

# NATIONAL ANTHEMS AND ATHLETE ACTIVISM

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## **Introduction**

This chapter explores athlete activism, focussing on its expression via national anthem protests or expressions of solidarity at sport events. We survey this type of activism and map its evolution. In doing so, we highlight three environments – the US, Australia, and Northern Ireland – as epicentres for anthemic protests and expressions of solidarity. In these varying contexts, we explore the bases for, and effectiveness of, these types of athlete activism.

Athlete activism is not a new occurrence, for it can be traced back over time. For instance, in the late 1800s the creation of separate independent and amateur baseball teams for Black baseball players, coaches and officials that had been largely excluded by the White-owned baseball teams and leagues in the US provides an example of how sport was used to pursue legitimacy in society while also creating business opportunities for Black communities. Cooper, Macauley, and Rodriguez (2017, p. 175) term the creation of these teams and leagues “social justice entrepreneurship and economic activism” and situate them within a wider typology of activism that will be detailed below. Yet, as we highlight in this chapter, pervasive discrimination and oppression within society has resulted, and often still does, in considerable backlash to acts of resistance by athletes (Ervine, 2017). Recently, however, the resurgence of athlete activism, combined with the increased media profile of top athletes, have resulted in greater public dialogue around issues pertaining to social justice both on and off the field of play. But, of course, this is not without controversy. Even peaceful activism by athletes during sporting ceremonies has in some instances been met with backlash from other players, administrators, the public, and heads of state (Yan, Pegoraro, & Watanabe, 2021).

In various countries, national anthems with associated tunes and lyrics evolved as part of what Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012) have described as the “invention of tradition” for modernising national states. But there were also pragmatic adaptations. In the United States, for example, the patriotic Star-Spangled Banner was routinely played at sporting events during World War One, though it was not then officially recognised as the country’s national anthem. In 1931 that changed, with the Star-Spangled Banner now used to honour the nation’s military.

Singing national anthems at the start of international sports matches may have had its genesis with a rugby union match between Wales and New Zealand in 1905 (Volans, 2015). Despite not having a national anthem, the Welsh and New Zealanders, then and now, have a proud tradition of singing en masse at special occasions. The practice also became widespread in the United States for its professional leagues. A catalyst was the prelude to a 1918 baseball game between the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs. As the band played The Star-Spangled Banner “Players turned to face the centerfield flagpole, and fans, who were already on their feet, began to sing along. By the end, nearly the entire stadium was singing, and the song ended to a chorus of thunderous applause” (Sporcle, 2018).

### **National anthem activism**

Despite claims that sport should be apolitical (Thorson & Serazio, 2018; Zirin, 2013) and should positively distract the masses from their everyday stresses, it also serves as a site for discussions about inclusion, exclusion, and fairness, and thus it has been a high-profile space within which inequalities may be either reinforced or challenged. Indeed, it has long been recognised that major sporting events can be used as propaganda tools for political and ideological regimes, such as with the 1936 Summer Olympic Games, which became a vehicle for Nazi propaganda. International sport is, by its very nature, nationalistic with competitors representing their nations and pre- and post-game rituals frequently involving national anthems and flags that serve as “reminders that nationalism, patriotism, and unquestioning loyalty” are expected components of sport (Smith & Tryce, 2019, p. 172). Yet it is worth bearing in mind Benedict Anderson’s (2006) view that nationalism and nationality are merely ‘imagined communities’; they are socially constructed, evoked through culture, and “represented through the agencies of ethnicity, language or religion” (Horton, 2012, p. 1670). These myths of national identity can often be laid bare by international competitions where a small group of highly paid and privileged athletes represent the hopes and dreams of a nation. Yet some of these athletes may only be loosely associated with a nation through descent or by having switched allegiances from another nation (often with a financial incentive to do so).

In the early years of the twenty-first century, athlete activism diminished. Cunningham and Regan (2011) offer three reasons why African American athletes were less likely to speak up about social and political issues in the twentieth century. They argue that changes in social norms and legal mandates lessened the social ills prevalent in earlier periods and the need for resistance diminished. Second, the professionalisation of sport meant that athletes focused on athletic excellence alone and not social change. Third, athletes were concerned about losing out financially if they stood up for wider social issues – the inference being that they would be punished.

Indeed, the best-known sporting example of protest during a national anthem – and punishment thereafter – is the so-called Black Power Salute in 1968. The African American runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos made global headlines when they protested during the medal ceremony after the men’s 200 metres track event at the Mexico City Olympic Games. As the American national anthem played, Smith and Carlos each raised a fist with a black glove (symbolising Black Power) as they also stood with bare feet (this symbolising the impoverished circumstances of most African Americans). The sprinters also both wore an Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) badge to protest the White-dominated world of American sports administration in the 1960s (Ervine, 2017). This podium protest was part of wider political campaigns that characterised the Civil Rights era. The image of Carlos and

Smith on the medal dais, where they were joined by the Australian silver medallist Peter Norman, is one of the most reproduced and well-known images in sport. It was even included in *Life* magazine's 2003 list of 100 images that changed the world (Osmond, 2010). However, at the time, the protest was met with criticism, ostracism, and even death threats against the American runners (Galily, 2019), not to mention the solitary experiences of ostracism faced by Norman in Australia.

By contrast to Smith and Carlos, an entrepreneurial breed of athletes of the Global Majority focused overwhelmingly on their individual pursuits, thereby avoiding difficult conversations of the kind pursued during the 1960s. High-profile athletes, such as golfer Tiger Woods and basket-baller Michael Jordan, were careful to avoid political commentary, thereby protecting their endorsements and financial interests (Mudrick, Sauder, & Davies, 2019). Nevertheless, athlete activism, and particularly Black athlete activism, has been a feature of American sporting culture. According to its most astute observer, Harry Edwards, this has been shown to occur in waves, with rises in protests reflecting contemporary struggles against racial discrimination at certain points in history (Edwards, 2016 cited in Cooper, Macauley & Rodriguez, 2017; Yan, Pegoraro & Watanabe, 2021). Cooper, Macauley and Rodriguez (2017) have proposed an African American sport activism typology outlining five categories of activist actions: (1) symbolic activism, (2) scholarly activism, (3) grassroots activism, (4) sport-based activism, and (5) economic activism. Although the current chapter does not focus solely on African American athletes, this typology signposts the importance of connecting sport activism with the broader socio-historical, socio-political, and sociocultural factors that necessitate acts of resistance.

In 2020, the death of George Floyd, an African American man suffocated by the knee of a White police officer in the United States of America (US), was met with widespread horror and condemnation. This murder of Floyd by a Minnesota state official, who was expected to "serve and protect others" (Minneapolis Police Department), gave renewed impetus to Black Lives Matter (BLM). This movement arose in 2013 in response to longstanding and wide-spread police violence towards coloured communities and, specifically the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. After Floyd's killing, BLM was no longer confined to the US; assertive anti-racism was now a global phenomenon, though most obviously in liberal democracies that allow robust free speech. Here, professional sport has played a pivotal role. Players, club staff, officials, and media organisations have taken part in coordinated shows of solidarity; dropping to one knee before matches, making institutional comments (particularly via social media), and, in the case of Black players, raising fists – doubtless inspired by Carlos and Smith's Black Power Salute. In some instances, these protests have occurred during the playing of national anthems, which has resulted in considerable criticism from some quarters.

During his time as US president, Donald Trump continually attacked athletes who pro-tested during the playing of the national anthem before sport matches. For example, with professional sport matches returning following COVID-19 suspensions, he tweeted "Looking forward to live sports [returning], but any time I witness a player kneeling during the National Anthem, a sign of great disrespect for our Country and our Flag, the game is over for me!" (@realDonaldTrump, 21 July 2020). His responses highlight the tensions that arise when rituals tied to concepts of national identity become contested.

A collective voice among professional athletes has thus recently emerged (Mudrick et al., 2019) whereby sports stars use their celebrity status and/or social media platforms to draw attention to a variety of social movements and campaigns that highlight social injustices.

In this manner, they are able to use their status to act as ‘agents of social change’ (Smith, 2019). As a result, a recent rise in sport-based activism has been seen in a number of contexts (Galily, 2019), all of which have received substantial media coverage. While these protests have been met with some resistance, those involving national anthems – expressions of patriotic solidarity – have been the most polarising (Smith, 2019).

It is common practice for major sports matches to begin with a short ceremony featuring the playing of the national anthem while the national flag is either raised or flown, along with a variety of ritualised ceremonies (Ward, 2009). This practice was described as ‘redundant patriotism’ by Spiegel and Spiegel in 1998 but, in the US in particular, sports have since adopted a hyper-patriotic stance, most notably in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019) where national symbols and songs have (re)assumed profound significance. Sport organisations such as the National Football League (NFL) and major events like the Super Bowl have been keen to brand themselves as both patriotic and militaristic (Butterworth, 2008; Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019; Smith, 2019). The longstanding tradition of anthem singing has thus played an even more powerful role in the symbolic performance of American nationalism (Yan, Pegoraro, & Watanabe, 2021). Under such conditions, patriotism (or patriotic behaviour) risks becoming synonymous with “blind loyalty, staunch allegiance, and inflexible attachment to the country” (Hawkman & Van Horn, 2019, p. 106). Criticising the national anthem or any of these symbols of patriotism, or a refusal to stand or sing the anthem while the national flag is flown, typically results in questioning of someone’s ancestry or their commitment to the American nation (Spiegel & Spiegel, 1998). Such activists are often dubbed as unpatriotic, traitors, or even communists (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019). In the US, where professional sport has become increasingly tied to patriotism, athlete activism that calls out racism and racial injustice – especially when expressed by a person of the Global Majority – is commonly seen as racially divisive by conservative White Americans. By the pro-cess, Black and Brown athletes are labelled as a threat to traditional notions of national identity and community solidarity (Dickerson & Hodler, 2020). By pointing to social injustices according to race, minoritised athletes are branded as disloyal to the ‘American’ dream – a mindset (whether conservative or liberal) within which racial inequities are either ignored or denied (Averbeck, 2018). Donald Trump has, in particular, adopted such a stance. This labelling is mostly applied to racialised minorities to “disqualify them from political citizenship as well as justify state violence and social control” (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019, p. 14).

### **Colin Kaepernick, the NFL, and anthem protests in the US**

Since 2009, the NFL has required players to be on the field for the pre-game playing of the national anthem, apparently after US sports leagues were paid to honour members of the military by the Department of Defence (Berr, 2018) – previously it was typical for them to remain in the locker room (Seri et al., 2019). Colin Kaepernick’s anthem protest began in August 2016 and was a response to pervasive police violence and widespread inequality against African Americans (Yan, Pegoraro & Watanabe, 2021). His initial refusal to stand for the national anthem came during an NFL pre-season game when he was the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. At the time he was a popular figure with the team’s fans; his jersey was the highest selling kit in the NFL ahead of the 2016 season (Mudrick et al., 2019). During his initial protest he sat on the bench and drew little attention (Smith, 2019). However, during the third game his action was captured by a photographer and in a media interview he revealed

the reasons behind his move, subsequently generating much more publicity (Daum, 2019). Discussing his protest, Kaepernick said:

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color ... To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.

(cited in Murty, Holyfield-moss, Vyas & Roebuck, 2018, p. 46)

To stress that his actions were not aimed at the military, he changed to kneeling after consulting with a friend and military veteran on how best to protest while still respecting the US armed forces (Sevi et al., 2019). Ironically, though, this resulted in a rapid and vitriolic response from many segments of US society, in particular right-wing communities and conservative media (Daum, 2019; Duvall, 2020). Kaepernick's 'stance' was part of a complex racialised cultural moment in the US (Dickerson & Hodler, 2020) that itself is reflective of the privileging of Whiteness and the 'othering' of Black Americans and other minority groups (Johnson, 2019). He followed in the footsteps of a number of other athletes who had protested in support of BLM and earlier movements of resistance to racial discrimination, injustice, and inequality in both law and custom (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019). Given the NFL's influence on American culture (Sevi et al., 2019), Kaepernick's protest was significant as it brought the movement to audiences that had previously remained ignorant of its aim of raising awareness of institutional racism. More so, Kaepernick's protest diverged from other recent protests in that he purposefully protested during the playing of the US national anthem (Duvall, 2020).

Despite the personal sacrifice Kaepernick made (he has been without a playing contract since March 2017 when he opted out of his contract with the San Francisco 49ers), his protest was embraced by a number of Black as well as White players across teams in the NFL. It has been suggested that over 49 NFL players from 13 teams joined Kaepernick in kneeling within two months of him starting this form of protest (Murty et al., 2018) with players in other sports, including the entire Indiana Fever Women's National Basketball Association team, as well as college and high school teams also taking a knee during the anthem (Smith & Tryce, 2019). Subsequently, the league reviewed its policy surrounding the national anthem and decided players could stay in the dressing room if they did not wish to stand for it, but all those on the pitch would be required to stand (Anderson, 2019). Significantly, Kaepernick's protest was well received by some members of the US military and the hashtag *#VeteransForKaepernick* began trending on social media (Murty et al., 2018). Although not violating any league rule, these peaceful anthem protests have met with considerable backlash from other players, administrators, the public, and then President Donald Trump (Yan, Pegoraro & Watanabe, 2021). Kaepernick and fellow protesters have been labelled anti-American, received death threats, and described as "sons of bitches" by Trump, whose criticisms often drew on White nationalist statements (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2018). As has been the case with Kaepernick, anyone who protests during traditional US national rituals, such as the playing of the national anthem, quickly has the stigmatising label 'unpatriotic' attached to them by the more right-wing elements of the media due to a perceived lack of respect for tradition or honour for what the anthem symbolises (Sevi et al., 2019).

However, following the public anguish in response to the murder of George Floyd, the NFL revisited its position and permitted players to kneel in protest (Sherwood, 2020). NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell stated that:

We, the National Football League, condemn racism and the systematic oppression of black people. We, the National Football League admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier and encourage all to speak out and peacefully protest. We, the National Football League, believe black lives matter. I personally protest with you and want to be part of the much needed change in this country. Without black players, there would be no National Football League. And the protests around the country are emblematic of the centuries of silence, inequality, and oppression of black players coaches, fans, and staff. We are listening, I am listening, and I will be reaching out to players who have raised their voices and others on how we can improve and go forward for a better and more united NFL family.

(Goodell quoted in NFL, 2020)

Again, Trump attacked this decision on Twitter, vehemently arguing that the “Great American Flag” (and the other pre-match rituals such as playing the national anthem) should not be protested, repeating his familiar talking-points that such a stance was disrespecting the country (Murty et al., 2018). Trump’s attitude did not deter athletes from their protest; in fact, it may even have encouraged more acts of resistance with NFL players defying Trump via gestures of protest during the anthem, and basketballers Steph Curry and LeBron James speaking out against the President (Siddiqui, 2017).

Of the athletes to kneel in support of Kaepernick, the most vocal was Megan Rapinoe, a star player for the Seattle Reign of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and US Women’s National Soccer Team (USWNT). She copied Kaepernick’s actions and kneeled during a NWSL match and then two USWNT matches in September 2016 (Schmidt et al., 2018). Rapinoe, a White openly lesbian player who is an outspoken advocate for LGBTI+ rights, stated that kneeling was an act of solidarity and allyship with Global Majority communities in protest against police violence toward them (Hawkman & Van Horn, 2019), saying:

I am disgusted with the way he has [Kaepernick] been treated ... and [the] hatred he has received in all of this ... We need a more substantive conversation around race relations and the way people of colour are treated.

(McNeal, 2018)

Rapinoe was similarly labelled anti-American by many conservatives, but was also painted as an outlier – acting in isolation (Coombs et al., 2020). Her actions were also minimised as her team’s next opponents played the national anthem before Rapinoe had taken the field (Trimbur, 2019) and US Soccer subsequently mandated that players were required to stand during the playing of the anthem. Rapinoe was not to be silenced and took to *The Players’ Tribune* (a prominent blog written by athletes) to explain her decision to kneel in detail and to reinforce her respect for the national flag, which she stated represents “the heart of our country’s ultimate symbol of freedom” as she faced it during her protests (Rapinoe, 2016). She also played to traditional values and ideals, claiming:

I am the same woman who has worn the Stars and Stripes across her chest, proud and beaming. I am one of the women you have called an American hero, and not just once.

I look like your sister, your friend, your neighbor or the girl your kids go to school with.  
I am the person sitting at your dinner table and coming to your holiday party.

(Rapinoe, 2016, para. 1)

In a move similar to that of the NFL, the USWNT also repealed its rule requiring players to stand in June 2020, removing the fear of disapproval by the governing body. As a result, the “vast majority of players, coaches, and officials took a knee during the anthem before each game” (Howell, 2021, p. 76). These two decisions can be seen as watershed moments in American sport. For possibly the first time, athletes have been empowered to protest racial discrimination without fear of reprisals – from the governing bodies at least.

### **Australia**

In Australia, Indigenous athletes, who are disproportionately represented in sport, have demonstrated resistance by remaining silent during the national anthems at the start of some high-profile sports matches. These protests were in response to an anthem that, despite popular claims to the notion of a ‘fair go’ for all, has ignored both the historical and contemporary significance of Indigenous communities to Australia. As has been noted by Cleland, Adair, and Parry (2020), ‘fairness’, by way of shared opportunity, has typically only applied to opportunities for fair skinned (i.e., White) Australians (Fotinopoulos, 2017). Indeed, far from a ‘fair go’, Aboriginal peoples have been the subject of a history of institutionalised racial discrimination that has resulted in considerable disadvantages. This discrimination is best highlighted in the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families, to be placed in foster care with White families, in many parts of Australia during the early to mid to late twentieth century. The Federal Government issued a national apology for what has become known as the Stolen Generations in 2008 (Murphy, 2011) and committed to a reconciliation process but discrimination, in both overt and covert forms, has remained in wider society and sport (Cleland, Parry & Radford, 2019).

Australia’s national anthem, Advance Australia Fair, is, in one sense, relatively new given that it was only made the official anthem via a referendum in 1984. However, the song itself was conceived much earlier, in 1878 by a Scottish migrant – thus reflecting an earlier period in time. The original lyrics have undergone minor adjustments over the years: for example, “Australian sons” was replaced simply by “Australians”, thus making the song more gender neutral (Institute of Australian Culture, 2012). Yet, until recently, there had been no effort to acknowledge the country’s Indigenous peoples. Aboriginal Australians had long criticised the anthem’s lyrical claim that Australians are “young and free”, citing the historical presence of Aboriginal peoples dating back at least 65,000 years and their subjugated status following the European invasion. In addition, Indigenous critics have (perhaps understandably) construed the title Advance Australia Fair to refer to White skin colour, even if not intended by its author (Welcome to Country, 2019).

Indigenous Australians rose to prominence in professional sport in the late twentieth century, becoming household names in rugby union, rugby league, and Australian Rules football in particular and making up around 10 per cent of contracted players in the latter two sports (Ferrer & Turner, 2017). Recognising this involvement, the National Rugby League (NRL) established a dedicated Indigenous Round of matches every season and more recently introduced a special pre-season rugby league match featuring the ‘Indigenous All Stars’ against either the (non-Indigenous) ‘NRL All Stars’ or the (Indigenous New Zealand) ‘Māori All

Stars' (Philpott, 2017). Significantly, during the NRL's Indigenous Round in May 2017, alongside Advance Australia Fair, an alternative pre-recorded version of the national anthem was shown on big screens inside the stadiums with the words "young and free" supplanted by "peace and harmony", and "our land abounds in nature's gifts of beauty rich and rare" changed to "our land abounds in nature's gifts to love, respect and share" (Hytner, 2017).

Given that Indigenous Australians comprise around 2.5 per cent of the national population, it may be little surprise that the management of the sport industry and sport media are controlled almost exclusively by non-Indigenous people. We have already shown that Indigenous athletes are prominent, but Indigenous people are much more rarely in off-field positions like coaching, administration, and media commentary. All that said, sport is one of a small number of places where the Indigenous community has some voice and can demonstrate advocacy at a national level (Cleland, Parry & Radford, 2019). Increasingly, sporting bodies have accepted that they need to work with Indigenous people in more profound ways. A key example was the NRL's decision to showcase an alternative national anthem. The initiative recognised that the official song was not deemed appropriate to the history and experiences of First Nations people. That experimental (albeit temporary) step provided a space, in 2019, for a string of high-profile silent protests by key Indigenous rugby league players: they objected to a requirement that the Australian anthem be played at sporting events, and this brought the debate firmly into public consciousness.

The players first used media interviews to openly state their intended refusal to sing Advance Australia Fair ahead of games. Using their privileged positions, the Indigenous rugby players commanded the attention of the national media, compelling them to ask the players why they intended to make this gesture and thus allowing the players to give voice to Indigenous criticisms of the anthem. The media typically provided verbatim statements from the players, significantly allowing Indigenous voices to do the talking and not just be talked about (Cleland, Adair, & Parry, 2020).

Then, during televised games, several players on both teams remained silent during the anthem. The first match was the 'All Stars' game in February 2019. Speaking after this match, Cody Walker, one of the most prominent figures in the protests reflected on the reasons behind his silent protest:

It just brings back so many memories from what's happened [in Australia's past] ...

I think everyone in Australia needs to get together and work something out [about the national anthem] ... It doesn't represent myself and my family.

(ABC News, 2019)

In the lead up to the three-match State of Origin series between Queensland and New South Wales in June/July 2019, another Indigenous player, Josh Addo-Carr, opined:

We're Australians too, Indigenous people. We were the first people here ... I have full support of Cody's decision and I'll be behind him all the way. The anthem doesn't represent us Indigenous people and I think we've got to change it.

(Brunsdon, 2019)

During the series, players from both teams remained silent during the national anthem and, significantly, support for the players was tacitly given by the NRL as they were not punished

for not singing (Parry & Cleland, 2019). The players also received support from athletes in other sports (Koha, 2019) and in other areas of rugby league. In particular, Indigenous female rugby league players competing in the women's State of Origin in June 2019 also refused to sing the anthem, although this event received less media attention. The coach of the Australian rugby league team, South Sea Islander Mal Meninga, was one prominent individual to speak out in support of the players. In a media interview he stated:

We expect them [the players] to sing the national anthem, but I'm also in favour of the fact, if it is offensive to Indigenous Australians, let's have a discussion about it. We're a multicultural society, so all of Australia should decide on what our anthem should be. The majority of us are third- and fourth-generation Australians now. What does contemporary Australia want? If it's important to people, why not call for a referendum?

(Nicolussi & Phillips, 2019)

He also drew attention to the fact that it had been over 40 years since Australians had voted on the choice of a national anthem:

while the Indigenous population has been talking about Advance Australia Fair for a long time, I cannot see why there can't be debate about it again now ... Times have changed since the last decision was made. We've had major decisions around Indigenous Australia, such as native title recognition and cultural heritage being revived. We've had the national Sorry Day so Australians—all Australians—are very aware of our national history, maybe more aware than they were before. So we can have a national debate and let the people of Australia have their say. If we have a national anthem that offends our Indigenous people, let's see what all of Australia thinks.

(Meninga, 2019)

Similarly, an article by Channel Nine (2019) quoted New South Wales coach Brad Fittler (a non-Indigenous Australian) who also indicated his support for the player protests, stating that the national anthem “definitely needs work ... you go to any venue around the country and three-quarters of the people aren't singing”. However, the response to these protests was not solely favourable. A small number of Indigenous athletes spoke out against the players. Former Indigenous Queensland rugby league player, Justin Hodges, viewed the national anthem to be about military sacrifice and claimed that he sang the anthem “for the soldiers and those guys that have given us the freedom to play rugby league” (Fox Sports, 2019). The disapproval was led most vocally by rugby union player, Kurtley Beale, who believed that the most appropriate steps towards the ongoing process of reconciliation was to sing the national anthem (Doran, 2019).

What the protests particularly did was to give “oxygen to wider discussions about the appropriateness of the anthem as representative of Australia” (Cleland, Adair, & Parry, 2020, p. 15). Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous journalists and commentators argued that the silent protests had regenerated discussion about changing the anthem and had found support from across the party-political divide. For example, two politicians stated that changing the word “young” in the opening verse containing the lyrics “for we are young and free” would encourage a more inclusive Australia by acknowledging and responding to the criticisms of Aboriginal peoples. In 2020, the state Premier of New South Wales proposed that this line be

changed to “for we are one and free”. Following approval from a variety of ministers the Prime Minister enacted this change from 1 January 2021.

It is important to note that the athlete voices were not the only ones that championed this change. For instance, The Recognition in Anthem Project in particular, which began in 2017, consulted both Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups to gain support for a change to the lyrics. However, given that professional sport holds a significant place in Australian culture and lends itself to regular media focus and commentary, the athlete protests, with the tacit support of the sport’s governing bodies were able to draw media attention to the issue in ways that Aboriginal peoples are not typically afforded. While the Australian government’s decision to change the lyrics of the anthem cannot be solely attributed to the action of a small number of rugby league players, they kept debates on its appropriateness in the public eye.

### **Northern Ireland**

The island of Ireland is divided into two nations and so the role of national anthems in sport is complex, particularly given that there are often two separate representative sides for Ireland on the international stage. Athletes from Northern Ireland who are eligible to represent both the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) face difficult decisions over which nation to represent (Liston & Moreland, 2009). This identity conflict was highlighted at the Rio 2016 Olympics where Mark and Paul Gleghorne, brothers from Northern Ireland, competed for different national teams (Team GB and Ireland) (Liston & Kitching, 2020).

A number of Association footballers born in Catholic communities in Northern Ireland, where Roman Catholics make up a significant religious group but where the country is aligned to the Protestant UK, have chosen to represent the predominantly Catholic Republic of Ireland rather than their country of birth (Hassan, McCullough & Moreland, 2009). Traditionally, Association football (soccer) has been associated with “those parts of the country that retained support for the union with Britain and less so amongst advocates of Irish national independence movement” (Hassan, 2006, p. 344); i.e., it is linked with unionist Protestants rather than nationalist Catholics. Meanwhile, Catholic players representing Northern Ireland have been targeted for sectarian abuse by sections of the crowd at games (Hassan, 2006) and have even received death threats (Liston & Deighan, 2019). Recently, however, it is claimed that the Northern Irish national team has increasingly been seen as representative of both sides of the ethno-religious divide (Keown, 2020).

As in other nations, matches of representative teams and national cup finals usually begin with the playing of the national anthem, but the anthem itself has unsurprisingly been identified as problematic due to its sectarian connotations (Liston & Deighan, 2019). At this time, in Northern Ireland, God Save the Queen/King was traditionally played before sports matches – a move that is staunchly unionist and which has been described as demonstrating a “calculated disregard for northern nationalists” (Hassan, McCullough & Moreland, 2009, p. 748). In the Republic of Ireland, the national anthem, *Amhrán na bhFiann* (The Soldier’s Song) is at times replaced with the song *Ireland’s Call*. This was commissioned by the Irish Rugby Football Union ahead of the 1995 World Cup because, although the team represents the Republic of Ireland, players from Northern Ireland are eligible to play for the team and some of these had expressed their unease at the use of the anthem (Fanning, 2016). Nevertheless, nationalists living in Northern Ireland, including footballers, have shown a greater affinity to the anthems of the Republic (and associated ideals) (Murray & Hassan, 2018). In a study of

12 self-declared Irish nationalists and republicans who had represented Northern Ireland at football, Liston and Deighan (2019) found that only one player had developed a level of comfort with the anthem, while the others believed it was an ideological barrier for current and future Catholic players. Despite recommendations for a new anthem to be played at sports matches, the First Minister for Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster refused, expressing a desire to retain what she regarded as the ‘depoliticisation’ of sport (Liston & Deighan, 2019). The actions of players have again brought this discussion into the public eye.

Football grounds are critical sites of fandom, with allegiances based on religious and political identities. The island has a longstanding ethno-national conflict (known as the Troubles) and Northern Ireland’s national Association football venue, Windsor Park, has witnessed violence and religious sectarianism, including sectarian chanting against the Catholic community and denigration of Irish nationalism. In this way, Windsor Park has been ‘claimed’ by loyalists and unionists from Northern Ireland (Hassan, 2002). The stadium was the site of controversy in 2018 when it played host to the Irish Cup final between Cliftonville, who are identified as being associated with a Catholic/Nationalist tradition, and Coleraine who have Protestant/Unionist ties (Hassan & Ferguson, 2019). During the playing of God Save the Queen before the match, Cliftonville players en masse bowed their heads in protest at the use of this anthem. Their actions divided opinions along predictable political lines with a number of politicians highly critical of their protest, with one claiming that the team “got what their disrespect deserved”, as they lost the match (McKeown, 2018).

At international levels, the anthem has not been met with such a coordinated response but individual players at senior and age representative groups have also chosen to bow their heads and not sing. This action has evoked strong responses from unionists, with players criticised and harassed in online public spaces (Liston & Deighan, 2019). Similarly, Republic of Ireland footballer James McLean has received considerable online abuse for his decision to bow his head when the British anthem has been played ahead of matches involving his club side. This abuse even included death threats towards McLean and his family (Kavanagh & Parry, 2021).

It is not only the public that have criticised Northern Irish players for not joining in with the national anthem. Fellow footballers and captains have confronted players that remain silent or bow their heads, claiming that they are disrespecting their team mates along with the anthem (Liston & Deighan, 2019). The notion of shame was also used by coaches in the Northern Irish system to encourage players to keep their heads raised during the anthem, singling out these nationalist players based on ethno-religious bases.

Interestingly, Barry McGuigan, a former boxer from Northern Ireland with a Catholic, nationalist upbringing, adopted a different stance on anthems. He preferred a non-aligned ‘anthem’ and peace emblems in place of a national flag when he competed and, thus, attempted to avoid some of the issues noted above (Liston & Kitching, 2020). However, while McGuigan’s sporting medium meant that he was more accepted by nationalists with an interest in boxing, nationalists interpreted his moves as sporting treachery as he refused to fight under the Irish tricolour (Hassan, 2005). Sugden and Sugden (1997) have similarly noted a degree of flexibility from Irish sports teams when it comes to the flag and anthem by either substituting them with neutral emblems and songs as McGuigan did or by avoiding their use completely. Despite this desire to down-play national symbolism and lower ethno-religious tensions, various European and World sporting authorities continue to insist that a national flag and anthem are included when Irish athletes take part in their competitions (Sugden & Sugden, 1997). The enforced playing of the anthem may also be detrimental to the on-field performance of the Northern Ireland team. Former manager, Michael O’Neil has claimed that it alienated

players from a nationalist background, who would typically stand with their head bowed. Speaking in a television documentary, O'Neil stated his belief that the team:

were at a disadvantage in the anthem, because I could see how other countries would either sing their anthem or display real patriotism, you know, a real togetherness, real emotion during the anthem. And we never really got that.

(Browne, 2021)

He pointed to tensions between the nationalists and those who sang the anthem, seeing it as a representation of their national identity. O'Neil also claimed that such friction and contrasts in body language during the anthem were not present in most other nations where, it is implied, the anthem brought players together.

### Conclusion

Despite the opinion of Michael O'Neil that playing national anthems ahead of sports matches can bring players together, the cases discussed in this chapter paint a very different picture. These rituals, utilising songs that are inherently nationalistic, can be marginalising as well as solidifying. Debates around national anthems are not new, yet at a broad level the societies discussed here remain attached to them. The anthems themselves are often problematic as they have been adopted and thus represent the ideals of earlier periods in nations' histories (Parry, Adair, & Cleland, 2020).

In this chapter we have shown athletes across three continents and in a variety of sports have used the combination their celebrity profiles, the media focus on sport, and the desire for sports organisations to associate themselves with nationalistic rituals to draw attention to a variety of social movements and campaigns that highlight social injustices or to challenge the practices of nationalism themselves. Importantly, these protests have revealed that social injustices remain prevalent, even following changes in social norms and legal mandates. Athletes now have platforms and profiles that allow them to highlight areas of society where injustices are most keenly felt.

Through these protests, the roles of anthems in national identity and who they represent have been questioned. In all cases, athletes have challenged the expectation that citizens should passively engage in the hyper-patriotic, militaristic, and ritualistic actions when they are not representative of themselves or all members of the society. These protests have not come without a cost, whether this be to individual players' careers or to team cohesion and performance. However, athletes have also been supported by those within their sport, eventually, even if politicians and governments have been slower to do so.

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