

Mike Cronin
De Montfort University

Sport and Nationalism: What Is It and How Does It Work?

This paper aims to explore the relationship between sport and nationalism in history. By necessity it can offer only the briefest overview, but this is important. One of the main arguments made here is that sport historians, while producing much work that discusses the links between sport and nationalism (usually incident based), have not developed a sustained attempt to understand or explore what nationalism actually is, and how it functions within the sporting arena. There has been a tendency to take nationalism as a given, and to be more concerned with how it manifests itself within sport, rather than developing an understanding of ideological or cultural importance.

The paper argues that the nationalism that is attached to sport is multifaceted. It has functioned in numerous ways over the years, and is often a product of larger political, social and cultural forces. Sporting nationalism is not a single entity that exists in a vacuum. It is complex force that is governed and shaped by a mass of external forces. Sport historians have to develop a better theoretical grasp of what nationalism is, and offer more sweeping assessments of how such a force is transmitted through sport. The nationalism that is inherent in the global sporting festivals of the Olympics or the Soccer World Cup need to be contextualized within the same space as the nationalism attached to traditional sports or regional distinctiveness.

If nationalism, in all its forms, is understood as a generic type that has impinged in some way on all sport through history, then the historiography of the subject becomes far more relevant. Rather than seeing all the work that discusses nationalism as either nation or sport specific, a generic model allows the historiography to be centralized and understood within a single intellectual context.