Editorial (Women in Sport)

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Editorial

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Were this an introduction to a journal, magazine or a combined collection of a different kind, we, as editors, might well feel more emboldened to begin differently: by citing the many populist commentators, in Ireland and the UK, who argue that sport is distinctive or even 'special' in some way; a phenomenon that can bring many diverse peoples together in a relatively short lived but significant shared sense of joy and passion. But, being respectful of this journal's readership and of the diverse scholarship underpinning this special issue, we are bound by a different equally relevant set of criteria. This journal takes as its main objective the facilitation of a challenging intellectual platform for a diverse range and lively mix of critical analysis and informed opinion. Thus we are compelled to observe that sports, and sporting participants, are not created equally. Not all participants in all sports have the same experiences that influence their development in the same way. Indeed sport is a social construction whose modern codified form emerged in a set of specific socio-historical, political and economic conditions and fuelled by an enduring belief. Sociologists have deconstructed this belief of the *great sport myth*[1]: an idea that has existed for more than a century which, put simply, states that sports are inherently pure or good and that these values or qualities are therefore transmitted, automatically and unproblematically, through participation in sport. What principally matters here is the general point that arises from academic work of this kind: that sports and sporting events defined as important – on and off the sports fields, basketball courts, gymnasia and so on – are far more complex than they are frequently rendered. There are two reasons, then, for taking a more judicious stance towards sports and leisure activities. One, sport reflects wider societal values, attitudes, beliefs and patterns and is mutually reflective and reinforcing of these broader processes and, two, sport is also worthy of analysis in and of itself given the relatively autonomous dynamics that play out within this social field (no pun intended).

[1] See, for example, J. Coakley. "Assessing the sociology of sport: on cultural sensibilities and the great sport myth", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. 2015. 50 (1): 402-406.

For more than 100 years, the idea of the *great sport myth* has influenced socio-political, organisational, community and individual approaches to sustaining and supporting sports and sports participation programmes, and especially for young people. Since the early days of formalised sporting associations in the nineteenth century, schools and playgrounds were sites of socialisation for the inculcation of particular values: around competition, obeying authority, achieving goals, suppressing sexuality, internalising particular moral values, defending nations and reproducing orthodox and hegemonic forms of masculinity[2]. In short, modern sports, leisure and physical activities were potent forces in the creation of imagined communities and central to questions of identity including race and ethnicity.[3] Modern sport was a male preserve. Girls were viewed as more fragile and physically weaker than boys, they learned domestic skills and, when permitted, they participated in 'ladylike' sports and activities, characterised mainly by a focus on aesthetic elements that did not divert from or damage (so it was claimed) their ability to conceive. The sportsman was, and arguably still is, perceived as the finest example of human physicality.

This *great sport myth* is an important backdrop against which to consider how and why sports were developed on the island of Ireland and have become increasingly important to governments and local communities alike. Underlying this development was an emphasis on the seriousness of playing sports; a seriousness with deeply embedded gendered dimensions. Rather than being just enjoyable outings or even diversions, sports became tools for achieving national goals (as seen in the role of the Gaelic Athletic Association, for example) and for developing positive character traits among young men. These developments were also consistent with industrialisation, economic expansion and state formation, north and south of the border. Sports can provide a high social standing for sportspeople, as seen in recent calls for prioritisation of the COVID-19 vaccine for elite athletes in advance of the rescheduled Tokyo Olympics. Such hubris – whether because these athletes are or should be elite and/or they are also valuable commodities and recognisable to the masses – reflects an elevated status for sport that is more inclusive of elite female athletes today than in the past. This having been said, COVID-19 is also likely to exacerbate current fault lines in sport, including gender, with as yet unanswered questions concerning its organisational and economic repercussions for women's sport at all levels, its consequences for female players under contract and for current and prospective investment. The preservation of sport as a traditional male-associated preserve also had/has negative social and personal consequences for male gay, bisexual and transexual (GBT) athletes, and on those athletes whose political beliefs or backgrounds differ(ed) from the mainstream. Sports played by women have consistently received less statutory and private funding and less mass media attention. Female sporting bodies are not considered ideally athletic when defined against a male-oriented benchmark, and female minds are not perceived to be a 'natural' source of bravery, competitiveness, psychological strength or tactical ability. This cultural bias is deeply held and impacts on both participants and spectators of sport, as well as on researchers in relevant disciplines that examine sport in all its guises.

This is the first edited journal collection on the island of Ireland that is dedicated *solely* to the history and culture of women's sports, leisure and physical activities in Ireland. The year is 2021. This fact alone exposes the dearth of attention and the inherent imbalance given to this

[2] See, for example, D. Cavalla. *Muscles and Morals: Organised Playgrounds and Urban Reform*. 1880-1920. (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1981); J. Mangan. *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal*. (Routledge: London, 1985).

[3] See K. Liston and J. Maguire, "The 'Great Game' and Sport: Identity, Contestation and Irish-British relations in the Olympic Movement", *Journal of War & Culture Studies*. 2020. Available at https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2020.1864873

subject matter on the island. But absence of evidence is not always evidence of absence and, as Katie Liston highlights in her opening contribution, many of the stories about women were neglected from women's history, from sports studies and from wider social commentaries. There has never been a time when women have been as involved as men in sports, as participants or as spectators. Equally, however, there has never been a time when girls and women were totally excluded from sports, and there have been times when their involvement was almost as extensive and intensive as men's. The academy too has rendered women less visible or invisible in sport and physical activity. For example, Helena Byrne recently calculated that, in a sample of historical publications from the Republic of Ireland published between 2012 to 2018, just over two of the 208 book titles were entirely about women.[4] Much of the limited work in this area has been undertaken by independent historians committed to the preservation of stories about which they are passionate and/or by sports organisations themselves, keen to ensure that 'their past' is remembered and celebrated. In this decade, ladies Gaelic football and women's football (soccer) will celebrate 50 years of formal organisational existence on the island.

It is no coincidence either that this collection focuses on sport and 'Ireland'. The island is home to one of the largest national women's sports organisations in Europe, the Ladies Gaelic Football Association, formed in 1974. Attendance at the finals of their premier competition - the All Ireland Championship - reached a world-record figure of over 50,000 people in 2018 and the match, broadcast live on TG4, the national Irish-language station, took a twenty-six per cent share of the television audience.[5] For these reasons, it was therefore crucial that this first pioneering collection gave voice to a diverse assembling of historians, sociologists, activists, journalists, players, writers and hobbyists who have played a role in preserving accounts (real and imagined) of the female sporting experience: past and present. There is much more work to do, and it is the editors' hope that this collection will not be the last to explore women's sporting activities within the wider socio-cultural and historical contexts.

Ireland is of considerable interest given the changes that have taken place in gender relations more widely, especially in the roles fulfilled by women. Having transformed from a largely conservative society in the Republic, in which women's (especially mothers') bodies and minds were, to a large degree, controlled by the Catholic Church's teachings on sex, fertility control and motherhood, today the island is a multinational, more cosmopolitan and globalising society. A conservative political and social climate reinforced these teachings and contributed to the policing of many, if not all, aspects of women's lives. Regarded internationally as having introduced progressive social change - including same-sex marriage by referendum, a relaxation of restrictions on abortion (in the Republic), an Electoral (Political Funding) Act that incentivises political parties to select at least thirty per cent female candidates for general elections, an active female caucus in the Stormont Assembly in Belfast, two female Presidents since the 1990s, and female leaders of political parties - a space has been opened up for women's experiences and for an examination of these to a degree not seen previously. As of 24 April 2021, the Citizens Assembly has also agreed 45 priority recommendations on

[4] Helena Byrne, "Where are we now? A review of research on the history of women's soccer in Ireland," Sport in History 39, no. 2 (2019): 166-186, https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2019.1604422; Some exceptions include M. O hOgartaigh, *Quiet Revolutionaries: Irish Women in education, Medicine and Sport, 1861-1964* (History Press; Dublin, 2011).

[5] K. Liston and M. O'Connor, "Media sport, women and Ireland: seeing the wood for the trees", in N. O'Boyle and M. Free (eds) *Sport, the Media and Ireland: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (University Press: Cork, 2020), pp.133-149.

gender equality covering the constitution, politics and leadership, caregiving and childcare, domestic sexual and gender-based violence, pay and the workplace and social protection.

Despite recent and less recent legislative changes in terms of equality for female workers, access to contraception and increased equality for female citizens, the tendrils of inequality, unconscious and conscious bias still permeate. Women, as a whole, do not receive equal pay, are not perceived as 'natural' leaders in the workplace, they are saddled with the majority of no- or low-paid and precarious caring and domestic labour. This double shift is not consigned to history. Against this backdrop of gender expectations and real-life economic, time, and emotional burdens, it cannot be surprising that women's sport has yet to receive anything like the support granted to sport played and supported by men.

Historically, legislative and cultural events signalled to women that it was inappropriate for them to show the physicality of their bodies in public, or to demand the right to access leisure activities. The highest document in the Irish state - the constitution - places them still within the home and conflates the roles of woman and mother. Successive legislation in the first decades of the Irish state also made it more difficult for a woman not to become a mother, as contraception was outlawed and large family sizes were difficult to avoid.[6] For much of the twentieth century married women were confined to the home by social constraints (which deemed it unsuitable for them to have outside interests) and by physical constrictions (such as excessive pregnancies). It might be said that female sportspeople too were perceived in a fashion similar to that of female workers: they were temporary, casual and transient occupants of the sporting space – a space which remained male ideologically and symbolically, in all of its power structures and leadership positions, despite women's low but increasing participation.

Devoid of historical, comparative and critical sensibilities, each generation can perceive that they are 'the first' to experience anything. Prior knowledge can be lost and become 'old wine in new bottles', rediscovered as if for the first time. Progress towards equality is neither guaranteed or linear – it can go backwards as well as forwards. Consequently it is dangerous to presume that the present is so much better than the past, and that the future will be better than the present. In drawing the past together with the present, this collection seeks to provide a platform that solidifies knowledge gains, identifies scope for further research on women's sports and sparks further debate, in which we hope to make the promise and vision of the academy more accessible to those who encounter and use it in various ways. For in this issue are a range of insights gleaned from diverse sources: from documents, photographs and other older visual forms, literature and poetry, interviews, oral histories, official and unofficial archives, personal sporting experience and the physical architecture of societies (museums, sports stadia and the like).

[6] Relevant publications include but are not limited to: Luddy, Maria. "a 'sinister and Retrogressive' Proposal: Irish Women's Opposition to the 1937 Draft Constitution." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 15, (2005): 175-195; M. G. Valiulis, *The making of inequality: women, power and gender ideology in the Irish Free State, 1922-1937* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2019); L. Earner-Byrne, 'The Family in Ireland, 1880–2015.' In T. Bartlett (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, 4: pp. 641–72. The Cambridge History of Ireland. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; C. Beaumont, 'Women, citizenship and Catholicism in the Irish Free State, 1922-1948', Women's History Review, vol. 6, no. 4, 1997; Ní Bhroiméil, Una. "Images and Icons: Female Teachers' Representations of Self and Self-Control in 1920s Ireland." *History of Education Review* 37, no. 1 (2008): 4-15. Redmond, Jennifer and Judith Harford. ""One Man One Job": The Marriage Ban and the Employment of Women Teachers in Irish Primary Schools." *Paedagogica Historica* 46, no. 5 (2010): 639-654; Foley, Deirdre. "'Too Many Children?' Family Planning and Humanae Vitae in Dublin, 1960–72." *Irish Economic and Social History* 46, no. 1 (2019): 142-160; L. Kelly,'Irishwomen United, the Contraception Action Programme and the feminist campaign for free, safe and legal contraception in Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, 43(164), 2019, pp. 269-297.

In the first article in the collection, Liston surveys the impact of the relationship between women's bodies, physical activity and 'honour' across the centuries. Themes from her article are threaded through each of the subsequent contributions, explicitly or implicitly, and the collection proceeds in a chronological fashion broadly speaking. The threads of honour and shame permeate the past and present, and include the importance of male allies in promoting diversity in sport (Carr and Power, and Greene) and the growing awareness of gender gradients in changing governance and policy (Stapleton). There are often less visible and even invisible barriers which make success more difficult for female sports participants, historically and today (as seen in the contributions of O'Donovan, Gibbs and Faller) and joy is also experienced once questions about honour can be overcome (Telford, Kitchin and Hassan; Kilgallon and Nealon); when participants can engage with their chosen sport(s) less fettered by restrictive cultural expectations or when they break new cultural ground, either because they are operating within a female-appropriate and empowering environment (Heffernan) and/or have the benefit of class status (O'Riordan). The collection is also not confined to elite or high performance sports. Those sports participants who are 'not athletes' *per se*, as Louise Nealon's mother might say,[7] are just as important in understanding the social, physical, economic and symbolic capital of sport, including the many visible and invisible barriers or microaggressions therein, such as racism, socio-economic inequalities and misogyny.

This special issue could not have come to pass without the support of many allies, male and female. In particular was the conference, *Sidelines, Tramlines and Hemlines - Women in Irish Sport*, organised at the County Museum, Dundalk, by curator, Brian Walsh. This conference was also supported by the British Society of Sports History (BSSH) Small Events Funding programme and brought together sports stars, policy makers, journalists, and researchers to explore various dimensions of women's sport on the island of Ireland.[8] The conference was built on the work already started by the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), who were the first such organisation to host a conference or event dedicated solely to women's sport in Ireland in 2017.[9] It was held in Dundalk on February 28th 2020, the same day that the first official case of COVID-19 was identified on the island of Ireland, and only weeks before the global outbreak. Little did we know then that, as we gathered together over a shared interest in women's sport, it would be one of the last public events that many of us would attend in person. Like all other aspects of our lives, the development of this special issue has therefore been overshadowed by the global pandemic.

As editors we would therefore like to convey our fulsome thanks and praise to all of the contributors who, based in several countries, battled the pressures of working through this period – many adapting to online environments, childcare demands, isolation, and in one or two cases, teaching full time while also completing research over the past year. Various restrictions to archive opening hours and access have also impacted on research possibilities over the past year or more. We also acknowledge the financial support of the Department of Arts, Languages and Study Abroad Programmes at the Dublin Business School for their contribution towards the production costs of this special issue.

We would also like to express our gratitude to the editorial board of this journal for facilitating this special issue and for their commitment to the interdisciplinary vocation. The cover image was specially commissioned by the editors and executed by one of our

[7] See article

[8] "Sidelines, Tramlines and Hemlines - Women in Irish Sport," Eventbrite, accessed December 24, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20201224212853/https://www.eventbrite.com/e/sidelines-tramlines-and-hemlines-women-in-irish-sport-tickets-92345914115#

[9] "PRONI - A Level Playing Field: Women In Sport," PRONIOnline, accessed December 24, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znx9ppJ1AO4

contributors, Stuart Gibbs, whose own historical research on female soccer players stemmed originally from his work as an artist. In commissioning a bespoke cover image, we discussed at length how best to encapsulate the past, present and future of women's sports. It was decided to commission an original reproduction of a photograph of Irish Olympian and Northern Ireland Commonwealth athlete, Maeve Kyle, who founded the Northern Ireland Women's Amateur Athletics Association. Fittingly, this image captures the importance of intergenerational heritage in which she is seen training with her daughter, Shauna. This photograph is reproduced here in artistic format courtesy of the Kyle family and Liston. discusses some of Kyle's achievements further in the opening article.

As much as this is a collection of new research on women's sporting activity in Ireland, past and present, it is also a call to action. The current historical moment is an opportune time to make advances in knowledge, provide a guide to principal conflicts and difficulties, and alert us to mistakes that have been made and to some of the possible solutions for avoiding these. We hope that this collection is well placed to offer important insights into a variety of interrelated issues: accelerating globalisation of sport and its uneven consequences, processes of populism around the world and in sport, the intensity of competition within and between academic disciplines and the quest for gender equality. If in reading this collection you find elements of your own or your family's stories, or you are captivated by the stories of others, we will be satisfied as editors. We hope that this issue offers you, the reader, a means of orientating yourself better in the complex social world in which we live. Above all, we hope that this work contributes to the growing interest in women's sport and physical activity. We are indebted to all those women who have paved the way in this regard and we dedicate this issue to Doireann and Dáire, who were born in January 2021. *Moladh na doaine óga agus déanfaidh said dul chun cinn.*

Dr Katie Liston, Helena Byrne and Dr Maeve O'Riordan, June 2021