Notional Englishmen, Black Irishmen and Multicultural Australians: Ambiguities in National Sporting Identity

Mike Ticher
University of New South Wales

When England selected fast bowler Martin McCague in the 1993 Ashes series, the reaction in Australia was indignant. McCague was born in Northern Ireland, but came to Australia at the age of two. He learned his cricket at the AIS Cricket Academy in Adelaide and had represented Western Australia in the Sheffield Shield.

The *Australian* alleged that England had 'devalued Test cricket and dismissed national pride'[1] in choosing McCague, as well as Andy Caddick, who was born in New Zealand and had previously represented in their Under 19 team. The *Sydney, Morning Herald* protested that McCague's selection was 'against the spirit of Test cricket'.[2] An Ashes match, it went on:

> is supposed to be a confrontation between the culture and pride of Australia and the culture and pride of England with all their shared heritage and all their significant differences - and as a notional Englishman only, McCague can never embody that theme.

As it turned out, McCague's impact on the series was minimal, and the outcry soon subsided - to be revived, no doubt., if he plays a significant role in the 1994/95 Ashes series. But he is just one of an increasing number of international players, across a whole range of sports, whose apparently 'obvious' nationality conflicts with the country they represent. This trend raises many questions, some of a merely technical nature (what should be the criteria to qualify for national selection?)' others which delve into the much shadier areas of each country's concept of its own nationality as expressed through and shaped by sport.

Specific national teams of two particular countries, England and Ireland, have recently included a significant number of players whose 'real' nationality has been called into question. Australia's selection of athletes, who have recently arrived from other countries, has also been a matter of current debate in several sports. All these examples provide insights into the immensely complicated emotions aroused by national sporting teams and their interaction with underlying (and shifting national identities.

'At last, so English'

Rather than being exceptions, press-ganged into service in desperate times, the choice of McCague and Caddick can be seen as part of a long tradition in English sport which easily accommodates players from former colonies as English or, in sports such as athletics, British. (Technically even this definition isn't always correct, since the team represented at the Olympics is not Great Britain, but the United Kingdom, which also includes Northern Ireland).

This tradition of so-called 'notional Englishmen' is recognisable in cricket as early as the nineteenth century. Between 1877 and 1900, five players represented both Australia and England. For some at least there was no contradiction in doing so, since they regarded themselves both as imperial subjects and as Australians.[3] The same was true of the Indian princes who represented England in the late nineteenth and the first half of this century, the famous Ranjitsinhji, his nephew Duleepsinhji and the Nawab of Pataudi, who came on the Bodyline tour with England, but later also represented India. 'If ever there was an honorary Englishman, it was Ranji.'[4]

What were the defining characteristics of an Englishman, honorary or otherwise, in the late nineteenth century? A racial conception certainly existed, regarding the Anglo-Saxon as superior not just to Asians and Africans, but also to the Celtic Irish and other Europeans.[5] Yet with the expansion of the empire, the idea of what it meant to be English could no longer be confined to the inhabitants of the old country:

> The concept of Englishness had to expand to include the English people as a whole, to be found wherever English people were to be found, and to be defined in terms of a check-list of traits associated with the English race - for example governing capabilities, respect for law and order, emotional stability, energy and determination, worldly success and Protestant religion.[6]

The narrow, racial definition of the English became increasingly blurred. The new multinational state in the process of creation (according to some such as the Radical politician, Sir Charles Dilke) was one in which 'the binding forces' providing 'a language and feeling which could include those lesser races who brushed with that language and feeling'.[7]

The admission of persons such as Ranjitsinjhi to the English team, despite a certain amount of prejudice against them,[8] indicates that these traits, and hence 'Englishness', could, under the right circumstances, be transmitted to people of diverse races who were lucky enough to belong to the Empire. The characteristics were essentially the product of a class, or even a caste, rather than of a race. Their breeding-ground was the public schools, and it was ex-public schoolboys who put into practice the 'policy, consciously formulated and pursued, to turn "idolaters" not so much into Christians, as into people culturally English, despite their irremediable colour and blood'.[9]

Sport was one of those 'binding forces'. Cricket, in particular, was both a means of inculcating Englishness (above all through notions of 'fair play') and a measure of it.[10] In addition, that notion of Englishness embodied explicitly imperial values which not only could be acquired by ethnically non-English people, but which were consciously fostered among native peoples. It 'embodied so many of the values and ideals which ... they [petty-bourgeois Africans] aspired to. Cricket was a social training ground ... its value in character development unquestioned.'[11]

The selection of members of the 'lesser races' for the England cricket team was the ultimate acknowledgement of the possibility of becoming 'English', even if the practice only applied to a tiny elite.

Cricket became 'the symbol par excellence of imperial solidarity',[12] which helped to create 'Englishmen' like the uncles of the (English-born) playwright Hanif Kureishi in Pakistan: 'Shadowing the British they drank whisky and read the *Times;* they praised others by calling them 'gentlemen'; and their eyes filled with tears at old Vera Lynn records'.[13] When they visited the young Kureishi in England, of course, one of their obligations was to take him to a Test match.

Whether the inculcation of Englishness in this form was instrumental in fostering loyalty towards the home country and the Empire is quite another matter. Arguably, its ultimate effect was the exact opposite. Nor is it the case that Indians, Pakistanis, West Indians or even Australians, no matter how anglicised, thereby obtained the same rights and opportunities within the Empire as racially-defined Englishmen.[14] What is significant as far as the construction of an English sporting identity is concerned, however, is that a concept of Englishness existed which allowed for players from all corners of the Empire to be accepted as fit to represent England at sport

In the postcolonial period, the relationship between England and its former colonies has necessarily changed. Very few Australians, even the most pro-monarchist, now want to beat England at cricket to prove that Australians are 'more English than the English', as Spofforth and other early Australian Test players did.[15] For the ex-colonies, beating England at cricket has been one of the first and most enduring symbols of their political independence.[16]

Yet in England itself, the habit of accepting players from the former colonies as English for the purposes of playing ticket has died much harder. Basil D'Oliveira recorded his bewilderment (albeit mixed with a large dose of gratitude) at the attitude of the English when he was first selected to play for his adopted country in the 1960s:

'Why were all these spectators clapping me? I wasn't English, I was a coloured South African yet I was to play for England just six years after leaving Cape Town.'[17] Clearly he felt the contradiction much more acutely than the English cricket public did.

In addition to McCague and Caddick, players born and brought up in South Africa or Zimbabwe such as Tony Greig, Allan Lamb, Robin Smith and Graeme Hick have all recently represented (and even captained) England. No doubt many factors were involved in their decisions to qualify for England, among them the banning of South Africa from Test cricket until 1991; the relative ease of securing a professional contract (and even a place in the Test team!) in England; and their own country's limited Test opportunities (in Hick's case).

Whatever their personal motives, the response of the English cricketing authorities and, as far as can be gauged, the public, has been one of unconditional acceptance. Indeed Hick, like Smith before him, was eagerly monitored as a potential England player well before he had completed his seven-year residency qualification. 'Never in the history of British sport', wrote the *Times,* 'has a greater national impatience been visited on a single subject ... it is the fact that we have got him at last that is blowing such a rustle of anticipation across the national outield'.[18]

The idea that Hick's birthplace and a stubbornly surviving Zimbabwean accent might make him somehow not quite the genuine article was not so much glossed over as baldly denied. Hick was 'so wholesome, so blameless, so unexceptional and, at last, so English'. What's more, he was still uncapped at international level, as far as the *Times* was concerned. 'His appearances for Zimbabwe,' it flatly asserted, 'do not count'. For Robin Smith, the residency period he underwent to qualify for England was enough to forge in him 'a peculiar brand of determination which originates from the pride he feels when playing for his country'[19]

It's interesting to compare England's experience in this context with Australia's. In contrast to England's continued reliance on players from former colonies, Australia's one South African 'refugee', Kepler Wessels, returned to his original country in 1986 and subsequently led them back into Test cricket. Wessels' departure from Australia was occasioned by his falling out with the Australian Cricket Board, which

believed that he was recruiting players for a rebel tour of South Africa. His reserved nature did not chime well with the version of mateship practised in the Australian team. For whatever combination of reasons, Wessels was never looked upon as a 'fair dinkum' Aussie:

> 'Even under a green Australian cap, it was impossible to think of Wessels as other than a South African, which is probably how he thought of himself'.[20]

It would be foolish to draw dramatic conclusions from the experience of just one player, and certainly from one as idiosyncratic and introverted as Wessels. Nevertheless, he failed to become an Australian in the apparently effortless way that Smith, Hick and the others became English.

Looking at the composition of recent English teams, it's important to distinguish between those players born or brought up outside England who came there specifically to play cricket, and those who came at a young age when their families migrated. The former all come from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Australia or New Zealand, and are white, while the latter came originally either from the West Indies or the Indian sub-continent, and are black.

Devon Malcolm (born in Jamaica), Chris Lewis (Guyana) and Philip DeFreitas (Dominica), for example, have all featured prominently in recent English sides. Yet they appear not be regarded as 'honorary Englishmen' in the same way as their white counterparts. Having grown up in Britain their availability for England selection has never been in doubt. Although they and other black players have been accepted as members of the England team, none has been actively pursued in the way that Hick was, or actively sought out and adopted as Caddick and McCague were. There may be several reasons for this. One is certainly that Hick's performances at county level were so extraordinary, at a time when the England team was performing very poorly. However, the fact that he was recruited by his county (Worcestershire) at the age of sixteen is itself significant. No similarly promising black player (to my knowledge) has come into the English game in this manner.

This is not to imply that there is a consciously racist selection policy at work, either at county or national level - rather, that when considering overseas recruits, both are more inclined to look to white players than black. Thus the modern manifestations of the 'honorary Englishman' in the England team - defined as someone who by birth and/or upbringing would be expected to represent another country - have all been white. It is perhaps in this area that England's selections should be scrutinised, rather than criticising the policy of picking players raised overseas per. se.

Much of the criticism in the Australian press of the decision to include McCague in the England team hinted that it somehow sullied a contest which should be between 'pure' Englishness and 'pure' Australianness (see notes 1 and 2). This analysis ignores that the historical reality that 'culture and pride' of England, in cricket terms, has also included the diffusion of that culture to the countries of the empire and the subsequent racial diversity of English teams - notwithstanding the limitations of that diversity noted above.

It also incidentally raises the so far largely monocultural composition of the Australian cricket team to something of a virtue. Few players would come closer to most people's idea of the epitome of Australia's cricketing 'culture and pride' than the Chappell brothers, Yet as Geoff Lawson records in his autobiography, they habitually baited Len Pascoe about his ethnic origins when facing him.[21] Is this the model of a 'pure' national identity Australians would wish to set up in opposition to England's so-called mercenaries?

In other sports and in other countries, the relaxation of qualification rules (or the exploitation of loopholes in them) has led to different, and in part more positive experiences. Whereas England's cricket team seems to reflect the persistence of an idea of Englishness shaped by the experience of empire, in Ireland the recent composition of the national soccer team has led rather to a sudden and surprising reassessment of Irishness.

'Any nigger with an Irish granny'

In 1988 the Republic of Ireland qualified for the finals of a major tournament - the European championships - for the first time in their soccer history. Two years later they reached the quarter-finals of the World Cup in Italy. In 1994 they were the only country from the British Isles present at the World Cup finals in America. Each stage of this unprecedented run of success has been accompanied by massive celebrations in Ireland and the elevation of the players, and more particularly the manager, Jack Charlton, to extraordinary levels of popularity.

The Charlton phenomenon may have peaked with Ireland's 1-0 win over Italy in their first match in this year's World Cup. Thereafter the team was disappointingly cautious and couldn't repeat its 1990 performance, reaching the last sixteen before going out 2-0 to Holland. Criticism of Charlton, previously unthinkable from most quarters, has started to make itself heard, albeit tentatively. Yet the legacy of this remarkable six-year period is much more significant than merely a debate over Charlton's team tactics.

The appointment of Charlton as manager of the national team in 1986 was highly controversial A member of the England team which won the World Cup in 1966, he was the first non-Irishman to hold the manager's position. He appointed another Englishman, Maurice Setters, as his deputy and set about implementing a team selection policy which upset many Irish commentators.

Under FIFA (the soccer world governing body) rules, players are entitled to represent either the country of their own, their parents' or their grandparents' birth. Given the levels of migration within the British Isles, this means that some players are qualified to play for as many as five different national teams.

Charlton set out systematically to exploit what became known as the 'Granny rule'. He sought out players who, although technically qualified to play for the Republic, had been born and brought up in

Britain, to play alongside the 'real' Irishmen. The presence of a number of key players in the team whose accents betrayed their English, Welsh or Scottish upbringing was at first looked upon with some suspicion in Ireland. But the euphoria which greeted the performances in the European championship finals in Germany in 1988 signalled the end of any real debate on the policy - all the more so since Ireland's campaign included a 1-0 win over England.

Among the supposedly more exotic recruits have been Tony Cascarino, a Londoner with one Irish and one Italian grandparent, and Ray Houghton, whose accent is unmistakably Glaswegian, but whose father came from Donegal. The cosmopolitan nature of the team was further enhanced by the presence of several black players. One, Chris Hughton, had been an international since 1980. Paul McGrath, the son of an Irish mother and a Nigerian father, was born in London but brought back to Dublin at the age of two. A superb defender, he became perhaps the single most popular player with the fans by the time of the 1990 World Cup. In America in 1994, McGrath was joined in the defence by two more black players, Terry Phelan and Phil Babb.

Inevitably, not everyone greeted the emergence of black players as Irish representatives with enthusiasm. As the novelist Roddy Doyle recorded in his account of the 1990 World Cup campaign:

> There was always a gang of miserable little fuckers waiting for things to go wrong. 'None of them are really Irish, that's the problem.' 'He's only in it for the money.' 'Any nigger with an Irish granny can get on to that team.'[22]

By and large, and despite Ireland's tiny black population, they were accepted remarkably easily. No doubt the remarkable success of Charlton's teams helped that process. Their triumphs were received with an extraordinary outpouring of national sentiment. Around half a million people, or 15 per cent of the population of the entire country, gathered in Dublin to welcome the team back from Italy in 1990. The plane bringing the team was temporarily christened 'St Jack' by the national airline,

Aer Lingus,[23] which aptly summed up the feelings of most Irish people towards the Englishman, Charlton.

The patriotic euphoria which engulfed the team, and which was repeated, if on a somewhat diminished level in 1994, was not simply an expression of joy at the achievement of success after so many years of failure. The fact that it was a soccer team, and this soccer team in particular, had much wider ramifications.

Soccer has always had a strong working-class urban following in Ireland, but in many parts of the country Gaelic football and hurling have long been the dominant sports. The Gaelic games are associated with a purist, and in part racially-oriented strand of Irish nationalism, which has played a significant role in the development of Irish national consciousness in the twentieth century. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), founded in 1884, saw English sport as a 'foreign' threat and was largely responsible for the 'nationalist, almost racist themes that characterised contemporary propaganda about [it]'.[24] Until 1972, the GAA banned its members from playing 'foreign' games, of which soccer became the most threatening to its reserves of players.

A successful soccer team harnessing national feeling implied a decisive step away from this racial conception of Irish nationality:

> The embracing of something which had been regarded as somewhat shameful and un-Irish [soccer] added to the national exuberance. Mixed with the cheers was amass sigh of relief. We had owned up to having impure cultural thoughts and taking pleasure in them.[25]

The presence of players of such diverse backgrounds in the team reinforced this new sense of identify. In particular, it brought into focus a constant theme in the past 150 years of Irish history, emigration, which has often been seen as a cause for both anger and shame in Ireland - anger at the perceived effects of economic policies imposed by England in the past and shame that Ireland as an independent state has been unable to provide for all its population.[26] That Ireland's national soccer

team should benefit from the descendants of emigrants (particularly in beating England) was seen by many as entirely just and appropriate.[27] At the same time, the symbolic diversity of the team opened the way for ‘a more generous inclusive alternative’ idea of national identity as Mary Holland, a prominent Irish journalist, put it.[28]

The Republic of Ireland itself is one of the most homogenous countries in Europe in terms of ethnicity and religion - a fact which has encouraged a narrow definition of modern Irishness as culturally, and to some extent racially, the direct heir to an ancient Gaelic past.[29] But the ‘mongrel’ nature of the team represented, much better than a ‘pure’ Irish-born-and-bred eleven, the reality of the Irish diaspora. Irish-Americans and Irish-Australians have long been acknowledged as sub-categories of Irishness. The rejoicing in the exploits of the national team proved that it was not just acceptable, but perhaps even a virtue, to be both English and Irish, Scottish and Irish, black and Irish. As one writer (himself of Czech-Irish parentage) wrote in the *Irish Times:*

> The Irish soccer team, with its extraordinary collection of polyglot Irish pedigrees, has given us a new pride in our multi-cultural Irishness, and put one more nail in the coffin of the old, exclusive ... GAA-supporting, Fianna Fail-voting definition of ‘real’ Irishness. I’m sure Leopold Bloom [the Jewish hero of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*] is up there cheering along with the rest of us half-breeds.[30]

There is one further dimension to the discovery of this new conception of Irishness - its relevance to the political future of the country. Among the many people outside the Republic who have criticised Charlton’s selection policy is the former manager of the Northern Ireland team, Billy Bingham. Before the Republic played Northern Ireland in Belfast in the last, crucial, qualifying match for the 1994 World Cup finals, Bingham described the Republic’s non-Irish born players as 'mercenary'.[31]

His view was shared by the Northern fans (who are almost exclusively Protestant and loyalist), whose antagonism towards the Republic’s representatives was not distributed uniformly. Rather, they

particularly reserved their hatred for ‘those who are most impure, most despicably mongrel’.[32] First came Charlton, because he was English. Second Terry Phelan, because he was black.

The prime object of their rage, however, was Alan Kernaghan, himself born and brought up in Belfast, and who had played schoolboy football for Northern Ireland, but was also qualified to play for the Republic through his grandparents, who were born in Belfast before the partition of Ireland in 1922.[33] The implication of Kernaghan’s selection, for many northern Protestants, was that the Republic’s team was in the first stages of turning itself into an all-Ireland representative team, a concept which they regard as another step down the slippery slope towards a united Ireland

This was not the only difficulty with Kernaghan’s selection. In Northern Ireland the divisions are clear. You have to be ‘one thing or the other’,[34] Catholic or Protestant, nationalist or loyalist. Indeed support for the Northern Ireland team has become not less but more sectarian as a result of political developments in the 1980s. Since the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985, the sense of betrayal by, and alienation from, Britain has heightened considerably in the Protestant community.

The old attachment to the sacred Union between the two has been replaced to some extent by ideas of a future independent Northern Ireland (under Protestant domination), and its soccer team is one of the few existing symbols which is exclusive to Northern Ireland.[35] This shift in attitude has manifested itself in the flying of Northern Ireland flags at international matches rather than the Union Jack, and an increase in abuse towards the team’s Catholic players.[36] (The team has never been picked on a sectarian basis and some of the all time greats of Northern Ireland soccer, such as goalkeeper Pat Jennings, have been Catholics).

The increasingly rigid identification of the Northern Ireland team with the Protestant community alone has magnified the changes which have gone on south of the border. Perhaps even more frustrating to the Northern Protestants than the Republic’s success on the field, is that its

team no longer functions as a straightforward extension of the sectarian divide in the North. In the past, the distinctions between the Catholic population in the North and the population of the Republic itself were perceived to be minimal.

The metamorphosis of the Republic's soccer team demonstrates that if this perception ever corresponded to reality, it certainly does so no longer. It raises questions for the northern Catholics too. A team led by a man who is 'cussedly, awkwardly, irredeemably "a Brit",[37] yet which inspires such extremes of Irish patriotic fervour, implies that straightforward Anglophobia can no longer function as effectively as a uniting factor between northern and southern Catholics as it once did.

Overlaying the old clear-cut division between Catholic and Protestant is a new one, between two northern communities on the one hand, still (and to some extent more than ever) stuck in the old rigid antagonisms, and the Republic on the other, cautiously (or in the case of soccer, enthusiastically) embracing a more open, tolerant and multicultural national identity.

National Representation in a Multicultural Australia

The examples of England and Ireland show that the composition of national sporting teams can both express past political and economic experiences (such as empire or emigration) and help to shape new national identities. They also indicate that conceptions of nationality are relative and multi-layered, and do not necessarily coincide with instinctive reactions such as those produced by the McCague case.

What's more, as should be clear in Australia thanks to the ongoing debate on multiculturalism, national identity is constantly undergoing a process of redefinition. There are few more concrete representations of a nation than national sports teams.[38] Their composition and the reactions they arouse provided barometers of changing perceptions. But as the Irish example shows, national teams don't simply reflect underlying changes, they can also play a considerable role in actively redefining perceptions of national identity.

However, these examples certainly do not offer a policy prescription for other countries on the issue of who, is or who is not, an appropriate national sporting representative. Such policy decisions, and their acceptance by the public, are of particular relevance to Australia, because of the large overseas-born population here.

The official policy of multiculturalism at least provides framework to accept (and hopefully also celebrate) the fact of cosmopolitan Australian national teams. Invoking multiculturalism, however, is neither an adequate justification for every 'import', nor a guarantee that their official designation as Australian will receive broader public acceptance.

Immigration policy has not always been consistent and, partly as a result, Kepler Wessels has not been the only unhappy experience. In 1993 for example, the Hungarian swimmer Norbert Rozsa was granted Australian residency, just fourteen days after applying for it, and just in time to qualify to swim for Australia at the Atlanta Olympics. (If competitors have previously competed at the Games for a former country, Olympic rules require a period of three years after the acquisition of a new nationality before they can represent a new country).

Rosza has now returned to Hungary, but a spokesperson for the Department of Immigration was quoted as saying at the time: 'There are not a lot of world champions wanting to come to Australia and Norbert was accepted because he can win medals for us'.[39] By contrast no rules were bent for three weightlifters (two from Bulgaria, one from Romania) who wanted to compete for Australia at the Barcelona Olympics. They failed to fulfil citizenship requirements and competed for their original countries instead, but have subsequently qualified to represent Australia.[40]

The relationship between official policy and public acceptance of recently-naturalised Australians is clearly not a straightforward one. However, it would be reasonable to speculate that wholehearted acceptance of any competitor as Australian hinges on their perceived future commitment to Australia and their motives for coming here, rather than on their background. The justification for granting Rosza residency drew

some hostile responses. 'The reasons for fast-tracking him to be officially Australian are unworthy ones', one commentator stated. 'If he does win gold, and we do puff out our chests with pride, it'll be with a somewhat hollow feeling.'[41]

The prospect of rival countries offering financial or other inducements to sportspeople with dual qualifications (as the Italian Athletics Federation reportedly did to Dean Capobianco in 1993)[42] should provide an added incentive for Australia to formulate consistent principles, both at government level and among sporting bodies. The potential for conflict caused by not doing so is considerable, particularly when government funds invested in the development of athletes are at stake.

Wider debate on the subject would be helpful, both in policy terms, and in gaining a clearer idea of how and why overseas-born players do or do not become accepted as Australians by the sporting public. Further productive questions might lie in the different ways in which various sports approach the issue, and what that says about their different (and changing) interpretations of Australian nationality. Cricket, rugby and soccer offer at least three significantly different alternatives. With the recent introduction of players of Tongan and Fijian origin such as Willie Ofahengaue and Ilie Tabua, as well as Zambian-born George Gregan, the composition of the Australian rugby team is currently undergoing radical change (by rugby's standards). This development has implications not only for national identity but also for the social status of rugby in Australia. In this particular context it would be fascinating also to know how the influx of players of Samoan descent into the icon of New Zealand national sporting pride, the All Blacks, has been received both in Western Samoa and in New Zealand itself.

It is clear from the above examples that what it means to be 'really' English, Irish, Australian or whatever, will never be so clear-cut or unchanging that it can be defined simply by referring to a handy checklist of apparently 'obvious' characteristics such as race, accent,

colour, birthplace or upbringing. The web of attributes which make up national identity in a world of increasingly mobile populations is complex and often bewildering. It is perhaps through sport that it can best be mapped, if not always thoroughly explained.

NOTES

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