when Londonderry/Derry born player – James McClean – compounded his decision to switch international allegiance from NI to ROI, by refusing to sport a remembrance poppy on his club shirt in compliance with FA and club requests.

In Scotland of course, football allegiance along sectarian lines is ingrained and well documented. Both Celtic FC and Rangers FC have had to formally address issues of sectarianism on the pitch, on the terraces and in the courts.
Despite efforts to directly prohibit sectarian songs and provocative behaviour, the naked sectarian hatred that exists between elements of these clubs' fan bases, remains the emotional and tribal touchstone for supporters from both communities.[2] (This can even extend to the barracking of foreign international players who have the misfortune of playing for either Glasgow club, during international games against both N. Ireland and Republic of Ireland.)

Undoubtedly within the working class Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community, affiliation with Rangers FC offers a well-established expression of identity and affinity.

In a local footballing context, there are opportunities to follow clubs *not* defined by sectarian community identification.
Additionally, considerable efforts have been made by the IFA (at international and club level) to introduce a robust programme of community relations/anti-sectarian initiatives. However, as one might expect, traditional loyalties are also well represented – particularly in Belfast – through support for clubs like Linfield, Cliftonville and Donegal Celtic. Linfield draw their support almost exclusively from the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community (as do East Belfast rivals, Glentoran).

[2] Edinburgh historically also features clubs with sectarian origins but both Hearts and Hibernian seem to a large degree to have transcended the problem.

There exists a chequered and ignoble history within domestic football in Northern Ireland. Belfast Celtic – a team supported predominantly by the Nationalist community – withdrew from the Irish League at the end of the 1948/49 season, in protest against a mob assault on players at Windsor Park the previous December. Cliftonville and Donegal Celtic have to some degree taken up their mantle (although in the past, the former traditionally drew support from both communities).[3]

Indeed the case of Cliftonville dramatically reveals how the fortunes of a local sporting institution tellingly reflect the experience of the wider Protestant community in this particular area of North Belfast.

Formally Cliftonville Football and Cricket Club, this society founded in 1870 was to find their home premises and wider area targeted for re-settlement by an expanding Nationalist / Republican community, hostile to the traditions and culture of their sporting heritage.

The so-called 'greening' of this area ultimately rendered a religious sea-change in the support base for the football team and all but usurped and destroyed the Cricket club, replacing their ground with a GAA facility.

> "The outbreak of civil disorder in August 1969 and the geographical positioning of the ground had made it increasingly difficult to travel to and from practice/games etc. with bomb scares and street protests a regular occurring event. However, members overcame this and enjoyed the good spirit which abounded from within. By 1972 a campaign of intimidation had begun against the Club, its members and what it represented in the area. Members were verbally and physically attacked, two young Protestant men were abducted, executed and their bodies dumped within the grounds of Cliftonville Cricket club. Whilst the British Army stood idly by and watched, the club was looted and set on fire by a hostile crowd.
>
> With no assurances coming from local or national government regards guaranteeing members safety, the Club had no alternative but to make the heart-breaking decision to abandon the ground."
>
> Cliftonville Cricket Club (Our History)

The introduction of the All-Ireland Setanta Cup competition offered an ambitious opportunity for clubs from both jurisdictions to meet. However, the same problems that bedevilled international and local football were of course revisited to some degree in these fixtures, with supporters often goading each other with songs, national flags and banners of a sectarian nature. Crowd trouble inevitably followed.

In summary then, it would seem that affiliation and identification with specific football clubs and (to a lesser extent) the national team, remain a constant reference point when

[3] Derry City in the Northwest also significantly withdrew from the Irish league to play in the ROI's League of Ireland. As with other decisions of this nature, this move reinforced the drift toward an almost exclusively Nationalist support base for a club that had previously been religiously 'mixed'. Interestingly, sport once again reflecting the changing socio-religious demographics of the city itself along sectarian lines.

considering expressions of cultural identity from the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities.
To support Linfield, Rangers and the Northern Ireland team is to accept one's collective cultural responsibility, even birth-right. Much of the history and paraphernalia surrounding these teams remain steeped in Orange and Loyalist dogma, ensuring that the triumphalist and exceptionalist aspects of this mode of cultural expression persist.

The fact that Roman Catholics have been associated with these teams on the playing and coaching staff, seems to do little to defuse the situation, particularly in games with their Nationalist counter-parts. And to some degree it might be argued that this situation will maintain whilst there exists a diametrically opposed, sporting/politico-cultural adversary.

Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU)

Superficially at least, when one considers the provincial system by which the Irish Rugby Football Union operates, we might be forgiven the assumption that here is a sporting administrative model (as with Hockey and Cricket) under which sectarian difference can be transcended. And perhaps one where Unionists and Loyalists can comfortably embrace a sense of their own (Ulster) 'Irishness' in supporting a national team in competition with other home nations.

In 1879 two Unions representing all Irish provinces at the time agreed to amalgamate on the following terms: A Union to be known as the Irish Rugby Football Union was to be formed for the whole country; Branches were to be established in Leinster, Munster and Ulster; The Union was to be run by a Council of eighteen, made up of six from each province.

The pre-professional era of the 1980's saw Ulster Rugby dominate the national game, culminating in the team being the first Irish Province to lift the European Cup in 1999. During this period, Ulster provided a large number of players to compete for Ireland at international level and some of the legends of the Irish game have been Ulstermen.

Yet in practice, the very real issues arising from a player panel drawn from two sovereign territories, inevitably engenders questions regarding allegiance and commitment to the common cause (certainly amongst supporters from ROI). And questions regarding favouritism in selection of players and coaches (primarily from NI based fans).

Take for example the thorny issue of the anthem to be played before each game.

The Irish team must first stand for the anthem of the Republic, 'Amhrán na bhFiann' (The Soldier's Song), with references to *"...the Saxon Foe*". In deference to those players, officials and supporters from the other jurisdiction on the island, this is followed by 'Ireland's Call', an anthem written primarily for just such an occasion and which studiously avoids partisan reference. Subsequently, 'Amhrán na bhFiann' is replaced entirely by 'Ireland's Call' for away matches.

(It is interesting to reflect that –when the team are performing badly- the letters pages of The Irish Times are awash with irate fans bemoaning the dilution of patriotic team spirit due to the national anthem's absence!)

Many Ulster Protestants simply reject Irish rugby due to the IRFU decision to play its games in Dublin, under the flag and anthem of the Republic. (Although the traditional flag of the four ancient provinces is also flown in a sop similar to the arrangement for an alternative anthem).

This sensitivity was particularly noted in August 2007, when the IRFU *did* decide to play north of the border for the first time in 50 years against Italy. In a post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland -sensitive to the principles of tolerance and mutual respect – the flying of the Union Flag and the playing of 'God Save the Queen' at Ravenhill were notable by their absence. [4]

Significant individuals have at times directly and indirectly contributed to the debate within rugby circles.

Ken Maginnis (former Unionist politician and now Baron Maginnis of Drumglass) seemingly saw little contradiction in promoting robust anti-nationalist views whilst happily travelling to Lansdowne Road to stand for Amhrán na bhFiann and heartily cheer on the Irish rugby team. (As a former Major of the Ulster Defence Regiment, this displayed considerable chutzpah at a time when the Provisional IRA was rampant.)

Trevor Ringland, MBE is a former Ulster, Ireland and British Lions player. Ringland was Vice Chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party's East Belfast Branch and was adopted by the Ulster Unionist Party and Conservative Party as their joint candidate in East Belfast for the 2010 General Election.

Significantly, in 2010 he became involved in a controversy with the then new leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Tom Elliott. Upon Elliott's election as party leader, Ringland publicly asked him if he would be prepared to attend a Gaelic Football All-Ireland Final in Dublin if an Ulster team were to take part. Elliott refused and Ringland resigned from the Ulster Unionist Party. He continues to be involved with 'Peace Players International', an organization devoted to promote inter-religious unity in Belfast through sport

Not all players or former players have exhibited such magnanimity toward the challenges of dealing with cultural and political identity within a shared rugby family.

Munster and Ireland player Ronan O'Gara famously used the opportunity of a team photo-call with the Queen to thrust his hands deep within his pockets and demur a handshake with the monarch. The gesture was widely seen as variously puerile, disrespectful or as striking a mischievous blow for Republicanism. It would not have enamoured him amongst Ulster rugby fans or players.

[4] The IRFU later explained that when Ireland played rugby in Northern Ireland it was deemed to be an away match, therefore only 'Ireland's Call' was played.

Many believe that differences of opinion amongst Northern Unionists regarding Irish rugby can be explained in class terms (Rugby still being a primarily middle-class sport in the province, unlike say, in Munster). And indeed, deep fissures within the Ulster Protestant monolith have been pronounced in class terms since the formation of the state, with much more serious consequences than simply sporting endeavour.
Despite Ulster Rugby having a number of Roman Catholic players and staff, it should also be noted that the game still recruits largely via a Grammar School education system that remains divided along sectarian lines. Additionally, those Ulster counties within the Republic have tended not to be as involved in the sport as the other six counties. Ulster Rugby has recognised this and targeted these areas for particular developmental attention.

What is undeniable is that Ulster rugby is viewed differently by the supporters, players and administrators of the other three provinces and not always in a sympathetic or generous manner. Additionally, some Northern Nationalists offer support to other Irish provinces rather than give allegiance to their native Ulster team (and despite the inclusion of Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan within the affiliation).
Of course some of this ambiguity arises from the state of Northern Ireland's insistence on making itself synonymous with the designation of the term '*Ulster*'. (BBC Radio Ulster; the University of Ulster; the Royal Ulster Constabulary; the Ulster Farmers' Union; the Ulster-American Folk Park; Ulster-Scots, etc.)

Whilst the overt sectarian mistrust evident in soccer is mercifully absent, there nevertheless persists an attitude of 'otherness' projected onto the Northern rugby province that is understandably more notable at international than club level.
And it's fair to assume that Leinster, Munster and Connacht reserve something special for their encounters with their (British/Irish) cousins.
Southern media coverage and even the comparative unavailability of Ulster shirts in Dublin, Galway or Limerick sports shops suggests that Ulster rugby is still somewhat viewed as Unionism in disguise.

Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)

It is axiomatic to suggest that Gaelic games – North and South- are almost exclusively the domain of Nationalist, Catholic Ireland.
The history and culture of the game is synonymous with ethnic identity and Celtic/Gaelic tradition. With more than 1 million members worldwide, assets in excess of 2.6 billion Euro, and declared total revenues of 94.8 million Euro in 2010, the GAA remain a formidable organization at both national and community level.
In terms of crowd attendance, GAA sports remain the best attended in ROI and Gaelic Football is the largest participation sport in NI.
Notably, the most prestigious trophy awarded in Gaelic football – The Sam Maguire Cup – is named after a Cork Protestant, noteworthy for recruiting Michael Collins to the Republican cause.

For many well documented reasons borne of historical happenstance and perfidious manipulation, there maintains little affinity between the legacy of previous generations of Protestant United Irish Men and the GAA,
Similarly, Protestant citizens of the Republic who did not relocate after partition and contemporary Northern Protestants who define themselves primarily as 'British' and 'Unionists' perhaps find the Association less than welcoming.
In short then, there seems little to encourage this community to attend games or lend support to Ulster GAA teams (despite considerable success for provincial counties).
To further compound matters, unofficially, the GAA has been linked to Republican terrorism. In the past, there have been allegations that it secretly funded IRA operations. It is also alleged that some clubs continue to glorify IRA actions and celebrate former combatants as martyrs.
Indisputably, the Association has historically been isolationist in character.

However, there have arguably been attempts to address the situation.

Perhaps most notably in the repeal of the infamous Rule 21 (which precluded members of the RUC and the British Army from joining the GAA). Additionally the repeal of Rule 42, allowing for non-Gaelic games to be played at GAA headquarters, Croke Park, might also be cited as the organization endeavoring to move away from its cultural/political exclusivity.[5]

Additionally, there exist formal guidelines within Association laws claiming an anti-sectarian stance.

> Anti-Sectarian/Anti-Racist
> "The Association is Anti-Sectarian and Anti-Racist and committed to the principles of inclusion and diversity at all levels. Any conduct by deed, word, or gesture of sectarian or racist nature or which is contrary to the principles of inclusion and diversity against a player, official, spectator or anyone else, in the course of activities organised by the Association, shall be deemed to have discredited the Association.**"** Gaelic Athletic Association. Official Guide - Part 1.

However, the high profile case of Darren Graham – a Protestant playing Gaelic football for Lisnaskea Emmets (his local team in County Fermanagh) against a team from nearby Brookeborough – hinted at prejudices that are not adequately addressed by laws and guidelines.

When he was called a 'black cunt', ('Black' as a reference to 'Black Protestant', a long-standing term of sectarian abuse) Graham decided to reveal a protracted and difficult history of similar sectarian intimidation and insisted on a formal apology from the GAA. His case was perhaps particularly significant as his father – a former UDR soldier- had been murdered by the IRA when Graham was a child.

[5] It might be noted that Northern/Ulster county members predominantly voted against these changes.

Depressingly, abuse within the GAA is not confined to sectarianism. The case of Crossmaglen player, Aaron Cunningham - who is of mixed race – provides a serious indictment. In an Ulster Club football final between Crossmaglen and Kilcoo, players and fans alike were reported as calling Cunningham a 'nigger' throughout the game.

Perhaps the most perplexing variation on sectarian abuse within the GAA has featured sectarian insults aimed at Ulster club players purely by dint of their 'six county' location. In what seems a bewildering turn of events, it is apparently quite common for teams from the north of the county to be called 'Orange bastards', 'Brit lovers', and much worse when playing teams from the south of the country.

Many instances of this nature are a matter of record.

This intensity of indiscriminate sectarian abuse not only betrays a staggering level of ignorance amongst perpetrators, but augers very badly for any reappraisal of the Association by the Ulster Protestant/Unionist Loyalist community that might challenge the conviction that the GAA is anything other than an organisation stepped in Republicanism and anti-British hatred.

Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA)

The Irish Amateur Boxing Association organises and controls amateur boxing across Ireland, inclusive of both jurisdictions. Boxing clubs in Ireland are represented and supported at county, provincial and national level. Boxing clubs affiliate to the IABA and are then entitled to compete at each of these three levels.

The IABA has established four 'provincial councils' for Ulster, Leinster, Connacht and Munster, with special representation for Antrim, and Dublin. Although Antrim (Belfast) and Dublin are of course not among the four traditional provinces of Ireland, additional arrangements were put in place due to large volumes of working class youth joining boxing clubs in these two areas.

As with many other sports organised around an All-Ireland administration, the question of allegiance for boxers from the Ulster Protestant/Unionist Loyalist community has always been a vexed one. This is perhaps further compounded by a strong tradition of boxing success historically emerging from and supported by Belfast patrons.

There are many notable examples of boxers from this community securing Olympic success for Team Ireland and preferring to align themselves with the established boxing fraternity on the island rather declare for Great Britain.
Wayne McCullough (Shankill Road) and Dave 'Boy' McCauley (Larne) perhaps being the most noteworthy.
Famously Ulsterman Barry McGuigan MBE (from County Monaghan) became WBA featherweight champion in 1985 whilst pointedly eschewing both Union Jack and Tricolour, preferring to fight under a flag of Peace.

Promising prospect Carl Frampton (from the Loyalist Tiger's Bay area) is the holder of the Commonwealth Super Bantamweight title - has gained a silver medal representing Ireland in the EU Amateur Boxing Championship - and is managed by McGuigan.

Unfortunately, what seemed to be a functioning non-sectarian model of sporting endeavour for both communities was undermined somewhat in 2012 when a club from Loyalist Belfast's Sandy Row compiled a 57-page report outlining sectarian attacks on its members whilst competing in nationalist areas.
This was contested by the IABA but the publicity around the matter has proved damaging to the sports perceived neutrality.

Conclusion.

In all of the sporting codes under consideration, a pertinent theme emerged in the context of cultural, political and religious division as represented by community sporting allegiance.

It has been oft stated that Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist cultural expression (as represented through sports or elsewhere) defines itself in terms of separatism; exclusivity; exceptionalism; arrogance and perceived elitism. The implication being that collaboration and common purpose with shared expressions of 'Irishness' - through sporting endeavour (or cultural alignment) - are eschewed by this community.

However, when we review responses from the Nationalist tradition within Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland toward sporting institutions and individuals from this community, we can clearly identify a partitionist mistrust (even antagonism) anchored within a deeper perception of 'difference'.

Protestants/Unionists/Loyalists may indeed harbour solemn reservations regarding their Irishness. Crucially however, this is seriously compounded by Nationalist opinion that seemingly rejects any expression or representation of 'Irishness' that does not subscribe to a De -Valerian idyll.

I have always viewed with interest - in a sporting context – how the trappings representing the British or Northern Irish states have been regarded or presented as somewhat unsavoury.
How pride in this community's culture, traditions and sporting successes somehow equates with the rightly unpalatable manifestations of extremist groups like the National Front and British National Party.

Yet in contrast, the unmitigated and uninhibited pride that Irish sports fans (and citizens) take in the celebration and promotion of their state, culture and traditions - rarely if ever - sees any admonishment for the blanket waving of the Irish Tricolour.[6]

Nationalism of any hue seems always to find a welcoming domicile for celebration, affirmation and pride within any sporting code.

That popular sport also provides a fertile breeding ground for triumphalism, jingoism and sectarianism is a truism that still impedes the unfettered and joyous celebration of collective sporting achievement on this island.

If the Orange segment of the Republic's national flag is truly to symbolise a recognition of another valid tradition within the state (and the island as a whole), then perhaps the most immediate and far-reaching developments to acknowledge this might take the form of real and pragmatic changes and reforms to sporting bodies.
Whilst sport is often by definition adversarial, it should nevertheless be possible to create 'national' allegiances or forums where both traditions are meaningfully accommodated and respected in a common cause. Rugby Union has to some degree addressed this (whilst acknowledging the afore mentioned limitations).

Similarly, Loyalist/Protestant/Unionist communities should be able to meaningfully re-engage with those unique characteristics that previously identified them as different and distinctive within their shared British family; namely, their 'Irishness'.

In order for them to do this, Irish cultural and sporting identity must be seen to denote more than simply the 'Catholic/Nationalist/Republican' monolithic tradition. From a policy making perspective, we cannot under-estimate the potency of partitionist/separatist opinion in ROI in this regard. And at the sharper end of things, from those Northern Nationalists who relentlessly seek cultural domination and the eradication of British culture from Northern Ireland.

Put simply, if Ulster Protestants did not already feel significantly different to their neighbours, then difference would most certainly be thrust upon them.

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GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION Official Guide - Part 1.
http://www.gaa.ie/content/documents/publications/official_guides/Official_Guide_2012_Part1.pdf

[6] Explanations citing associations between emblems of British identity and her colonialist past crimes seem a little dated in the 21st Century. In fact, it could be argued that this would be akin to associations of the Irish Tricolour with IRA atrocities.

Cliftonville Cricket Club
http://www.cliftonvillecricketclub.co.uk/wordpress/ourhistory/