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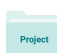

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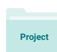

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‘Smart, clued-in guys’: Irish rugby players as sporting celebrities in post-Celtic Tiger Irish media

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Abstract

Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom ended with the 2008 global financial crisis. There followed a series of severe 'austerity' budgets and public service pay deals involving cuts in public service provision and employment reform. These were accompanied by approving Irish media narratives of atonement for Celtic Tiger 'excess' and, more recently, of corresponding 'recovery' through collective and individual discipline and entrepreneurial endeavour. This article focuses on the interplay between Irish media narratives of austerity and recovery and constructions of gender, class and national identity in representations of rugby players as celebrities. It explores how elite players have been presented as exemplary of the neoliberal management of physical and economic risk, and how the repeated focus on successful struggles with diet and injury and post-career educational and business investments highlights their optimising of the physical and social capital afforded by celebrity status. The emphasis on discipline and 'smart' economic management chimes with the hegemonic political and media discourse of 'no alternative' government austerity, and with economic recovery through individual acceptance of responsibility.

Keywords: sport, celebrity, rugby, Irish media, Celtic Tiger, austerity

Introduction

Graeme Turner (2004: 9) defines celebrity as 'a genre of representation and a discursive effect', a 'commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects', and 'a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand'. Sport celebrities are afforded high social status globally, and deemed to have an aura of authenticity that seems to transcend representation and commodification

because of their seemingly more visible, measurable achievements in a sphere that ‘mirrors the idealised version of capitalism’ through its basis in ‘competition, achievement, efficiency, technology and meritocracy’ (Jackson and Andrews 2012: 263). However, as Andrews and Jackson (2001: 4) stress, all celebrities are both commodified products whose images are constructed and sold through media representation, and processes that facilitate capital accumulation through endorsements and brand associations. While media representations of elite sporting achievements reinforce ‘the conception that there are no barriers in contemporary culture that the individual cannot overcome’, their resultant charisma intensifies their functioning as a ‘connecting fiber between the materiality of production and culturally contextualised meaning of consumption and its relation to collective identity’ (Marshall 1997: 245-246).

Jackson and Andrews (2012: 263) highlight how sport celebrities as cultural phenomena are also potential focal points for ‘understanding contemporary debates about identity politics (gender, race, sexuality, (dis)ability, national), social policy (including those associated with health), and consumer capitalism’. Both celebrity status and meaning are ‘inherently unstable’ (Marshall 1997: 56). Athletes’ careers inevitably decline, and media and audience perceptions of underlying causes frequently dwell on moral as well as physical explanations (Wenner 2013). Moreover, athletes can be vehicles of ideological affirmation and transgression, or contradictory combinations, both on- and off-field. Tracing how this occurs requires both transnational scope and sensitivity to historical and geographical specificity. In particular, sport celebrity is a vehicle for exploring often contradictorily intertwined elements in the construction of national identity as the biographical vicissitudes of national sporting celebrities frequently intersect with or come to represent significant socio-cultural moments and transformations.

Although played by a small proportion of the adult population,[1] rugby receives a disproportionately large volume of media coverage in Ireland due to the annual European Six Nations Championship, the quadrennial World Cup (both currently broadcast on terrestrial television), and two European club competitions in which Ireland's four provincial teams have been highly successful.[2] Between them they have won the premier European competition (currently the Champions Cup) six times. In a national context in which the largest sports organisation, the Gaelic Athletic Association is amateur and all of the Republic of Ireland's professional international soccer players are based abroad, even though it only professionalised in 1995 the media prominence of Irish rugby's teams and star players is unique among Irish team sports.

Rugby's professionalization has been represented in Irish media as emblematic of broader social, economic and political progress in Ireland since the 1990s 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom (Free 2017). This article focuses on a specific aspect of this, media representations of players as celebrities in the period since its collapse in 2008. It examines the interplay between the moralistic 'no alternative' discourse of public spending austerity as atonement for Celtic Tiger excess in the Irish media and political spheres and the depiction of rugby players as exemplars of the neoliberal management of physical and economic risk in an increasingly brutal sport where internal squad competition and the threat of career curtailment are constantly stressed. Stories dealing with successful struggles with diet and injury and that promote personal post-career educational and business investments highlight their optimising of both the physical and social capital afforded by their celebrity status. Such textual constructions have intersected with and helped to legitimise the pervasive discourse of economic recovery from the financial crash. While there is a class specificity in the depiction of players as paragons of entrepreneurial virtue, this combines with a reassuring stress on honesty and authenticity through their rootedness in community, place and cultural tradition,

key themes in an Ireland beset by a renewed wave of emigration since the crash (Glynn et al 2013).

The article draws on methods of qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA), particularly those of Fairclough (2010), in conjunction with concepts and approaches derived from Bourdieu (1990; 1991), Foucault (1981; 2003) and others. It primarily utilises a selection of articles retrieved from all Irish national newspapers from September 2007 to May 2017 via the Lexis Nexis and Irish Newspaper Archive databases, but is part of a larger project encompassing television and radio broadcast material and retrospective books and player biographies published in this period.[3] The analysis shares Fairclough's (2010) proposition that 'discourse' (including non-linguistic visual 'texts') is 'both constitutive' of and 'constituted' by 'socio-cultural practices'; and that discourses function 'ideologically' in Thompson's (1990: 60) post-Marxist sense of ideology as meaning that serves to 'establish and sustain relations of domination'. This version of CDA combines a modified version of Foucault's (1981) 'orders of discourse' to designate the 'relative permanencies' of how various genres, discourses and styles are 'articulated together in particular sorts of relationships' with the concept of 'interdiscursivity, the ways in which 'shifting articulations of genres, discourses and styles in specific texts' enable 'creativity in discursive practice' (Fairclough 2010: 175).

Following Bourdieu (1990; 1991), Fairclough (2010: 175) stresses that social practices are 'networked' in 'fields', 'particular areas of social life which have a relative internal coherence'. 'Interdiscursivity' in this context must be seen to result from constructive tensions between and within sport and sport media as intersecting fields of social practice. In order to explore the intersection between the fields of sport, media and politics in Ireland the article also draws on Inglis' (2006) Bourdieusian tracking of the historical emergence of what he calls an 'Irish habitus' heavily informed by a Catholic cultural doctrine of self-denial and

communitarianism, and how this came into conflict with new discursive formations in his analysis of the lived experience of rapid social and cultural transition as Ireland moved rapidly towards a form of neoliberal government and governance in the late twentieth century. Having elsewhere (Free 2017) explored the ways in which the management of rugby in Ireland and its media representation registered this transition, this article focuses on individual players.

Finally, I share Fairclough's use of Gramsci's (1971: 12) theorisation of hegemony to posit that media and other texts are sites of contestation and that discursive creativity is 'in practice limited and constrained by the state of hegemonic relations and hegemonic struggle' (Fairclough 2010: 95). This Gramscian framework enables an extensive engagement with how discursive constructions of gender, class, national and racial identity are dialectically intertwined with material social and cultural structures and relations, and with the ways in which discourses of the body both 'constitute' and are 'constituted by' those structures and relations within historically changing contexts. The article correspondingly contends that discursive constructions of Irish rugby have contributed to hegemonic narratives of national cohesion, shared experience and collective resilience despite successive governments' accentuation of social inequality and division both during and following the economic boom.

Ireland as a neoliberal state

The context for these representations is Ireland's trajectory as a neoliberal state both before and following the onset of the financial crisis. In the 1990s and 2000s successive Irish governments' courting of inward foreign direct investment through a 12.5% corporate tax rate combined with public-private partnerships, privatisation of public services, light financial regulation and relatively low health and social services spending (Kirby 2010). Multi-national corporations' non-union policies were facilitated by government, trade union membership

declined, welfare provision was weak and European employment directives were minimally adapted (McDonough and Dundon 2010: 16). A feature of pre-2008 Irish politics was the 'social partnership' system whereby collective wage restraint was negotiated by Government and employers with trades unions in exchange for income tax reductions. While this was a form of 'consensus-led corporatist thinking' with roots in a distinctly Irish Catholic vision of an organic society, the 'religious conservatism and consensualism' which 'created a political and intellectual void' in which much potential opposition had been 'incorporated into the state machinery' effectively facilitated' market-led neoliberalism' (Lynch et al 2017: 264-265).

When the guaranteeing of banking deposits following the 2008 global financial crisis precipitated the European Union/ European Central Bank/ International Monetary Fund Troika's imposition of 'structural reforms' and spending cuts in exchange for a €67.5 billion 'bailout' in 2010 (Mercille and Murphy 2015: 50), this was fully compatible with the neoliberal economic policies to which both the existing and subsequent governments were committed. The consensual corporatist rhetoric likewise endured in the moralistic political and media discourse of austerity used to justify these measures. The focus on the 'stupidity and corruption' of the political and financial spheres (Coulter 2015: 27) became enmeshed with a concern with the excessive consumption and metaphorical corpulence of the 'bloated' Celtic Tiger and its allegedly excessive public spending. A banking crisis was displaced onto collective, national responsibility as a moral failure (Kerrigan 2011) and the metaphorical discourse of fat and fat reduction in the public sector became increasingly intertwined with the austerity rhetoric so that the nation-state was reduced to a metaphorical body in need of retraining and toning by curbing excessive spending-as-consumption (Free and Scully 2016).

The Irish print media led the shift in emphasis from seeking the causes of the crisis to an assault on alleged public service over-spending (Mercille and Murphy 2015: 85-87).

Collective discipline and self-denial were promoted as a form of moral asceticism in a distinctly Catholic confessional variation on the 'moral and social vocabulary' of 'virtuous necessity' (Clarke and Newman 2012: 303) that underpinned the justification of the ensuing international 'roll out' neoliberal policies of 'market conforming' 'reform'' (Peck 2010: 23).

Sin and atonement: from the 2007 World Cup to the 2009 Six Nations Championship

Both before and following the crisis, as a recently professionalised sport rugby was repeatedly represented in Irish print and broadcast media as exemplary of how to negotiate the pressures of a marketised neoliberal economic environment while maintaining national cultural integrity and collective economic ownership (Free 2017). Though competing as clubs in European competition the four Irish provinces from which the national team is generally exclusively drawn are representative sides with players graduating from regional clubs and provincial feeder academies. While the clubs remain amateur the provinces' players are retained on full-time professional contracts, a system that only reached full fruition in the early 2000s (O'Callaghan 2017: 12). The Irish Rugby Football Union (henceforth IRFU) successfully retained and supported most of its elite provincial players, despite lucrative approaches from wealthier English and French clubs, through a 'welfare programme' that limited games played per season, thus extending individual careers (Fanning 2007). Its national symbolism was greatly enhanced by direct government intervention in 2002, a scheme allowing athletes completing their careers in Ireland to retrospectively reclaim taxes following retirement. Irish rugby benefitted disproportionately given that all the national soccer team were based abroad and no other major Irish team sport was professional. Often cited (e.g. *Irish Times* 2013) as key to keeping players 'at home' in the 'national interest' and fuelling Irish rugby's 'golden age', this was also a variant on favoured neoliberal methods of incentivised low taxation that otherwise principally assisted foreign direct investors and wealthier earners (Mercille and Murphy 2015:162-163). While top domestic players were

retained and crucial to the game's marketing in Ireland, stories of strategically recruited in-migrant players were complementarily framed by the IRFU and Irish media in terms of the imperative of avoiding comprising the game's national integrity through a surfeit of 'mercenaries'. International 'marquee' signings have been used to market the provinces' enhanced competitiveness in European competition while foreign born 'project' players are recruited on the basis of future national qualification through rugby's international three year residency rule (extended to five years from 2020) (Free 2017: 215-220).

A significant exception to this positivity, though consistent with rugby's growing metaphorical significance in Ireland was how, prior to the 2008 crisis the national team's failure to progress beyond the group stage in the 2007 World Cup generated considerable opprobrium in Irish media, and was often explicitly linked with Celtic Tiger excess, prefiguring the discourses of 'crony capitalism' as a vehicle for 'anger displacement' (Allen 2015: 77) and the subsequent calls for tighter discipline as path to recovery a year later. As national coach Eddie O'Sullivan (2001-2008) remarked (2009: 2), the failure became intertwined with the 'pursuit of corrupt planners and crooked bankers' that subsequently 'fixated the Irish public'.

Lawrence Wenner (2013: x) argues that through stories of 'fallen' sports heroes 'we learn about our culture's moral contours', where 'our moral fault lines currently stand and how contemporary sensibility poses their negotiation'. Sports heroes' relative successes and failures are deemed both indicative of their individual and collective efforts *and* the outcomes of supporters' emotional, cultural and economic investments. The 2007 failure was hardly a moral issue, but was treated as such. The term 'sense of entitlement' was especially noticeable. A favourite neoliberal commentators' term of abuse for supposed 'lifestyle choice' welfare dependents (see, for example Humphrys (2013)), here it was used to deride leading players underexposed to high intensity competition in pre-tournament 'friendlies'.

The *Irish Times*' cultural and political commentator Fintan O'Toole (2007), for example, alliteratively indicted the IRFU and players for a 'smugness […] spawned in a stagnant pool of easy money'. Following Ireland's narrow victory over lowly ranked Namibia, his colleague Miriam Lord (2007) associated a fan culture fuelled by the 'short-hopping […] national hobby' of Ryanair flights (the Irish based European low cost airline being a key signifier of the Celtic Tiger) with a feminised sporting culture: 'the sense of affronted surprise at how things went was best summed up by a young blond woman, calling home on her slim, pink, crystal-studded mobile phone: "Namibia, Dad. NAM-IB-I-A. Like, hello?"'.

The much vaunted player welfare programme was now construed as a dangerous source of complacency. *Irish Times* rugby correspondent Gerry Thornley (2007) cuttingly remarked that

> rugby will not seem so sexy to the corporate world either. There's no doubt that not only the [rugby] union, but O'Sullivan and many of the Untouchables have dipped their bread considerably with various endorsements and deals in the last few months.

The confessional tone of penitent retrospection in subsequent player interviews, comments and profiles corresponded, in turn, with the theme of shame and guilt in Irish media following the 2008 crash (Free and Scully 2016). The team's 2009 Six Nations Championship victory was often construed in contrastive symbolic terms. Thus captain Brian O'Driscoll's personal resurgence in 2009 was typically read as a lesson to the nation:

> He has had to apply himself to the less glamorous, unseen work of defence, of graft, of poaching the ball on the ground, of dummy running to create space for faster men. […] Now he is a more mature, complete player. He is more "real" in a sense. [… W]e, a nation who rose and fell with him over the last nine years, might rise again a

little and permit ourselves a small, recessionary celebration. A cup of Bovril and a cream cracker, perhaps. Dry, mind. (Robbins, 2009).

The (albeit humorous) invocation of Irish Catholic asceticism here is unmistakable, but the theme of atonement through bodily denial was later extended by O'Driscoll's own post-retirement autobiography, which includes the admission of 'carrying too much body fat' and being 'wrapp[ed] in cotton wool' prior to the 2007 World Cup (O'Driscoll and English 2014: 156-158). 'Raising his own game' through first admitting his sins of over-consumption is a mini 'autopathographic' 'fat memoir' (Linder 2011) in which he loses weight in order to find his submerged 'true' self. This is but one example of a quasi-genre of confessional narratives by Irish rugby players dating from the early 2000s that trace the transition from amateurism and professionalism, Celtic Tiger 'high life', being mesmerised by their 'untouchable' status before being forced to 'eschew the fat' (Fanning 2004) through professional discipline.

Analyses of media representations of male sporting celebrities typically concentrate on the degree to which they embody 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 2005), especially in an American context. Messner et al. (2004: 241), for example, identify a 'sports manhood formula' in US television where legitimate masculinity is defined as the athlete as 'aggressor, both on the "battle fields" of sports and in his consumption' so that 'his aggressiveness will net him the ultimate prize: the adoring attention of conventionally beautiful women'. However, Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005: 829) later theorisation of plural 'hegemonic masculinities' reflects their call for the 'explicit recognition of the geography of masculinities, emphasizing the interplay among local, regional and global levels'.

There is a cultural specificity to Irish male sporting celebrities' representation and self-presentation in Irish media. Irish athletes typically evince, and are expected to embody what

might be termed an Irish sporting 'habitus' (Free 2015: 1156). Habitus, in Bourdieu's (1990: 52) conceptualisation, is a system of always embodied 'structured' and 'structuring dispositions' which inform our near unconscious positioning within and orientation to a particular social 'field'. It is manifested both discursively and corporeally through deportment and demeanour. To have a 'feel for the game' of a particular social field is to have a learned 'immanence in the world through which the world imposes its imminence, things to be done or said, which directly govern speech and action' (1990: 66). The game of sport as a social *field* varies geographically and can be impacted upon by certain embedded and embodied socio-historical influences.

In Ireland, national sporting heroes' typically softly spoken style and modest deportment and demeanour in public appearances evince a 'feel for the game' of Irish sporting culture. Though drawing on Norbert Elias' conceptualisation of habitus rather than Bourdieu's, Maguire and Tuck (2005: 88-89) stress how national 'habitus networks' bond individuals to the nation through rugby by reproducing a sense of 'national character' to 'produce dominant, or hegemonic, codes of behaviour'. Players' references to 'fighting spirit' over 'flair' in Tuck's interviews undertaken just prior to professionalism in 1995 invoke this shared 'national character' (Maguire and Tuck 2005: 103). More particularly, though, and the presence of (mostly Northern Irish) Protestants in the Irish team notwithstanding, the embodied principle of not 'getting above' or 'losing the run of yourself' (Free and Scully 2016) in the routine modesty of Irish sporting and social discourse and its rhetorical invocation generally relates to an enduring, deeply embedded culture of self-denial and self-deprecation heavily influenced by the Irish Catholic Church (Inglis 2006: 37). In the examples of reproach and confessional discourse quoted here the invocation of this habitus is

unmistakeable, as is the implied warning against the potential corruptions of professionalism even as obeying its disciplinary demands constitutes a moral imperative.

The theme of redemptive 'back to the future' confession was a peculiarly 'Irish' cultural phenomenon following the Celtic Tiger's demise. The rugby team's 2007 failure and 2009 success thus became enmeshed in the hegemonic national narrative of hubristic excess, punishment and confession. This was also a specifically gendered symptom of a post-2008 'national moral reckoning' (Negra 2014: 45) in which a '"soft" feminine consumer culture' was deemed 'appropriately in retreat'.

As such it continued an ongoing debate about whether or not the Irish rugby celebrities of the professional era had 'got above' or 'lost the run of themselves' dating from the early 2000s. When an RTÉ (Raidio Teilifís Éireann) television interviewer introduced Brian O'Driscoll as 'Golden Balls' in a 2005 post-match interview (thus invoking the nickname of global celebrity English footballer David Beckham and drawing a comparison with O'Driscoll's growing celebrity status), coach Eddie O'Sullivan complained to its head sports broadcasting that this was insultingly inappropriate (Watterson 2006). While in Britain O'Driscoll's contemporary, the Welsh player Gavin Henson was deemed an exemplar of an incipient 'metrosexuality' in rugby, the 'Beckham of Wales' for his unabashed embrace of 'fashion, his changing hairstyles, and his pop-star girlfriend' Charlotte Church (Clayton and Harris 2009: 141), he was clearly singled out for widespread booing by the majority Irish crowd when Ireland played Wales in Dublin in 2006. O'Driscoll's brief dalliance with self-indulgent hair bleaching was forgiven or offset by Irish commentators and supporters by his professional commitment, charity work (Slot 2005) and post-Celtic Tiger application. Henson's embodiment of celebrity excess appeared to make him 'fair game' for his transgression of rugby's code of unostentatiously 'hard' masculinity, and a vehicle for

articulating a distinctly ‘Irish’ rugby and masculine identity through unsporting but legitimised taunting.

The 2009 Championship was depicted as a collective national recovery from over-indulgence grounded in healthy, quasi-fraternal inter-provincial rivalry and respect. Rated by 70.6% in a survey as the greatest sporting achievement that year (Reid, 2009) it was widely depicted as a metaphorical prescription for general economic recovery. The *Irish Independent*’s Fionnan Sheehan (2009), for example, translated the victory into a bullet pointed recipe for Government and national recovery: ‘grind out the hard yards’, ‘get the job done’, ‘be brave in stepping up at vital moments’, etc.

An important feature of the 2009 (RTÉ Two) television documentary *Ireland’s Grand Slam Journey* is the ‘blokish’ inter-provincial banter between players, in which physical and mental toughness combine with paradoxically mutually and self-deprecating humour. The documentary constitutes a progressive tournament narrative consisting of edited interviews with players as they watch the key moments from each game, so that they appear to relate the story through turn-taking. In the climactic game against Wales, a last minute conceded penalty almost ends Ireland’s hopes. Munster’s Ronan O’Gara reiterates the stupidity of his Ulster colleague’s conceding a kickable penalty: ‘I said “how can a fella give away a penalty with two minutes to go in a game?!”’ Simultaneously a flashed newspaper headline (‘O Gara concedes winning penalty’) reveals his own disastrous concession in a subsequent British and Irish Lions 2009 Test Match against South Africa. This both highlights his deliberate irony and, by implication, the centrality of collective honesty and humility in the national team’s ultimate success and atonement for the 2007 under-performance.

The notably self-directed humour here is distinctively ‘Irish’. The expression of individual modesty is the vehicle for a victorious cross-provincial alliance through mutual empathy and recognition in which an integrated national geography is embodied by the players even as regional differences are acknowledged: the stereotypically more reserved, stiffer Ulster Protestant is playfully subjected to his southern counterpart’s Munster masculine culture of both other-directed ‘sledging’ and *self*-mockery.

The documentary’s form – a progressive narrative consisting of players’ sequentially edited direct words – was mirrored by Alan English’s (2009) similarly titled book, and by Tom English’s (2015) history of Irish rugby in which, once again, interview extracts combine in a progressive narrative. The format foregrounds players as individual and collective agents of success, and in both books pits them against ‘blazers’ and ‘alickadoos’ (slang for non-playing officials) who are repeatedly represented as symbols of the unearned privilege of ‘old Ireland’ versus the meritocracy of the professional era of which even earlier amateur *players* are harbingers. Their publication in the current era intersects with the pervasive neoliberal logic of individual agency and meritocracy as agents of progressive social change in Ireland that would intensify post-2008, while embodying – corpo-realising – an enduring hegemonic national corporatism.

Taking responsibility

The recent interplay in Irish media between discourses of rugby management, coaching and training and neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility, self-discipline and entrepreneurialism (Free 2017) reflects an international tendency exemplified by James Kerr’s (2013) eulogistic commentary on the New Zealand All Blacks’ recovery from their own under-performance in 2007 to win the 2011 World Cup. The All Blacks’ progress from

‘choking’ in their 2007 quarter final is presented as a model lesson in the players’ collectively and individually taking responsibility in moments of crisis. *Legacy* highlights the refocusing of rugby coaching away from instruction and game planning to in-the-moment capacities to react appropriately and effectively, sometimes referred to as ‘Teaching Games for Understanding’ or as ‘game sense’ (Light, 2013). The team ideally consists of self-questioning individuals in a dynamic grouping focused on each contest as a project with unique challenges.

Legacy’s subtitle, ‘what the All Blacks can teach us about the business of life’ signifies a more general aim to show how their ‘maps and mantras’ as a technology for producing self-reliant, self-disciplining players could become a role model for business as a ‘game’ (Kerr 2013: 119). The All Blacks’ powerful international brand combines the emphasis on individual mind-over-matter discipline with the romance (albeit contested – see Scherer and Jackson (2013)) of the national ‘stadium of four million’, the New Zealand 2011 World Cup slogan.

Legacy’s characterisation of rugby as a beacon for the business world is comparable with the popularisation of Japanese industrial management techniques through the method known as ‘scrum’ (Sutherland 2014). Here the rugby scrum becomes a metaphor for the Japanese managerial practice of autonomous teams of workers ‘empowered to make their own decisions’, with executives as ‘servant-leaders and facilitators’ (Sutherland 2014: loc. 466) as the goal (rather than management supplied task) orientated team cluster meets infrequently and briefly to address specific objectives. ‘Scrum’ is a variation on the ‘lean’ management systems popularised in the 1990s and identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p.73) as the essence of the ‘new spirit of capitalism’: ‘*lean* firms working as *networks* with a

multitude of participants, organizing work in the form of teams or *projects,* intent on customer satisfaction' (their emphasis).

Similar language pervades the routine public sector reform discourse in Ireland typified by Lyons' (2011: 40) contrasting of the 'pyramid structure' of public service and permanent workforce with a 'project-based organisation' using a 'flexible pool of labour' on short term contracts working in 'teams'. Such prescriptions fuel the 'common sense' neoliberal doctrine of uncertainty, relentless self-criticism and flexibility 'in any and all respects' (Mirowski 2013: 108). The rhetoric of the Irish Government organisation Enterprise Ireland typifies this advocacy of 'lean' management as a route to achieving more with less (O'Connell 2016).

Irish media representation of rugby evinces a related recent emphasis on engineering success through management and coaching despite limited financial and playing resources, with players willingly participating in multiple forms of surveillance as empowerment, particularly since New Zealander Joe Schmidt's appointment as national Ireland coach in 2013. Schmidt's methods – extensive use of statistics, posing questions of his players that imply self-discovery of the solutions, using the metaphor of the 'mind gym' – are widely reported (e.g. http://allblacks.com/News/24439/odriscoll-gives-joe-schmidt-credit). The 'rebranding' of the IRFU 'player welfare' programme as 'player performance management' (O'Connor 2013) typifies international rugby's pervasive 'new public management' discourse (with New Zealand as leaders – see O'Boyle 2015), with players as human resource components whose 'performance' is prioritised.

This is complemented by the coaching emphasis on individual responsibility for performance through repeated reference to the embrace of surveillance technologies (e.g. McCarry 2015: 275) and relentless comparison of player 'stats' as the team becomes a potentially ever

changing amalgam of dispensable individuals. Williams and Manley's (2016: 846) research on players in England highlights their extensive anxiety regarding the potential of these technologies to cause 'public humiliation in the workplace'. By contrast there is a marked instrumentalism in Irish players' public discussion of their own bodies, with typically euphemistic references to injury 'management', 'playing through serious discomfort' or 'looking forward to sweating and hurting again' (McCarry 2015:177, 185). Such matter-of-factness is typically conveyed through full stops to give a Hemingwayesque 'masculine style' paratactic flavour to statements: 'We're not playing table tennis here. Lads get hurt. It's part and parcel of the game' (Jamie Heaslip, quoted in McCarry 2015: 180).

Yet the implied toughness, durability and personal control coexist with anxiety regarding potential career curtailment or replacement in stories of painful training and fraught, uncertain recovery from injury. Hence, for example, the television documentary 'Tommy Bowe's Bodycheck' (RTÉ One, 24 February 2013), which tracks the player's supervised recovery through various statistics generating technologies. While it focuses on the technologies, a tie-in article ('you always fear this could be over in a split second' (Meagher 2013)) conveys his anxiety.

Leinster/Ireland player Sean O'Brien's contrasting profiles in 2009 and 2015 are indicative of the shift towards matter-of-fact acceptance mixed with fear of losing out. An earlier article stresses his rural and farming background in a romantic rejoinder to the perception that the 'province' of Leinster is limited in player recruitment and appeal to elite Dublin suburbs (Watterson 2009). By 2015 he typifies the neoliberal language of target setting and optimal exploitation of his worn body, stressing that he no longer visits his farm during training camps:

> “You stop doing those things. You have to get your body in the right place”. The changes [indicate] O’Brien’s growing wisdom kicking in, in terms of […] how to live up to the coach’s expectations. Or not. […] He embraces Schmidt’s scorched-earth policy with players (Watterson 2015).

In contemporary rugby, ‘getting your body in the right *place*’, metaphorically, implies comparative self-assessment and hierarchical positioning. Voluntary self-denial and submission to punishing training regimes and contests becomes the price of keeping (and knowing) one’s place. While there is a sense of the ‘Irish habitus’ here, there is also a more distinctly Foucauldian sense of ‘governmentality’, the meeting of Foucault’s (2003: 146) ‘technology of the self’, which permits ‘individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being’, and ‘technologies of power’ determining ‘certain conduct of individuals and submit[ting] them to certain ends or domination’.

Investing in the future

The emphasis on training, discipline and scientific measurement often intersects with accounts of business investments and sponsorships. Stories of players becoming ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ (Rose 1999) in the face of heightened bodily risk and career precariousness in a sport where earnings and contracts remain relatively limited compared to emigrant Irish professional footballers in England fuel the overall narrative of individual responsibility. Indeed many interviews and stories openly double as adverts for player endorsed products and services (e.g. *Irish Times* 2015; Thornley 2011).

The active promotion of rugby's business links in the guise of journalism is quite common. A *Sunday Business Post* article (2014), for instance, highlights the Irish Rugby Union's 'business mentoring' programme (developed by former banker and Ireland manager Paul McNaughton), while the Irish Rugby Players' Union (IRUPA) reportedly 'operates a similar system' in which 'senior business figures […] give up their time for free'. Such articles present players as 'smart, clued-in guys' (former Ireland/ Munster player Jerry Flannery) planning ahead (Bielenberg, 2014) while effectively promoting the philanthropy and fraternity of the business world. Player and team profiles offer neoliberal lessons in how to imagine and control the future, thereby reducing the sense of uncertainty in the present while using the anxiety of potential career curtailment to heighten the sense of urgency.

Specific associations of business interests and 'brand ambassador' work with a neoliberal logic are evident in their connections with the spheres of food, cuisine, diet, sport science and the widely circulating discourses of health and wellbeing (Cederstrom and Spicer 2015). Hence, for example, Tommy Bowe's use in the State sponsored food promoter, Bord Bia's (2015) campaign encouraging higher fruit and vegetable consumption. The food and drink sectors constituted nearly 50% of indigenous Irish exports from 2000-2007 (Taft 2015: 269). Bord Bia's (2015) promotion of its recent consumer survey typifies the pervasive and cumulative theme of healthy consumption as key to progression from 'recession to recovery'. Its 'new consumer agenda' of 'self-reliance', 'balance' and 'post-materiality' is presented as both a research discovery and a focus for marketing native produce. Bowe's 'brand ambassador' status connects his associated theme of dietary and bodily discipline with 'smart' consumption while providing a synergistic self-promotional vehicle.

Relatedly, rugby players' necessary maintenance of muscular bulk is also frequently cited in debates framing obesity as both 'epidemic' and threat to the taxpayers' purse (Free and Scully 2016: 10). In the interplay between dietary and moral narrative, players are contrastive

masculine models of virtue, exceptions to the body mass index (BMI) as a gauge of obesity (e.g. Stephenson 2013) as much of their 'excess' weight is a necessary muscular buffer in a high collision sport. Varying this logic, a widely reported study of players' intestinal bacteria generated the following pun that interconnects physical and moral courage: 'Rugby stars have "exceptional" guts - that help prevent obesity' (Sheehan 2014).

Representations of the Leinster/ Ireland players and brothers Rob and Dave Kearney illustrate media complicity in players' self- and business promotion. Players' Union Chair Rob Kearney typifies many players whose higher education in business and marketing is widely publicised. Having undertaken a Masters dissertation on Leinster's 'brand equity' while still playing (Power 2015) he repeatedly connects competition in sport and business as equivalents rather than metaphor and referent:

> "The margins at the moment between people at high levels in sport or high levels in business are just getting smaller and smaller and smaller. If I can improve myself even by that 1 per cent then I will improve my own performance" (quoted in Ingle, 2015).

Kearney offers a telling variation on how the rise of 'cultural intermediaries' blurs the boundaries between journalism, entertainment and marketing in rugby (Scherer and Jackson 2008: 196).

There is also a tendency in such representations towards reassurance that optimising business opportunities is compatible with cultural rootedness. Emphasising their farming backgrounds, the Kearneys' current 'brand ambassador' status for the former state sponsored (now industry financed) National Dairy Council (NDC) (Irish Examiner 2014) is exemplary. A NDC television sponsor's insert preceding Ireland's 2015 World Cup warm-up matches features them playing rugby with children in their old school ('It all starts here' –

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SE0nvw8QBSU). This in turn echoes shirt sponsor O2's 2011 World Cup television ad ('Play them next' – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wl1vwr6L1R4) in which the national team call to suburban houses, inviting children out to play. It also interconnects with 2015 sponsor Three's combination of television advertising featuring 'surreal tests' of players' physical and mental strength' (charging a rhino etc.) and supplementary Youtube videos stressing their associations with 'elements of traditional Irish culture and community' (O'Boyle and Kearns 2016: 10-11). Players' connections with farming and with suburbia's everywhere and nowhere in these ads reassure us that they are 'grounded' despite being on the 'crest of a commercial wave' (*Sunday Business Post* 2015).

The Kearneys' NDC brand ambassador status is significant in how it connects the secular world of 21st century Ireland with a 'back to the future' romantic evocation of Catholic rural Ireland. As an illustration of how this connection is followed through, Adam Redmond's (2014) *Irish Daily Mail* article accompanied a picture of them in saintly, milky white NDC hoodies, commencing:

> on match days, Siobhán Kearney lights two candles for two sons. On the blessed days, Rob and Dave's glowing talent allows them to run out in their country's colours together or hoist European silver over their heads, but there are other days where her faith and prayer must burn brightest.

Dairy 'goodness', religious devotion, fraternal and maternal love intertwine in the imagery of post-2008 'adjusting men and abiding mammies' (Negra 2014), a reminder of prelapsarian Catholic Ireland that accentuates the players' marketability.

The National Dairy Council and Bord Bia's mobilisation of players as symbolic vehicles also promotes agribusiness' enduring economic significance in Ireland despite the heavy reliance

on multi-national corporations' foreign direct investment in IT and other sectors. However, such sponsorships and promotions may also obscure significant contradictions. For instance, one of the Munster province's key sponsors, Greencore, was formerly the Irish Sugar Company founded by the fledgling post-Independence state in 1933. Privatised in 1991 Greencore controversially ceased all sugar manufacturing in 2006, causing major job losses. Although depicted as a driver of economic recovery it has limited its tax liabilities in Ireland (Free 2017: 220). While actually exemplary of the neoliberal principle of state asset divestment through privatisation (with concomitant relinquishment of state liability), and having utilised corporate tax avoidance provisions, it has successfully optimised its symbolic capital through sponsorship. Greencore's rugby sponsorship obscures a long and problematic history of State involvement, financing, privatisation and foregone taxation through its own programme of neoliberal corporate welfare.

Another sponsor, Bank of Ireland, benefitted directly from the Government bank guarantee in 2008. A sponsor of three Irish provinces, the bank directly employs former players and utilises current players as 'brand ambassadors' (Hancock 2017; Rowe 2015). This is an important vehicle of brand promotion under the guise of patriotic philanthropy and even economic investment. In an instance of this, retired player and newly appointed employee David Wallace is reported to 'lead an experienced team across the Munster region, with responsibility for generating and promoting economic activity throughout the province, across enterprise, community and the 72 branches' (Hancock 2017). The bank's commercial sponsorship of rugby and its use of individual stars as exemplars of discipline, dedication, future career investment and its own supposed 'generation' of 'economic activity' might be more a sign of post-2008 'corporate image adjustment' (Philips and Whannel 2013: 17) than altruistic voluntarism.

Conclusions

In Irish media national rugby celebrities have become symbols of post-2008 economic 'recovery' and exemplars of optimistic neoliberal narratives of future-orientated 'smart', targeted business investments. They are points of linkage between the cultural, economic and political in a country small enough that personal acquaintance across these spheres is common. Such narratives are indicative of enduring connections with the professional-managerial class and its associated hegemonic status in Ireland. Irish rugby's associations with elite schools and business world networking are particularly strong (O'Callaghan 2017: 17-20). A recent global survey (SMG Insight 2013: 3) indicated that Ireland has the 'greatest differential' in level of interest in rugby between high and low income respondents. Irish rugby's explicit links with the corporate world illustrate its extensive facilitation of the translation of physical into economic, cultural and social capital (Shilling 1993: 127-128).

The Irish Government sponsorship of the ultimately unsuccessful Irish bid to host the 2023 Rugby World Cup exemplifies rugby's explicit role in the Irish political and media narrative of post-2008 economic recovery, with current Taoiseach/Prime Minister (and former Sport Minister) Leo Varadkar featuring prominently in the bid presentation in London in September 2017. Further illustrating how 'cultural intermediaries' simultaneously connect rugby, media and the corporate world in Ireland the bid's Working Group was initially chaired by former (amateur era) international player and investment bank Goldman Sachs Ireland Managing Director Hugo MacNeill, who is also a regular Irish television (TV3) rugby commentator. The 'bid ambassador' was Brian O'Driscoll, whose post-playing career has also combined television rugby punditry (for BT Sport and ITV (UK)) with corporate representation. A 'senior adviser' for 'global advisory firm Teneo Holdings' O'Driscoll was reported to be 'looking forward to helping Teneo's clients redefine how they leverage sports to grow their

brands' (Hancock 2016). O'Driscoll and MacNeill's involvement in the bid illustrates continuity and change. Both were enlisted in rugby's contribution to the political narrative of reinvigorating Ireland as a global competitor post-2008, and their corporate connections were presented as unproblematic personal and public goods. However, O'Driscoll marks a generational development through his more direct linkage of the corporate sphere with rugby and other sports as 'leveraged' vehicles for brand promotion.

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[1] A recent Irish Sports Council survey (2013: 21) indicated that 1.4% of the adult population of the Republic of Ireland played rugby, compared with 5.9% for soccer and 2.6% for Gaelic Football. 2.7% attended a rugby event in 2013, compared to 5.4% for soccer and 6.7% for Gaelic Football. Despite this, television audiences for major rugby events have grown dramatically in the post-1995 professional era. In 2014 Ireland's Six Nations Championship winning game against France had the highest Irish television audience for any sporting event that year (https://tvmediasales.rte.ie/top-programmes-2014/). See also O'Callaghan (2017: 19).

[2] Unlike Association football (soccer), the Irish national rugby team includes players from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The four provincial teams include Ulster, which includes the six counties of Northern Ireland and three from the Republic.

[3] The selection was generated by combining 'rugby' with various keyword search terms, which included player names and, given the article's focus, 'injury', 'diet', 'education' and 'retirement'. Additional searches focused on the combinations of the terms 'Celtic Tiger', 'recession', 'austerity' and 'recovery'. Intersections with the 'rugby' searches were of particular interest. This approach generated combinations spanning the sports, business, political and opinion pages numbering many thousands of articles in total. The article is tentative in argument given this ambitious scope as, inevitably, identifying and tracking

thematic currents is an interpretative exercise. Sampled articles were coded and subdivided according to manifest themes, before seeking to trace possible discursive representational patterns such as narrative form, argumentative structures (rhetorical contrast, analogy etc.), humour (puns, irony etc.), tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, etc.) and interdiscursive connections with representations of other aspects of Irish society and government in this period.

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