

# **“Our wee country”: National Identity, Golf and ‘Ireland’**

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## **Abstract**

The careers of professional golfers offer a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which national identity is imagined, constructed and experienced. This paper examines the nexus of national identity and golf in ‘Ireland’, and more particularly, Rory McIlroy’s public statements on the identity politics surrounding his country of choice for the 2016 Olympic Games. In so doing, it reveals aspects of McIlroy’s personal and sporting habitus, the value he associated with, being ‘Irish’, his legitimisation of Northern Ireland (NI), and the possible effect of this on others’ orientation towards his sporting identity on the island of Ireland. Given the current context of political instability in NI, it remains to be seen whether McIlroy’s talent as a golfer and his transnational social status will mean that he is a powerful cultural intermediary for sport in/and NI.

**Keywords:** golf, habitus, McIlroy, national identity, Olympic Games

## **Introduction**

Processes of globalisation and glocalisation have impacted on the ways people think about membership of a nation, defined in civic terms as attached to a state, or ethnically in terms of membership of a particular group with a shared cultural heritage. Today, more than ever before, people engage in multi-locationality, where they frequently traverse social, political, cultural and territorial boundaries around the world. In this way, membership of a nation or state is, for some, fluid: spaces and places are less central to national identity. At the same time, however,

as a direct response to the homogenising trends of globalisation, the nation and/or state have become more relevant, with international sport being a critical expression of the ideological sentiments associated with nationalism and national identity. Through the national symbols evident on the sports fields, courts, and playing greens around the world, nations are more easily identifiable and visible, and athletes are symbolic patriots at play, portrayed as emblems of national pride who supposedly embody the ideological virtues of those who claim allegiance to the nation/state. This paper examines national identity and golf in 'Ireland', with a focus on Rory McIlroy's decision surrounding his country of choice for the 2016 Olympic Games. McIlroy's handling of his Olympic eligibility offers insights into the dialectical struggle between British, Ulster/Northern Irish and Irish identities in sport, and also its manifestation in a divided society like NI.

### **Rory McIlroy**

At the time of writing, Rory McIlroy is one of golf's top male athletes, ranked number five in the world. Born in 1989 and educated in both Catholic and mixed-religious schools, McIlroy is a child of the post-Troubles era in Northern Ireland (NI). Raised in a middle class area, McIlroy's upbringing was atypical of ethno-religious division in NI, where, in his words: 'there was a mix of Protestant and Catholic families but everyone got along as far as I remember. It was a great place to grow up and religion and religious differences were rarely mentioned' (Kimmage, 2017). As both an amateur and professional golfer he has represented multiple flags, including Ireland under the Golfing Union of Ireland (GUI), an all island organisation. In 2007 he was part of the Ireland team that won the European Amateur Team Championships, while he also won the Walker Cup for a combined Great Britain and Ireland team. Though as a professional he has represented Ireland in the World Cup of Golf and Europe in the Ryder Cup, McIlroy is most associated with NI, as seen through flags displayed alongside his name

on scoreboards and results sheets. McIlroy's official webpage displays an image of him holding an Irish Football Association (IFA) pendant, he being a public supporter of the NI football team and of Ulster's men's rugby team. Ahead of NI's opening game at the 2016 European Football Championships, Rory McIlroy narrated a short video message to the NI team, in which he commented:

Down through the years, many have claimed their place in Northern Ireland's sporting hall of fame, like Mary Peters, Dennis Taylor, Barry McGuigan, Pat Jennings, Joey Dunlop, Willie John McBride, and of course the Best (George). These sporting heroes helped unite Northern Ireland and now it's your turn ... it's an honour for us to have the opportunity to represent Northern Ireland around the world and to put *our wee country* on the sporting map ... feel the pride of what it means to represent your country with the world watching

(Irish Football Association 2016)

McIlroy is best known throughout the world, not necessarily for these identity complexities, but for his golfing exploits, supported by high profile sponsors (Nike, TaylorMade, Omega and EA Sports). In 2018 McIlroy was named the Sunday Times wealthiest athlete aged under 30 and listed as 26<sup>th</sup> on the Forbes list for the world's highest paid athletes. At the time of writing McIlroy has 3.18 million twitter followers and 1.6 million Instagram followers.

McIlroy's transnational profile was thrust into a different sphere when golf re-entered the Olympic Games. Given his position as a potential dual national of both Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK), under Rule 41 of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Charter, McIlroy was permitted to represent either nation at Rio 2016 (International Olympic Committee 2015, p.80). As such McIlroy was forced to choose between Great Britain and NI (Team GB) or Team Ireland. In the years preceding the 2016 Olympic Games McIlroy initially indicated a preference for Team GB, finally declared for Ireland, and subsequently withdrew before the Games, owing, he claimed at the time, to concerns regarding the Zika virus. Not

only did this decision generate personal difficulty for him but it also revealed the complex interplay between sportive nationalism and national identity, whose emotional base is magnified in dividing/divided societies like NI where ‘there is no ideological mortar ... holding things together’ (Gormley-Heenan and Aughey 2017, p.9). This paper sets out to describe the ways in which McIlroy sought to make sense of his national eligibility choice, through his own public statements and media interviews. In so doing, it reveals McIlroy’s personal identity, his socialisation as an amateur golfer in an all-island governed sport, and the dissonance between this and his professional identity as one of the world’s top professional golfers. The case of McIlroy is of interest to those seeking to better understand valuable insights on global stars, national identity and nation states. It is also particularly timely given the ongoing constitutional debates surrounding the UK’s exit from the EU (Whigham and Bairner 2018). It is a moot question whether McIlroy could be a cultural intermediary in sport, in terms of his desire to negate the pernicious influence of ethnic nationalisms.

## **Methodology**

The data consists of public statements and direct quotes or comments by McIlroy from the time golf was announced as being readmitted to the Olympic Games on October 8<sup>th</sup> 2009, to the current date. The majority of the data was gathered from newspaper sources<sup>i</sup> in the Nexis database where the search terms were ‘McIlroy’ (headline) and ‘British’ and ‘Irish’ (both anywhere in the text). This resulted in 378 newspaper articles, each of which was examined in search for direct quotes from McIlroy. Some of the articles presented short quotes, while others such as those written by Kimmage (2017) used the style of presenting direct excerpts from interview transcripts. Where possible the primary source of the quotes were found for verification, e.g. personal statements (Twitter or otherwise), television and radio interviews/programmes, and press conferences. For the most part, McIlroy’s statements on the

question of national eligibility for the Olympic Games are presented in chronological form, not only to illustrate the development of his personal and professional sporting habitus during this time, but in accordance with Scott's (1990) criteria for assessing the quality of evidence. Of particular importance to this analysis is the ways in which the accounts of, and by, McIlroy himself, as well as those mediated by others, play a potent role in the imagined 'wee country' of NI.

### **National identity and the habitus**

Bourdieu (1977 p.214) described habitus as "a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body), and in particular a disposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination". The habitus forms in response to the demands of the field in which the individual is engaged, leading to different practices and stances depending on the state of the field. For people to engage in communities and practices successfully they must work within an identifiable habitus where they feel an obligation to share in the lifestyle, tastes and dispositions of a particular social group or community of people. Habitus is a useful framework with which to understand embodied and imagined connections between individual identity and national character. Maguire and Poulton (1999) argue that one of the most potent I/we identities of an individual member of a modern nation-state is that associated with that individual's nation, where the traits of the social habitus are very deeply ingrained in the individual and 'the fortunes of the nation become sedimented, internalised and fused as part of the "second nature" – the habitus' (Maguire and Burrows 2005, p.130). Modern sport is accepted to be a primary sociocultural expression of this habitus, mobilising and intensifies feelings of personal and collective belonging, both real and imagined. (Maguire and Poulton, 1999; Tucj, 2003; Paulle and Van Heerikhuizen, 2012). The 'we-identity', emotional bonds, habitus codes and the personal, social and collective dimensions of identity can crystallise around common symbols, e.g. national teams, flags and

anthems. International sporting competitions in particular provide ‘people with a sense of difference and a way of classifying themselves and others, whether latitudinally or hierarchically’ (MacClancy 1996, p.2). These symbols reveal layers of the complex network of beliefs, national and emotional allegiances that operate on a daily basis. Thus the development of national identity or a national ethos is both a reflection of, and reflected by, the individual.

The process of identification is dynamic, interactive and multi-layered and each individual possesses complex dynamic identities that are continually developed and shaped by social networks. People in complex nation-states such as NI have multiple identities that are many-layered, and may be based on gender, class, age, sexuality, religion, ethnicity or place (local, regional, national and global). In investigating religion and identity in NI, Bell (2013) found that identities are not fixed but multiple, overlapping and evolve over an individual’s lifetime, where during the ‘Troubles’, the levels of violence limited the space for alternative identities to form beyond the Protestant/British and Catholic/Irish binaries. This contrasts with the current picture which provides for more flexibility. In terms of sport, Cronin (1999) asserts that at any one moment, there are several dynamic Irish national identities on the island of Ireland and within the Irish diaspora; sport itself is an ever-changing vehicle for the transmission of ideology and identity. These overlapping affiliations form the flexible latticework of the habitus or the behavioural dispositions which are unique to the individual. Todd (2007) suggests that everyday constructions of national identity are subtly changed by the choices that individuals make in minor situations; everyday identity shift may be constrained by communal loyalty but is capable of underpinning change. For McIlroy, the re-entry of golf as an Olympic sport meant that his personal and professional habitus layers collided, in which he was forced into making public statements concerning his national identity. The embroiling of McIlroy in these double bind identity politics was perhaps inevitable, given

the role of sport as a non-violent means of asserting identities and of the unique character of sportive nationalism on the island of Ireland.

### **‘Ireland’, Identity and Sport**

From structuring political values, to institutional, symbolic and security matters, national identity can have major social policy connotations, particularly in deeply divided societies such as NI (Coakley 2007). Since partition of the island of Ireland in 1922, the status of NI has been one of the most challenging of our time. Ethno-sectarian attitudes remain deeply rooted in many social fields (Liston and Deighan, 2018) and inter-generational socialisation occurs almost exclusively within single identity community groups. Today, NI is less dominated by violence but cultural difference has become more heightened. In fact, it is argued that traditional identity boundaries around religion (Catholic/Protestant) and political persuasion (unionist/nationalist) have intensified since the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). In these lived realities, national habituses are deeply sedimented and reproduced in economic, political and social structures, and in everyday expressions of identity that are underwritten by symbolism and meaning. Flags, pavement borders, murals and walls are but one reflection of this contestation of symbolic and physical space. Dual citizenship of the UK and of Ireland is embedded in the GFA, in which individuals are afforded the right to hold both British and Irish passports. Therefore questions relating to national identity have a particular resonance and unique meaning there, especially given the politicised relationship between identity and sport. For example, the idiom ‘our wee country’, which McIlroy used in his video message to the NI football team, is claimed to represent the ‘country of Northern Ireland’. However, this habitus code is not necessarily shared by all; Liston and Deighan (2018) argue that it represents more a fantasy shield and imagined charisma of Protestant unionist loyalist groups, and of those with

specific emotional attachments to the NI football team. This is notwithstanding the increasing number of Catholics who play and watch football in NI.

Ethno-religious components remain an important marker of national identity in NI (Coakley 2007). Protestants are still more likely to view themselves as unionist and British, and Catholics are more likely to consider themselves nationalist and Irish (Muldoon *et al.* 2008). Some intra-variety exists within these groups of course, along social class lines of which McIlroy is one example. He declares himself a Catholic more comfortable with British culture owing to his father's identity but, in general, most inhabitants take the Protestant/Catholic and Irish/British distinctions as a form of self-positioning (Todd 2015; ARK 2017). While religion and identity are deeply connected in NI, sport, neighbourhood affiliation and educational background also play a significant role in identity and divisions. For instance, Todd (2015) found that identity-as-orientation – encompassing a value perspective, assumptions and expectations – is prevalent in NI where people are guarded in their use of the national 'we', and much more likely to speak of 'I'. For many Northerners then, national identity is much more a project or orientation than a shared collective feeling, not least because of the unstable political situation there. Since 2010, there have been eight elections, (local council, NI assembly, British and European Parliaments) while the 2016 UK referendum outcome to leave the European Union (EU) (Brexit) has exacerbated political tensions, given the reliance by the Conservative government on the Democratic Unionist Party and the question of the land border with the Republic of Ireland, an EU member state. The majority of voters in NI (55.8%) voted to remain within the EU, McIlroy not having a vote owing to his US citizenship by then. Around the time of the vote, he commented 'if I'm Northern Irish, what's better?...To be part of the UK and not be in the EU? Or to be in a united Ireland and still belong to the EU? People are going to have to weight that up.' (Brown 2016). The latest research from the NI Life and Times survey indicated that the majority of Catholic respondents (88%) and those with no



religion voted to remain in the EU. Unionists (63%) and those with a British identity (61%) voted to leave, while nationalists (92%) and those with Irish identity (90%) voted to remain (Gormley-Heenan *et al.* 2017). As Liston and Deighan (2018) have argued, it is difficult to predict with any certainty the impact of Brexit on the identity-sport nexus in NI but they have noted that symbolic walls of the mind exist there, notably regarding sporting emblems, anthems and the like.

In the context of sport in Ireland, the choice of national team is a potentially significant decision, given the complex governance structure on the island. As Liston *et al.* (2013) have noted, the elite sports policy arena in NI is a complex and nuanced field sitting within and between the sports development structures of Ireland and the UK, where a mosaic of different interests revolve from north to south and east to west. A complex bi-partite governance system exists in which just under half of the national governing bodies of sport (n=35) in NI are constituted on an all-Ireland basis (including golf), another 26 are constituted on a UK basis and 13 are what might be termed stand-alone organisations, e.g. the Irish Football Association. Correspondingly the 'national question' is multifarious. This can mean sporting representation for Ireland (32-county), the Republic of Ireland (26 counties), Great Britain and NI, NI alone or a combination of these. This complexity also extends to coach development systems and sports development structures funded and supported by a combination of Coaching Ireland, Sportscoach UK, Sport Ireland (SI) and Sport NI (SNI). Consequently, coaches and athletes are forced to negotiate the minefield of national sports representation, some of whom deal with this in pragmatic sporting terms and others who display more awareness and reflection regarding the dissonance between personal, social and sporting habituses (see Liston and Deighan (2018)).

## **Golf and Identity**

Notwithstanding the biennial Ryder Cup/Solheim Cup matches, golf is relatively inured from displays of nationalism that are more commonplace in international team sports. The prize monies and endorsements amassed by international professional golf stars like McIlroy, and the requirements of their profession, contribute to their status as 'borderless athletes' (Chiba, Ebhahara and Morinon 2001) who transcend national, racial and ethnic borders, *de facto* sports citizens of the world. In this profession, being a 'nomad' (*Irish News*, 10 May 2017) is to be expected, and religion, culture and nationality are typically marginal to professional golfers and their occupational habitat. Out of career necessity then, such athletes operate in global networks where they represent multiple, transnational identities, often linked to several nations and contexts (Wong and Trumper 2002). Fry *et al.* (2015, p.356) have noted that 'striking the right balance between individualism and conformity is always difficult' for professional golfers; it brings various tensions and difficulties, not only in terms of personal relationships, trust and distrust, but also in terms of how successful golfers, who compete as individuals primarily, become representatives of a collective 'nation'. Their business and commercial interests also operate in culturally heterogeneous and often transnational spaces. McIlroy has benefited from the expansion of golf worldwide, particularly the exploits of his self-stated role model and inspiration, Tiger Woods. Similar to Woods, McIlroy is widely viewed as a global golf citizen, part of 'planet Nike', where his celebrity power and worth transcends nations and nationalities.

Given this transnational status and global appeal, the actions of such professional athletes can take on cultural significance. Not only do they become consumer icons, engaging in brand endorsement through their status but, more importantly for present purposes, they are also viewed as representatives of nations and national character. Their successes and failures

are read as indicative of the health and status of ‘the nation’ (Tuck 2003; Vincent *et al.* 2010) or, at the very least, of the talent identification and development systems that operate there. Owing to the status of the Olympic Games, a pre-eminent sports mega-event, successful Olympians become highly visible embodiments of the nation, ‘significant actors who both define and reflect the “special charisma” of nations’ (Maguire and Tuck 2005, p.92). The interplay of the private and public worlds of these international sports stars is even more politicised when athletes/players holding more than one ‘nationality’ have, owing to eligibility or residency rules, to choose national team affiliation in various international sports competitions. Dual or multiple citizenship is one expression of transnationalism but these sports stars also remain national cultural icons for the formation and reaffirmation of identities (Wong and Trumper 2002). For instance, Padraig Harrington was used as the primary brand image for the 2006 Ryder Cup in Ireland, while the presence of two Kentuckians in the USA Ryder Cup team of 2008, held at Valhalla, Louisville, was also critical to the continued importance of the ‘local’ in this international sports event (Harris and Lepp 2011). In this way, high-profile international sporting events have been used to assert particular local/national ideologies, the Olympics being a specific case in point in which some athletes have also actively used their profile to advocate for political and social justice (see Timms, 2012).

Others, however, do not get involved in culturally, socially or politically sensitive issues. Having played a key role in the transformation of professional golf and the elevation of a formerly socially exclusive game into public consciousness, it is argued that Tiger Woods functions as one such public figure, avoiding engagement on any politically sensitive issue such as race, ethnicity or politics. Starn (2011) suggests that Woods lacked any motivation for social and political activism while Harris and Lyberger (2008) also claimed a lack of interest on his part in representing the USA in the Ryder Cup. Early in his professional career, Rory McIlroy too said that the Ryder Cup was not ‘a huge goal of mine. It’s an exhibition. In the big

scheme of things it's not that important an event for me' (Peters 2009). This view changed subsequently, where McIlroy has become a figurehead in Team Europe and led out the team on the final day at the 2016 and 2018 Ryder Cups. McIlroy's statements on the reintroduction of golf into the Olympics bore a similar pattern, shifting towards greater awareness over time regarding the sporting and cultural significance of the event, and of its implications for the representation of personal and collective national identity on the world stage.

McIlroy is not the first international sportsperson of his generation to have declared a position, however wishful and (non)aligned, on national identity. Hours before the polls opened for the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, tennis player Andy Murray declared his support for a leave outcome, for which he received a backlash (Jarvie 2017). Footballer, Gerard Pique, too offered to step down from the Spanish team recently as a result of his support for Catalan independence. In NI years prior, former world featherweight boxer Barry McGuigan refused a national flag as a competitor, instead preferring peace emblems like the dove and a non-aligned anthem. And, at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio, brothers Mark and Paul Gleghorne from Antrim, NI, competed for different teams (GB and Ireland respectively), in field hockey. Acknowledging that sleeping memories (Maguire and Poulton 1999) associated with national habitus are never the same for every individual, the re-entry of golf to the Olympic roster brought the question of national identity to the fore for golfers from NI, eligible to represent either Team GB or Ireland, specifically Graeme McDowell and Rory McIlroy who were ranked sufficiently high in the world for Olympic qualification purposes. Only when necessary have they discussed national identity and eligibility and in such cases, both have taken steps towards a personal NI identification and an Irish sporting one, having a shared desire to 'wear the green blazer'. In 2015 McDowell commented, 'you stuck the green jacket on [playing for Ireland] and never gave it a second thought ... But when the whole Olympic thing came up, it just felt like a banana skin where there was no right answer ... I'll be honest

and say that when I travel around the world I say I'm Irish, because people love the Irish ... Conflicted, that's the word' (Ferguson 2015).

It is possible that golf's early association with Ireland's social and political elite and selective religious practices (Mulhall 2006) may still have an influence on the participation and involvement of particular social groups in the modern day. In the late twentieth century golf became embroiled in the politics of communal division in NI, where golf clubs used membership entry mechanisms to prevent people from particular backgrounds from gaining access. The involvement of senior business, administrative and security professionals in golf clubs implicated these facilities as terrorist targets for bombings and shootings (Sugden and Bairner 1993; Bairner 2001). Today, golf attracts participants from unionist and nationalist communities in NI and 'Irish professional golfers, from whatever background, are members of a global circus that travels the world in search of tour victories and enormous winnings' (Bairner 2001, p.29). Regarding sports like golf, Bairner (2001, p.36) states that 'these primarily middle-class, individual sports either fail completely to get involved in the politics of identity or are such as to encourage unionists to identify with their Irishness, albeit not at the expense of being British'.

### **The Olympic Games, Golf and National Team Representation**

Given the complex and unique governance structures for sport in Ireland noted above, much attention has been paid to McIlroy's national allegiance. This has revolved around the question usually posed to him in dualistic terms: whether he considers himself Irish or British. In a 2006 interview as a 17 year old amateur golfer McIlroy commented "I would identify myself as British...I'm from Northern Ireland so I'm a British citizen and I've got a British passport. I'm Northern Irish but I can have an Irish passport if I want" (Keogh 2006). In September 2009, just one month prior to golf being readmitted into the Olympic Games, McIlroy was

asked for his position, responding “it’s a bit of an awkward question, but I have a British passport and it would be Great Britain for me” (Turnbull 2011). Three years into his professional career and upon winning his first PGA Tour event at Quail Hollow in 2010, McIlroy sought to avoid an unequivocal answer, he replied: ‘Pass ... I’m Northern Irish ... I hold a British passport, so there you go’ (PGA [Professional Golfers’ Association] Tour 2010). Playing for Ireland a year later at the 2011 World Cup for Golf at Mission Hills, with fellow NI golfer Graeme McDowell, and explicitly stating that there would be no waving of the Irish tricolour if they won, McIlroy for the first time, elaborated on the complexities associated with these layered identifications, citing the all-island sport of rugby as his exemplar for greater social acceptance of the complexities of identity:

In the island of Ireland you have people playing rugby, cricket, hockey and golf, and if you play for your country you play for the whole of Ireland. It never has been that big a deal in rugby so I feel it shouldn’t be a big deal in golf either ... it’s hard because I’m Irish but also Northern Irish and whatever you want to call me, but I have no real strong allegiances to any flag or nation. I am from where I am from. If people want to take me for being British, then they can, and if they want to claim me as Irish, they can...I’m very neutral. I’m from Northern Ireland, but both the Golfing Union of Ireland and the Irish Sports Council have been great to me. It’s a sensitive area, and a sensitive thing to talk about just because of the past and the politics that are involved.

(O’Sullivan 2014)

Following confirmation of the re-entry of golf into the Olympics, in a September 2012 interview, McIlroy went further in personal terms, and commented that he felt more of a connection with Britain than Ireland:

What makes it such an awful position to be in is I have grown up my whole life playing for Ireland under the Golfing Union of Ireland umbrella ... but the fact is, I’ve always felt more British than Irish ... 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.

(Lawrenson 2012a)

This interview resulted in a furore of international media reports surrounding McIlroy and his national identity. In response, McIlroy issued an open self-constructed letter on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012, via Twitter, in which he sought to dampen the spotlight by highlighting his global status. In the letter he explained the various layers of his personal and sporting habitus and was notably more nuanced regarding the complexities of his situation. The letter also reveals his idealism regarding an inclusive vision of sport in which national boundaries are less important:

I am in an extremely sensitive and difficult position and I conveyed as much in a recent newspaper interview. I am a proud product of Irish golf and the Golfing Union of Ireland and am hugely honoured to have come from very rich Irish sporting roots, winning Irish Boys, Youths and Amateur titles and playing for Ireland at all levels. I am also a proud Ulsterman who grew up in Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK. That is my background and always will be. I receive huge support from both Irish and British sports fans alike and it is greatly appreciated. Likewise, I feel like I have a great affinity with American sports fans. I play most of my golf in the US nowadays and I am incredibly proud to have won both the US Open and the US PGA Championship in the last two years. As an international sportsman, I am very lucky to be supported by people all over the world, many of who treat me as one of their own, no matter what their nationality, or indeed mine. This is the way sport should be ... I wish to clarify that I have absolutely not made a decision regarding my participation in the next Olympics. On a personal level playing in the Olympics would be a huge honour. However, the Games in Rio are still four years away and I certainly won't be making any decisions with regards to participating any time soon.

(McIlroy 2012)

At various times McIlroy has self-identified as Irish, Northern Irish *and* British, at pains to point out that none are mutually exclusive to him. In his professional career, he has consistently presented himself as seeking to avoid unhelpful dualities between Irish or British identities imposed on him. Given that he is now a US resident, married to a US citizen and based in Florida, McIlroy also tried to position himself as a 'borderless' athlete. The week following his personal statement he commented:

Over the past week it has really hit home just how important my success is for a lot of people and what it means to them...I've had support from all sides, from people who call themselves Irish, from Northern Irish, to the whole of the UK, to people in America, and it would be terrible for me to segregate myself from one of those groups that support me so much...It's four years away before I have to decide about the Olympics, and after everything that happened last week, it definitely makes me reconsider my position and reconsider a lot of things.

(Lawrenson 2012b)

The social pressure surrounding his eligibility decision was such that in a BBC television documentary broadcasted in January 2013, McIlroy revealed that he was then reviewing three options regarding the Olympic Games: representing Ireland, Team GB or opting out of the Games entirely. In his words then:

I just think being where we're from, we're placed in a very difficult position ... I feel Northern Irish and obviously being from Northern Ireland you have a connection to Ireland and a connection to the UK ... There are sports people before me who have been put in that position. If I could and there was a Northern Irish team I'd play for Northern Ireland. I feel Northern Irish, and obviously you have a connection to Ireland and to the UK ... I either play for one side or the other or I don't play. Those are my three options I'm considering very carefully.

(Watson 2013)



Commenting then on the newspaper headlines which claimed he would rather play for Team GB in Rio, McIlroy said:

It was a moment, I don't want to say of weakness, but a moment of, I guess, frustration with it all ... people tune in to watch me play on TV and feel like they are connected to me in some way ... I don't want to repay them for their support with something they don't want me to do ...

(Watson, 2013)

Much like Tuck and Maguire's (2005) interviewees (who were national rugby union players from Ireland and the UK), it's clear that McIlroy gradually became more acutely aware of his role in (national and international) sporting and golfing fraternities, and of the complexities of his personal and social context. In May 2014, speaking at the Memorial tournament on the US PGA Tour, McIlroy was asked if he had made a decision regarding the Olympics. He then appeared more hopeful that a decision might be clarified for him by the international sports federations in charge:

I think we've had a few conversations with the R&A and IOC and talking about taking the decision out of my hands in some way. It's not as far away as it was. It's a couple of years away. But I've still got a bit of time to sort of think about it. And I think 2016 is going to be a very busy golf season with that and the Olympics and everything else that's going to be going on ... of course I won't be a hundred per cent comfortable ... I mean, if you're going to the Olympics and representing a country, you would think you would want to be pretty sure that's the country you want to represent. But, yeah, it's a delicate subject.

(PGA Tour, 2014)

The following month, on June 18<sup>th</sup> 2014, at the Irish Open in Fota Island, Cork, McIlroy announced that he would represent Ireland at the 2016 Olympic Games, citing the all-island governance of the game as the main reason, and seeking social acceptance for this based on

similar choices made by others in all-Ireland governed sports. He was by then ‘one hundred per cent’. In this regard his sporting habitus appeared forefront in the decision:

I’ve played for Ireland my whole life and there’s no reason to change that now – it’s just a continuation of what I’ve done ... it’s a decision I feel comfortable with and I’ll be proud to represent Ireland in 2016 ... I’m 100% sure it’s the right decision for me and I hope people respect my decision ... just because now that I’m playing golf for money and I’m a professional. I’m supposed to have this choice or this decision to make, where if you look at the rugby players, you look at cricketers or hockey players, they view Ireland as one, the same as we do in golf.

(BBC Sport, 2014)

Two years later, on the same week that he was in Paris supporting the NI team at the 2016 European Championships, McIlroy released a statement to indicate his withdrawal from the Olympic Games owing to the outbreak of the Zika virus. While the health risks were low, it was ‘a risk I am unwilling to take’. He added: ‘I trust the Irish people will understand my decision’ (*The Irish Times*, 22 June 2016). The lower status of the Olympic Games to professional golfers of McIlroy’s status was also revealed in a July 2016 comment he made to Telegraph journalist, Oliver Brown: ‘For me, I haven’t been dreaming about the Olympics my whole life. In my opinion, the risk I was going to face didn’t match what I was playing for. The risk wasn’t worth the reward’. Thus his career objectives were rationalised. According to him in the same interview, in a conversation with Irish Olympian Sonia O’Sullivan, his decision was justified. She told him that ‘if the Olympics were the pinnacle [for him]... then it might be a different matter. The way I [McIlroy] have to explain it is, I have four Olympics every year [the four Major tournaments]. These guys [track and field athletes] have one every four years. The risk to them is worth it’ (Brown 2016). Later on, he said of a potential medal scenario at Rio: ‘I would have felt uncomfortable either way [representing Team GB or Ireland]. I don’t know the words to either anthem; I don’t feel a connection to either flag’ (Kimmage 2017).

Following criticism that his withdrawal meant he was not fulfilling his responsibility to promote the game of golf worldwide, McIlroy declared, perhaps a little petulantly, that he would not watch the Olympic golf tournament:

I don't feel like I've let the game down at all. I didn't get into golf to try to grow the game. I got into golf to win championships and win major championships and all of a sudden you get to this point and there is a responsibility on you to grow the game, and I get that. But at the same time that's not the reason that I got into golf. I got into golf to win. I didn't get into golf to get other people into the game ... But I'm very happy with the decision I've made and I have no regrets about it. I'll probably watch the Olympics, but I'm not sure golf will be one of the events I watch ... Probably the events like track and field, swimming, diving, the stuff that matters.

(Corrigan 2016)

One month later, he modified his tone saying '...to see the crowds and the turnout [at the golf event], I was glad to be somewhat proven wrong' (Ferguson 2016). Given his pre-tournament withdrawal, followed by that of the next ranked eligible golfer for Ireland, Graeme McDowell (also from NI), Pádraig Harrington (Dublin) was selected to represent Ireland in golf at the Rio Games, alongside Seamus Power (Waterford) after Shane Lowry (Offaly) had also withdrawn. Interestingly, in February 2012 Harrington (who is 17 years older than McIlroy and whose golfing career has had a different trajectory) suggested that McIlroy and McDowell both declare for Team GB, this being a self-serving suggestion that would benefit him in terms of selection (O'Malley 2012). Harrington softened this individualism a year later, citing sympathy for McIlroy as an Irishman but more so as a sportsman:

No sportsman should have to make that decision [choosing between GB and Ireland]. That's it, straightforward – nobody at 23 years of age should be asked to make that decision ... the reality is there've been people in politics for the last hundred years

who have tried to negotiate that and haven't been able to. So why would you ask a 23-year old just because he's going to hit a little white golf ball?

(Jones 2013)

This statement reflects a more realistic acknowledgement of the sport-politics nexus.

## **Conclusion**

Since the Olympic Games, McIlroy has acknowledged the resentment he felt at being forced to choose a national team. Like many high profile sportspeople who seek to position sport as above politics, that is, as a purely apolitical space in which performance is the ultimate and meritocratic objective, he is reluctant to discuss his nationality at length and he has decried the politicisation of his identity and the eligibility choices open to him. This was quite an oxymoron, given the political instability and longstanding ethno-religious divisions that exist in NI. In an interview with the *Sunday Independent* in January 2017, McIlroy revealed that he is unlikely to compete at the 2020 Olympic Games. In this more expansive statement, he revealed for the first time the ways in which identity was both managed and suppressed in his community and family, and what he sees as a primary personal allegiance to NI:

Yeah, I mean when it was announced (that golf was to be an Olympic sport) in 2009 or whatever, all of a sudden it put me in a position where I had to question who I am. Who am I? Where am I from? Where do my loyalties lie? Who am I going to play for? Who do I not want to piss off the most? I started to resent it. And I do. I resent the Olympic Games because of the position it put me in - that's my feeling towards it - and whether that's right or wrong, it's how I feel ... if I had been on the podium (listening) to the Irish national anthem as that flag went up, or the British national anthem as that flag went up, I would have felt uncomfortable either way. I don't know the words to either anthem; I don't feel a connection to either flag; I don't want it to be about flags; I've tried to stay away from that ... Not everyone is (driven by) nationalism and patriotism and that's never been me, because I felt like I grew up in a place where I wasn't allowed to be. It was suppressed. I'm very conflicted because I'm a Catholic and ... I turned on the TV

at home and it was the BBC; I did my GCSEs; I used pounds sterling, stuff like that. So I'm a Catholic but I feel very much Northern Irish. And I never wanted it to get political or about where I'm from, but that's what it turned into. And it just got to the point where it wasn't worth the hassle.

(Kimmage 2017)

McIlroy's active attempts to avoid national identity politics only enhanced the fault lines of this minefield, where he appears to have retained a wishful stance, before, during and after the Olympic eligibility question, confirming his ideological desire that sport might break down symbolic barriers between communities, in NI in particular. In that regard, the claim of an inclusive shared culture in NI is desirable in its idealism, but takes credulity too far if the implication is that identity politics can be transformed because of golf. Also, in seeking to manage the politicisation of his identity, McIlroy sought to position his primary identity (Northern Irishness) as inclusive, free from the worst excesses of the ongoing conflict in NI and beyond the dualities of Irish or British identities. However, by implication, and unintentionally, he offered some degree of legitimacy to the 'country' of NI, which raises further questions regarding the different shades of political and cultural opinion that constitute nationalism more broadly.

McIlroy's presentation of his personal, social and sporting habituses confirm the unique nuances of national identity in NI, and also reveal something of the ways in which some middle class Catholics demonstrate the ideological capacity to acknowledge a British identity layer. In the time period examined here, spanning his professional career to date, McIlroy's self-presentation of identity primarily in terms of NI has been relatively consistent as has been his idealism concerning the power of sport to be 'borderless' in attachment, for fans and competitors alike. Since making comments in his early professional career about feeling more British than Irish, and following his subsequent choice of Ireland for the Olympic Games, McIlroy has sought to escape attempts to confine his identity to a dualism between British and

Irish (real or imagined). He has sought out ideological space for NI in this and, in so doing, has legitimised the idiom of ‘our wee country’, in which multiple shades of green – the colour most typically associated with the island of Ireland, the basis for the so-called ‘greening’ of Windsor Park (Belfast) to become the national stadium for football, and the primary colour of McIlroy’s golf club head covers – reflect the many and varied attachments to Ireland. McIlroy’s position also reflects his socialisation into a post-Troubles era, and in a mixed family and community setting. For him, people in NI today do not have to be locked into binary religious or political identities as they once might have been. Yet, it is a moot question as to whether McIlroy’s idealism can function as that of a cultural intermediary (Smith Maguire and Matthews 2012). While he may frame ideas about national identity in NI as legitimate, and indeed frame NI as worthy of attachment in its own primary right, the intended impact of such values is difficult to assess.

Despite his desire to avoid identity politics, in making clear his personal values, he is implicated in wider processes of constructing categories of self, and framed as having some level of expertise, drawing on his personal disposition towards NI and his cultural capital as the basis of professional credibility. In this regard, what he does regarding the 2020 Olympic Games (assuming he is eligible for selection by virtue of his world ranking) will indeed matter. For sport matters a great deal, not only to national and international sports federations such as Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland, but also for governments who see value in their involvement in the global commercial spectacle that is the Olympic Games today. This same spectacle serves to part-fuel their continued financial investment in elite sport in particular, not least for divided societies like NI in which cross-party ideological status has only conflated an apolitical approach to sport and its wider social role. The marginal policy status of sport on the island of Ireland has also created a situation in which the dominant message that prevails is one of deeply entrenched and mythical storylines, not only that elite success (by McIlroy and

others) has a powerful demonstration effect but also that international sport improves relations between nations and strengthens community integration. In this regard, the politicisation of sport – be that the claim that sport is either above or below the political dimensions of social life on the island of Ireland – merits further analysis because, as (Allison 1993, p.5) argues, ‘even in politics, few complexities can rival the world of Irish sport’.

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<sup>i</sup> Separate to this study, the authors are completing an analysis of the variations of 'national' newspaper coverage of McIlroy.