

# ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL

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## ***Inventing a New Nationalism: The Effects of Irish Participation at the 1990 and 1994 Soccer World Cups on Irish National Identity***

In 1990, for the first time in the history of Irish soccer, the national team qualified for the World Cup Finals and against all expectations managed to reach the quarter final stage of the competition. In 1994 the Irish again qualified for the finals and, although it did not advance far in the competition, the fact that the team was there on the world stage, competing with the best, had a huge effect on notions of national identity, both in Ireland and amongst the Irish Diaspora.

Prior to 1990, Ireland had never achieved international recognition on the world stage of modern organized sport (with the possible exception of the Five Nations tournament in Rugby Union which is by its very nature, limited). This failure to succeed on a world stage was historically determined as the Irish have pursued 'exclusive' domestic games such as Gaelic football and hurling which emerged in the nineteenth century as the Irish nation sought to distinguish itself from the powers of Britain and her empire. But international sporting success has historically been far more important than any other type of sporting contest in creating a sense of nationalism, of "us" against "them" and so the success of the Irish soccer team in the 1990s has been crucial in the construction of a new nationalism.

The nature of the teams which went to the World Cup Finals was an important element in this process as it was drawn from the Irish Diaspora, rather than home based players, and thus represented an acknowledgement of the dominance of emigration as a theme in Irish history. The new Irish nationalism accepted the input of modernization, globalization, and emigration, and rejected the traditional version which embraced political Republicanism, rural mythology, and insular notions of national identity which 'forgot' history.

Using the story of the two World Cup Finals as its backdrop, this paper offers important insights into the construction of nationalism through the vehicle of sport and explores a number of historical themes which have been crucial in the construction of the Irish nation.