

# Sport, Nationalism and the Peace Process In Northern Ireland

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Since the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993, and the paramilitary cease-fire of October 1994, the Northern Ireland Peace process has moved slowly forward. In the political arena all the major players have been prepared to question their traditional political philosophies. This has particularly been the case with Sinn Fein, the IRA, and new parties such as the Ulster Democratic Party formed from sectors within the Protestant paramilitaries. As a result Ulster specifically (and Ireland generally) has seen huge benefits from the 'peace dividend.' While the whole process has moved forward and widespread concessions are made, the major Irish sporting body, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) has failed to contribute to the spirit of reconciliation.

Founded in 1884 to promote Irish games, the GAA standardised the rules of Gaelic Football and Hurling, and in strict sporting terms the evolution and promotion of these games has been a great success. Throughout the years of the Irish Revolution the GAA has been central to the nationalist struggle. Its membership crossed into radical movements such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood and, as a result of events during the 1916 Easter Rising and the massacre at a GAA match in 1921, the GAA was seen as centrally important to the new independent Irish state. Since the 1920s the GAA hierarchy and its historians have propagated the myth that without the GAA there would have been no nationalist rising.

With the outbreak of the troubles the GAA sought to play a similar role in the North as it had played in the South up to 1922. It placed itself at the heart of the nationalist community and used Rule 21 to prevent members of the security forces from competing or watching Gaelic games. As a result, GAA grounds and members became the subject of occupation and harassment from the security forces. And with their place within the nationalist community, they became the target of Loyalist arson and death squads.

While every other major body involved in the troubles has sought to push peace forward, the GAA has not. At its annual convention in April 1995 the GAA refused to debate motions calling for the removal of Rule 21. Dominated at higher echelons by traditional nationalists, it took the line that to debate such a notion would be to 'betray the nationalist community.' Even now, over a year into the cease-fires the GAA will not move on the issue.