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Sport as a Catalyst for Social Justice and Inclusion: A Case Study of the Gaelic Athletic Association's Role in Community and Youth Development

Mark A. Brennan [1,*], Pat Dolan [2], Colin Regan [3] and Theodore Alter [4]

[1] Education, Development and Community Engagement Program, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA
[2] UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway, H91 C7DK Galway, Ireland; pat.dolan@universityofgalway.ie
[3] The Gaelic Athletic Association, D03 P6K7 Dublin, Ireland; colin.regan@gaa.ie
[4] Creative Insight Community Development, State College, PA 16801, USA; talter2015@gmail.com
* Correspondence: mab187@psu.edu

Abstract

Sport can serve as a powerful tool for community building, fostering inclusion, challenging intolerance, and advancing social justice. It also supports positive youth development and active citizenship. When embedded in local life and accessible beyond athletics, sport creates unique conditions for community development and inclusive action. Sport and equity-focused community development are about relationships. The perspectives and behaviors stemming from youth participation in sport—what they learn about human relationships, relationship building, and life skills—carry forward through time in all phases and facets of their lives. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), Ireland's largest amateur sporting and cultural organization, exemplifies this potential. More than a sports organization, the GAA plays a central role in Irish society, offering opportunities for people of all ages to engage in sport, fitness, and well-being, while actively contributing to community life. GAA clubs often function as local social hubs, creating spaces for connection across generations. This article uses the GAA as a case study to explore how sport can be a unifying and inclusive structure for community building. Specifically, we will (1) examine the link between sport, youth, and active citizenship; (2) explore connections between sport, community, inclusion, and social justice; (3) offer a historical and cultural overview of the GAA; and (4) consider how organizations like the GAA can support efforts around inclusion, tolerance, and sustainability. The discussion will highlight implications for future community programming and policy.

Keywords: youth; sport; GAA; equality; social justice; community; community development

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1. Introduction

While often framed primarily as a pursuit of physical excellence, competition, and on-field achievement, sport also holds significant potential as a mechanism for community development, inclusion, and social justice (Jeanes & Trussell, 2024; Zhou & Kaplanidou, 2018; Schulenkorf, 2012; Karstensen et al., 2024; Lange et al., 2024; Brennan et al., 2022a; Odera et al., 2022). Beyond its physical and competitive dimensions, sport can serve as a vehicle for promoting positive youth development and active citizenship across the lifespan (Morgan & Parker, 2023; Camiré et al., 2022). When deeply embedded in local life and

structured to offer inclusive opportunities beyond athletic performance, sport can foster conditions that advance community cohesion and social equity (Ponciano Núñez & Carter, 2025; Partington & Bates, 2024; Cunningham et al., 2021; Spaaij, 2019; Ekholm et al., 2022). These efforts are particularly salient in our current global context, where fostering civic engagement and collective responsibility towards social justice is increasingly urgent.

A central focus on youth is especially critical, given that one-third of the global population is under the age of 15 and half is younger than 25 (Lin, 2012). This "youth bulge" is not merely a demographic trend but represents a pivotal opportunity for cultivating the next generation of active, engaged citizens. Failure to invest in youth development risks undermining societal stability and cohesion on a global scale. In a fragmented and increasingly polarized world, the intersection of sport and community can play a vital role in fostering connection, resilience, and civic responsibility.

A wide range of research and practice evidence points to a clear fact: All are based on and about relationships. These relationships are profound and the source of our sustainability in organizations, communities, and functional societies. Here we seek the opportunity to highlight the role of sports while reaffirming the importance of relationships and community to our human existence at all scales. An example of this relationship can be found in the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), and sports, more generally, are catalysts for both.

The GAA offers a compelling case through which to explore these dynamics. As the largest amateur sporting and cultural organization in Ireland (Cronin et al., 2019; Staines & O'Hara, 2024), the GAA is distinctive in its extensive diffusion throughout local communities. Since its founding in 1884, the organization has aimed not only to promote traditional Gaelic games (football, hurling, camogie, handball, and rounders) and preserve Irish cultural identity, but also to foster local community engagement. Over time, the GAA has expanded its mission to address broader social justice and inclusion issues relevant to 21st-century society. Included in these are efforts to challenge the sexism and misplaced nationalism that were previously associated with the organization in its early years.

The GAA plays a central role in Irish life, offering sport and wellness opportunities across the lifespan while also serving as a critical agent of community building within Ireland and internationally through clubs established in the UK, North America, Australia, and beyond. The organization places strong emphasis on youth development, integrating not only physical and athletic skill-building but also the cultivation of values such as teamwork, leadership, social–emotional competence, and civic engagement (Staines & O'Hara, 2024; Delaney & Fahey, 2005). Notably, these developmental opportunities are available to all youth, regardless of their participation in competitive sport.

Beyond sport itself, the GAA distinguishes itself by actively advancing local community development. GAA clubs often function as central social hubs within communities, offering spaces for connection and engagement across generations. For individuals not directly involved in sport, clubs provide a wide range of opportunities for civic participation and social–emotional learning. Clubs regularly organize community-centered events—from holiday celebrations and local competitions to wedding receptions and funerals—thereby reinforcing social bonds and a collective sense of belonging. These shared spaces and experiences are essential for nurturing inclusive, resilient, and socially just communities (Wilkinson, 2023; Bessant, 2018).

In contrast to other sport settings that may focus narrowly on youth or school-based populations, the GAA integrates sport and community in ways that blur the boundaries between athletic participation and civic life. The near-synonymity of the club and the community provides a unique structural foundation for leveraging sport to support inclusive, community-centered development. In these settings, the unique intersection of sport and community creates a series of "knock-on" effects (Schmid, 2004; Raekstad & Gradin, 2020;

Monticelli, 2022). The perspectives and behaviors stemming from youth participation in sport, what they learn about human relationships, relationship building, life skills, and their role in local society carry forward through time in all phases and facets of their lives (Schmid, 2004). As such, sport is not simply playing a game. When embedded into local life, it becomes a venue from which a wide range of community benefits emerge across the lifespan.

This article uses the GAA as a case study to examine sport's capacity to serve as a platform for inclusion, social cohesion, and community-building. Specifically, we aim to: (1) explore the relationship between sport, youth, and active citizenship; (2) analyze the links between sport, community, inclusion, and social justice; (3) provide a historical and cultural overview of the GAA and its impacts on youth, community, and equity; and (4) consider how organizations like the GAA might inform future initiatives aimed at promoting tolerance, acceptance, and sustainable community development. The article concludes with implications for both policy and practice in the sport and community development sectors.

2. Youth, Sport, and Citizenship

Sport serves as a critical context for positive youth development (PYD), offering multidimensional benefits that extend beyond physical health to encompass psychological, emotional, and social growth (Camiré et al., 2022; Cunningham et al., 2021). It also advances a young person's sense of belonging and affirms their social capital. From a developmental perspective, sport participation cultivates key life skills such as teamwork, leadership, and self-efficacy. However, its broader value lies in its potential, particularly when embedded within community structures, to contribute to long-term developmental outcomes for both individuals and their communities, even in societal contexts (Jewett et al., 2014; Lonie et al., 2020).

These outcomes extend beyond the immediate benefits of physical activity. Engagement in youth sport can foster social and emotional learning (SEL), strengthen community ties, and create pathways for civic engagement (K. Berardi & Brennan, 2025; M. K. Berardi et al., 2020, 2024). SEL, the process through which individuals acquire and apply the skills necessary to manage emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions is deeply embedded in the fabric of well-designed sport programs. Through collaborative activities and interpersonal challenges, sport provides a practical, experiential setting in which young people learn empathy, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and goal setting (McDonough, 2021). These competencies are foundational to both personal development and broader societal participation (Merves et al., 2015).

Moreover, youth sport enables young participants to develop a sense of agency, positioning them as active contributors and potential leaders within their communities (Davids et al., 2021; Karstensen et al., 2024). This symbiotic relationship between youth and their social environments can facilitate sustained community involvement and foster a more inclusive civic culture. Participation in sport has been associated among youth with increased empathy, heightened social awareness, and a broader understanding of one's role in the wider world (Partington & Bates, 2024; Merves et al., 2015; Morgan, 2013). At a most basic level, sport has been viewed through the lens of offering respite to young people from other stressors in their lives (Jewett et al., 2014).

Empirical research supports these claims (McDonough, 2021; Rueger et al., 2016). But it is also important to remember and value the basic physical health benefits of sport participation, including improvements in cardiovascular health, muscular strength, a less likely occurrence of obesity, and overall fitness. Regular involvement in sports is also

correlated with reduced engagement in risky health behaviors, such as substance use, by offering structured, positive alternatives.

The mental and emotional benefits of sport are equally compelling. Experiences of mastery and achievement in sport can enhance self-esteem and confidence, which often translate into other domains of life (Rueger et al., 2016; Van Hoye et al., 2024; Camiré et al., 2022). Moreover, the challenges inherent in sport, such as coping with losses or recovering from injury, support the development of resilience and emotional regulation. Physical activity itself has been shown to alleviate symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, offering youth a healthy outlet for emotional expression and stress management (Rueger et al., 2016; Van Hoye et al., 2024; McDonough, 2021).

In sum, youth sport—especially when grounded in SEL principles and supported by community infrastructure—holds considerable potential to foster holistic development. It not only equips young people with essential skills for personal success but also nurtures their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the social fabric of their communities.

Finally, sport can contribute to community engagement and citizenship. Youth involved in sports are often encouraged to give back to their communities, whether through volunteer work, charity events, or supporting local sports programs. This helps cultivate a sense of social responsibility and belonging. Sports bring together young people from different cultural, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds. Exposure to diverse groups can promote inclusion, tolerance, and understanding of different perspectives (Olson & Brennan, 2022).

Ultimately, sport can serve as a vehicle for individual and collective capacity building, including community and social change, now and across generations (Brennan et al., 2022a). While seen in other settings, this process is reflective of a social learning theory of change (Schmid, 2004). It is in this context that we see sport as a small political force, but a political force nonetheless. Consequently, sport in this context affords hope and agency but also has the potential for shifting power dynamics and whose interest counts. For example, many times we see adults or longtime residents deciding what is best for youth without youth voices at the table. Sport, and examples within the GAA, show that structures can emerge where community is built through sport, which enables youth voices, the ownership of local decision-making, and an equitable involvement in maintaining local life. It is also in this context that the prefigurative politics framing of building tomorrow today is obviously relevant (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020; Monticelli, 2022).

When considering the youth–sport development intersection, it is important to think of the "knock-on" or secondary impacts (Schmid, 2004; Raekstad & Gradin, 2020; Monticelli, 2022). While engaging in healthy lifestyles, youth are at the same time learning to be active, responsible citizens. Included are learning how to develop and navigate human relationships and life skills and a recognition of their role not just as adults in waiting but as active citizens who can facilitate change now. Here, youth can be significant players in building the community of today, not just tomorrow. It is these types of engagements that echo across the lifespan.

Sport and Community: An Overlooked Connection

Sport can play a critical role in community development, offering benefits that extend well beyond physical activity and skill acquisition. It has the capacity to strengthen the social fabric of communities, foster inclusion, mitigate conflict, and provide a dynamic venue for civic engagement (Zhou & Kaplanidou, 2018; Schulenkorf, 2012; Karstensen et al., 2024; Lange et al., 2024; Granovetter, 1973; Olson & Brennan, 2022). As such, sport functions not only as a recreational pursuit but also as a platform for social transformation.

A growing body of research points to sport's potential to foster social cohesion. Community sport initiatives often serve as key arenas for local interaction, which is essential to the emergence and maintenance of community (Wilkinson, 2023; Theodori & Brennan, 2023; Bessant, 2018; Granovetter, 1973). Participation—whether as a player, coach, volunteer, or spectator—cultivates interpersonal connections and social networks that often extend beyond the field, strengthening broader support systems. The physical and symbolic capacity of sport to bring people together makes it uniquely positioned to unite individuals across lines of difference, including race, ethnicity, age, gender, and socioeconomic status. Through local teams, recreational leagues, and community events, sport offers shared spaces that promote belonging and mutual recognition.

When implemented with an inclusive ethos, sport can break down social barriers and support the integration of marginalized populations. It provides opportunities for underrepresented groups to participate meaningfully in public life, contributing to both individual well-being and collective vitality. In this way, sport becomes a vehicle for advancing equity and fostering a more inclusive community fabric (O'Donovan et al., 2010; Spaaij, 2019; Morgan, 2013; Karstensen et al., 2024; Morgan & Parker, 2023; Lange et al., 2024; Ekholm et al., 2022).

Youth sport represents a powerful mechanism for promoting (Brennan et al., 2022b; Odera et al., 2022). When access is equitably structured, participation in sport can help mitigate the structural inequities faced by young people in underserved communities. Beyond physical development, sport nurtures critical social–emotional competencies—such as empathy, respect, fairness, and resilience—that are essential for navigating diversity and challenging bias. Structured sport environments can serve as protective spaces where youth facing discrimination, instability, or exclusion build confidence and coping strategies. Moreover, the presence of diverse coaches and mentors can challenge stereotypes, provide representation, and support identity development.

Sport also plays a significant role in framing and celebrating cultural identity, another key element of a resilient and engaged community (Balfour et al., 2016; Brennan & Phillips, 2021). Local sports traditions, community celebrations, and support for local teams help to preserve shared histories, values, and cultural expressions. Whether through traditional games or contemporary athletic events, sport fosters a sense of local pride and strengthens community identity (Balfour et al., 2016; Brennan et al., 2021; Brennan & Phillips, 2021). At the same time, it can serve as a medium for intercultural exchange. Events that bring together diverse groups—such as international matches, multicultural tournaments, or inter-community competitions—offer valuable opportunities for cultural sharing, fostering mutual understanding, appreciation, and respect.

Importantly, sport contributes to the development of a shared community identity, even among populations with significant differences. By rallying around local teams or athletes, residents can develop a collective sense of pride and belonging. These emotional bonds, formed through sport-related activities, often translate into broader civic engagement and a deeper investment in the life of the community (Lonie et al., 2020). Participation in sport can thus act as an entry point for individuals to become involved in other domains of community life, such as volunteering, governance, or local initiatives (Spaaij, 2019; Morgan, 2013; Sabbe et al., 2020).

In contexts of social division or post-conflict recovery, sport can also serve as a peacebuilding tool. While often associated with competition, sport offers a structured and symbolic space for dialogue, empathy, and reconciliation. By facilitating sustained interaction between individuals from diverse or opposing groups, community-based sport programs can promote understanding, reduce prejudice, and rebuild trust. Sport thus has the potential to serve as a platform for peace, especially when integrated into broader

reconciliation efforts or community-building strategies (Davids et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2021; Schulenkorf & Sugden, 2016).

From a community development perspective, sport constitutes a vital arena for social connection. A wealth of research underscores the importance of interactional venues—including sport programs, public events, and community services—as foundational elements of social life (Wilkinson, 2023; Theodori & Brennan, 2023; Bessant, 2018; Granovetter, 1973). These spaces enable both formal and informal social engagement, enhance communication and awareness, and foster pathways toward increased civic participation. As such, sport not only contributes to individual well-being but also to the collective capacity of communities to organize, respond, and thrive. Sport, given its various individual and collective effects, contributes not only to individual capacity building but also to personal values, beliefs, and behaviors central to a strong and just civil society and democracy, at all scales and over time (Schmid, 2004).

As with the youth–sport intersection, it is critical that we consider the secondary effects of community–sport interaction. When properly connected, community and sport multiply to provide a sense of belonging, networks of social support, civic engagement across the lifespan, and local adaptive capacities that can benefit all residents. When tied to youth, a sustainable model emerges for local community development and also the personal growth of all residents.

3. A Theoretical Perspective for Lining

3.1. Community, Youth, and Sport

A substantial body of literature underscores the significance of venues for interaction such as sport and its intersection with community engagement in fostering long-term civic participation (Balfour et al., 2016; Wilkinson, 2023; Theodori & Brennan, 2023; Bessant, 2018; Theodori, 2023; Brennan et al., 2013, 2024; Phillips & Brennan, 2021). Similarly, research in community development emphasizes that sustained citizen engagement emerges through ongoing interaction (Fortunato & Alter, 2023; Wilkinson, 2023; Theodori & Brennan, 2023; Bessant, 2018; Theodori, 2023). This includes regular, consistent interactions among residents through events such as local festivals, community gatherings, and especially sports. Unique sporting structures, such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), serve as prominent examples of how sport can anchor community life. These settings are foundational to community-building processes and, from an interactional perspective, are essential for cultivating social connectedness and collaborative partnerships that promote local well-being.

3.2. Community as an Interactional Phenomenon

Interactional field theory offers a robust framework for understanding the processes underpinning social participation, collective action, and community development (Wilkinson, 2023; Fortunato & Alter, 2023; Bridger et al., 2010; Theodori & Brennan, 2023; Brennan et al., 2013, 2024). This theory centers on how community and collective action emerge from local social interaction (Adams et al., 2019). While it acknowledges the influence of broader social and cultural contexts, it prioritizes the ongoing, place-based interactions of residents.

People who share a geographic space frequently interact around local concerns (Wilkinson, 2023; Brennan & Israel, 2008; Bessant, 2015; Theodori, 2023; Fortunato & Alter, 2023; Bridger & Alter, 2010; Granovetter, 1973). These interactions form the basis of community emergence. Sporting events and traditions—particularly those recurring throughout athletic seasons—can provide consistent and structured environments for such interaction (Zhou & Kaplanidou, 2018; Schulenkorf, 2012).

The interactional perspective emphasizes the importance of local interaction and capacity in the development of community among those who share a physical space (Wilkinson, 2023; Bridger & Alter, 2008; Theodori, 2023; Fortunato & Alter, 2023). Unlike systemic theories that focus on order and stability, the interactional model highlights the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of local life. It views community as a complex, evolving system rooted in people, place, and their relationships (Theodori, 2005; Bridger et al., 2010; Bessant, 2015; Bridger & Alter, 2008; Granovetter, 1973; Brennan et al., 2013, 2024). Community, in this sense, emerges from shared activity, creating the conditions for citizens to engage in purposeful efforts to sustain or transform social structures.

Community emergence can be assessed by the frequency and effectiveness with which diverse local actors collaborate to pursue shared goals (Wilkinson, 2023; Bridger et al., 2010; Bessant, 2018; Theodori, 2023; Fortunato & Alter, 2023; Bridger & Alter, 2008). These collaborations foster solidarity and cohesion, which in turn reduce the impact of external and structural barriers. Sport presents a particularly enduring space for this form of engagement. While other traditional venues for community interaction—such as religious institutions or festivals—may be declining, sport remains a resilient and consistent domain. The challenge lies in leveraging this consistency to foster deeper, sustained civic and community involvement.

As social interaction increases, so does awareness of shared interests and opportunities for collaboration. This process gives rise to the "community field"—a dynamic, emergent social structure that connects people across differences of class, race, ethnicity, and organizational affiliation (Bridger et al., 2010; Larson, 2023; Theodori & Brennan, 2023; Brennan et al., 2013, 2024). Strengthening these linkages enhances the community's collective capacity to address complex social issues.

A key indicator of community interaction is the pattern of participation and action that residents develop. Social action is shaped by community needs and is driven by residents' motivations (Wilkinson, 2023). As these motivations translate into organized efforts, communities develop what Wilkinson calls "community agency"—a reflection of both the desire and the capacity to enact change (Wilkinson, 2023; Theodori & Brennan, 2023; Bessant, 2018; Theodori, 2023; Fortunato & Alter, 2023; Granovetter, 1973; Adams et al., 2019). This agency highlights the potential of local actors to influence and transform their communities through purposeful action.

Community agency is grounded in the power of individuals and organizations to come together around common goals. Through interaction, mutual understanding of local needs emerges (Wilkinson, 2023; Theodori & Brennan, 2023; Fortunato & Alter, 2023; Olson & Brennan, 2017; Granovetter, 1973). Social action rooted in local interaction allows communities to maintain their identities, control decision-making processes, and direct their own development.

From the interactional perspective, community development is inherently positive and purposive. Without understanding the intentionality behind social interaction and the bonds it creates, development efforts may be misinterpreted. Community agency, then, is the product of relationship-building that enhances the adaptive capacity of people in a shared space. This capacity is reflected in residents' ability to manage, leverage, and grow their local resources in response to community challenges (Wilkinson, 2023; Bessant, 2018; Theodori, 2023; Fortunato & Alter, 2023; Bessant, 2015). So long as people care for one another and for their shared environment, every community holds the potential for collective action.

Ultimately, community exists as a field of social interaction, expressed through the collective actions of its members. These actions create the foundation for social change and community development. Without regular interaction, neither community agency

nor social action can emerge (Wilkinson, 2023; Theodori & Brennan, 2023; Bessant, 2018; Theodori, 2023; Fortunato & Alter, 2023). Through social interaction, individuals co-create a dynamic entity—one whose power and potential exceed the sum of its parts.

3.3. Sport, Community, and Systems Change: Prefigurative Politics

The interactional theoretical approach described above provides a framework for understanding how community emerges and how sport can play a vital role in this process. In tandem with this perspective, we can also consider this relationship as a way to start building tomorrow today, as a form of prefigurative politics (Schmid, 2004; Raekstad & Gradin, 2020; Monticelli, 2022). In this sense, youth involvement in sport is an investment in the future; it is about laying the groundwork for future development and is thus profoundly political. Youth participation in sport is about building capacity in the community today and in the future in a particular way, a way that honors respect for others, hard work, teamwork, empathy and compassion, and commitment to the local place. Prefigurative politics is about building and reinforcing values and ways of being with others in this world that shape both current and future times (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020; Monticelli, 2022). There are politics in sport, but sport is politics, and if we think intentionally, sport is thus a lever for change, particular change. Who controls what sport is featured and what values prevail is a matter of power. Even in this context, moral choice and power dynamics are inescapable. This is why the embedding of sport in a community setting, such as what the GAA does, can be so powerful. It enables capacity building, where power, equity, and collective engagement take place.

This perspective is also critical from another perspective. Throughout this article, we have stressed that the intersection of sport, community, and youth contributes to resilience. This is certainly true and important. Nonetheless, the term and idea of resilience can be fraught and misleading when we are thinking about change. Resilience often suggests surviving and then returning to some prior stasis. This can certainly be beneficial, but also not what we most often seek when facilitating social change. We seek to build back better. The individual, collective, and social change underpinning this article is that the sport community relationship is about strengthening and going beyond some prior stasis. To achieve equity, social justice, and more positive outcomes, we need to be more than just resilient. Taleb (2012) calls this strengthening "antifragility", getting stronger in the face of disruption. Examples of things that tend to be antifragile include complex biophysical (humans, the natural environment) and socio-political systems (complex organizations, governments, democracy). Sport, when viewed through a social learning theory of change, contributes to strengthening individuals, groups, communities, democracy, and society as a whole.

4. The Gaelic Athletic Association as a Case Study

Bringing together youth development, community development, prefigurative politics, and sport, we use the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) as a case study. The GAA, Ireland's preeminent sporting organization, dedicated to the promotion of the country's indigenous Gaelic Games, links youth development, community development, and activates engagement in a unique way. Through this venue for interaction, sport and local communities are bonded together. This is far beyond a sense of pride around a local sports team but much more so a celebration of the connectedness of local people who understand their local needs and opportunities.

Founded in 1884, the GAA promotes traditional Irish sports and cultural activities, including Gaelic football, hurling, camogie, handball, and rounders, along with Irish music, dance, and language. The GAA holds immense importance in Irish culture, history, and

society, far beyond its role as a sporting organization. It also plays a key role in promoting community identity through community-based clubs across Ireland and abroad.

4.1. The GAA and Past Irish Social Policy and Cultural Attitudes

While the GAA is a prime example of how sport can foster development across individuals and communities, it is first important to consider the beginnings of the GAA, the socio-cultural environment it was founded in, and valid criticisms that have been raised about issues of sexism and ultranationalism. In this setting, it is important to then follow the active efforts of the GAA to rectify and broaden their social mission over the last forty years.

A critical examination of the Gaelic Athletic Association's development reveals how the organization has both reflected and reinforced prevailing social policies and forms of patriarchal discrimination within Irish society. The GAA's history demonstrates the significant influence of the Catholic Church in suppressing women's participation, while also showing how elements within the association supported the use of violence in pursuit of nationalist goals (Ó Tuathaigh, 2015). It is also the case that the GAA, and wider Irish society, has actively pushed away from these old cultural attitudes and the influence of the Catholic Church over the last thirty years.

4.2. Gender Exclusion and Male-Dominated Sporting Culture

The formalization of sport during the late nineteenth century occurred within a social and political environment that systematically excluded women from public activities. This fundamentally patriarchal approach shaped the GAA's development throughout the twentieth century. The establishment of the Camogie Association in 1904 deserves considerable recognition, particularly given the cultural climate where vigorous physical activity for women, especially contact sports like camogie, was considered fundamentally inappropriate and "unladylike". The continued requirement for impractical athletic clothing, specifically "gymfrocks" and tunics that persisted well into the 1970s, reflected both the conservative social environment in which these sports were played and the restrictive nature of the organizations governing them. This conservative approach to women's sporting attire demonstrated the pervasive influence of an ultra-conservative Catholic Church that had successfully penetrated virtually every aspect of Irish social and cultural life.

The delayed establishment of the Ladies Gaelic Football Association in 1974, ninety years after the GAA's foundation, further illustrates the entrenched nature of gender exclusion within Irish sporting culture. Despite this significant delay, the LGFA's subsequent growth into one of Europe's fastest-expanding female sports demonstrates both the latent demand for women's athletic participation and the positive impact of greater inclusion.

The structural dependence of women's sporting organizations on GAA infrastructure reveals the complex nature of gender relations within Irish athletics. The fact that only a small number of Camogie or LGFA clubs own their facilities, remaining entirely dependent on GAA-owned pitches, illustrates the persistence of institutional inequalities and unequal resource distribution. Ironically, the GAA's development of exceptional sporting infrastructure was made possible through the essential contributions of female volunteers and community members. This contribution occurred both through direct involvement and, more significantly, through the gendered division of household responsibilities, where women took on complete responsibility for domestic duties, thereby enabling male family members to dedicate substantial time to GAA activities. This pattern of unpaid female labor supporting male sporting participation reflects broader gender inequalities within Irish society. The issue of equal access to facilities remains a source of ongoing tension and

represents a primary focus of current integration efforts, led by former President Mary McAleese.

4.3. Nationalism, Political Identity, and Official Neutrality

Separating the association from Irish nationalist politics presents considerable challenges. While the GAA never officially endorsed armed republicanism, the strong ideological connections between membership (including key leadership) and Irish republican principles were inevitable given the organization's timing and the broader context of Ireland's social transformation and revolutionary period culminating in the Easter Rising in 1916 (Ó Tuathaigh, 2015).

The widespread involvement of GAA members in the independence movement, including participation in armed republican groups such as the Irish Volunteers, demonstrates the close connections between sporting and political identity during this period (De Búrca, 2000). However, the GAA's official commitment to political neutrality, particularly during the divisive Irish Civil War, enabled the organization to serve as a unifying force capable of helping to heal divisions across communities and families (Foley, 2020).

During the more recent period of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the GAA's official policy maintained strict non-involvement in political matters, a position that continues today. However, for members in Northern Ireland, GAA membership carried profound significance beyond mere sporting participation. Membership provided a connection to an "all-Ireland" cultural identity that transcended the political border while simultaneously marking participants as potential targets for violence within their own communities (Cronin et al., 2009, 2011).

The implementation and eventual removal of Rule 21, which banned members of British security forces from GAA membership, represents the organization's most controversial policy. While some viewed this rule as a necessary protective measure against institutional infiltration and security threats, critics saw it as discriminatory and unnecessarily divisive. The rule's persistence well beyond its useful purpose demonstrates the deep-rooted nature of political divisions within Irish society and the difficulties involved in institutional change.

In response to these and other conditions, the GAA has been proactive in creating a range of programs that foster inclusiveness, peace, and societal well-being (Rouse, 2017).

4.4. The GAA and Community

Equally important, the GAA is deeply rooted in local communities. Each town and parish in Ireland is home to a GAA club, creating a network of volunteers, players, and supporters. The association fosters a sense of community spirit and pride in local identity, while at the same time engaging thousands of volunteers running local clubs and county structures. Similarly, unlike many professional sports organizations, the GAA maintains an amateur ethos and is almost exclusively volunteer-driven—players are not paid, even at the highest levels. Its national stadium, Croke Park, the spiritual home of Gaelic Games, boasts a capacity of 82,300.

In recent years, the GAA has established structures dedicated to maximizing its contribution to Irish society, further extending its positive influence beyond what might be expected of a traditional sporting organization. Much of this work has been done in conjunction with the government, statutory health services, non-governmental organizations, and charity partners.

Principal amongst this was the establishment in 2013 of the GAA Healthy Clubs Programme, in partnership with the Department of Health, Health Service Executive, and the National Office for Suicide Prevention (Van Hoye et al., 2024). Irish Life, the country's

leading financial services group, came on board as a CSR partner. Based on the World Health Organization's "Settings Approach" to health promotion, the program was designed by experts to transform GAA clubs into hubs for health in their communities. By its 10-year anniversary in 2023, 600 of the 1616 GAA clubs in Ireland had been engaged (approx. 150–200 clubs are recruited in two-year cycles).

Healthy Club teams, manned by dedicated club volunteers, receive training to help identify needs in their club and community, and respond by implementing nationally devised programs that target a suite of health-promoting activities, the most popular of which include:

- Physical activity for non-playing members (adapted recreational Gaelic games, walking clubs and exercise classes being the most popular).
- Mental health, particularly suicide prevention and response, and mental health literacy training.
- The engagement of older members of the club and community.
- Diversity and inclusion programs, including those for persons with additional needs and the LGBTQ+ community, and, increasingly, outreach to the growing migrant populations in Ireland.
- Dietary and nutritional workshops.
- Gambling and substance use education, smoking cessation.
- Youth leadership programs.
- Community development and sustainability initiatives.

An independent social return on investment (SROI) evaluation of the (now named) Irish Life GAA Healthy Clubs program indicated that it results in savings to the Irish health sector of approximately €50 m per annum (Just Economics, 2025; Delaney & Fahey, 2005).

To scaffold the Healthy Club program and the GAA's ever-broadening community development work, new volunteer roles were established at the club and county level of the GAA, while a new Community & Health department was established at the national level of the association. The value of this investment to the country was particularly evident when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Ireland and the world in March 2020. By May of that year, as the country struggled to implement structures to support those forced to "cocoon" from physical social interaction, almost 20,000 GAA volunteers delivered essential goods, medications, and, perhaps most importantly, vital social contact to almost 35,000 members of their communities who were self-isolating. It was a structure that the Irish Government became reliant upon as the crisis continued and was possible thanks to the GAA clubs' intimate connection with their local community and its members. The GAA also made available multiple stadia for coronavirus testing, while its members also raised over €10 m for charities in 2020 alone, at a time when their traditional fundraising avenues were no longer available (GAA, 2020; Irish Examiner, 2021).

One of the most striking and unique elements of the work undertaken by the GAA falls within its critical incident response. The GAA's newly established Community & Health department recognized that during critical incidents (defined as a situation that overwhelms the normal capacity of an individual or group), the local community regularly turned to its GAA club for support and guidance. Working with the Irish Defence Forces, An Garda Siochana (Irish police force) and the Police Service Northern Ireland, the National Office for Suicide Prevention, the national Health Service Executive's psychological services, schools, and a number of charities working in related services, the GAA launched, in 2015, a suite of critical incident resources and protocols, supported by volunteer training. To date, the protocols have been implemented on hundreds of occasions, activating a support structure that has limited the trauma and stresses on both those experiencing and living through critical incidents, with volunteers taking on leadership roles in what can be

extremely challenging times. While critical incidents can encompass almost any traumatic life experience, the most common dealt with through the GAA's structures include:

- Death or life-changing injuries during training/match situations (these are relatively rare, thankfully).
- Serious road traffic accidents and fatalities.
- Deaths by suicide and other tragic circumstances.
- Incidents that attract significant national media focus, including, on a small number of occasions, the murder of a community member who is also a GAA member.
- Acts of God, including floods and other extreme weather conditions.

Scór is the cultural wing of the GAA and celebrates and promotes Irish culture, language, and tradition. It involves a range of events including music, dance, storytelling, and quizzes, and is structured into three levels: Scór na bPáistí (primary school—up to the age of 12), Scór na nÓg (under 17), and Scór Sinsir (17 years and over). The competition is designed to be both fun and competitive, fostering a sense of community and promoting the love of Irish culture. Scór is a vital part of the GAA's mission to promote Irish culture and language. It provides a unique and engaging platform for individuals and clubs to showcase their talents and celebrate their heritage while fostering a strong sense of community (GAA, 2025b).

While much has been achieved, the ever-evolving nature of global and local factors presents new challenges and opportunities. The threat of climate change and the GAA's close connection with community identity and place prompted the establishment of a new Green Clubs program in 2020 (mirroring the structures and partnership approach of the Healthy Clubs program). Now entering its third phase, almost 300 clubs have already been engaged in taking simple and effective sustainability actions in their grounds and activities. It focuses on five key areas: Energy, Water, Waste, Biodiversity, and Travel & Transport (an external subject matter that expert panels have linked to each of the thematic areas to ensure best practice). The program also aims to inspire the wider community through the actions and leadership of their local clubs (Green Clubs, 2025).

In response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, many GAA clubs in Ireland opened their doors to welcome Ukrainian refugees and provide them with temporary accommodation and support. This includes offering facilities like hot meals, showers, and places to charge phones, as well as providing assistance with navigating the local community and accessing necessary services. This ranged from local community GAA clubs to some of the biggest stadia in the association, as Páirc Uí Chaoimh stadium in Cork and Croke Park in Dublin have been used to house refugees temporarily, often in cooperation with the government and local authorities. Many clubs have organized fundraising efforts and collections of essential supplies for refugees. Volunteers have also been assisting with tasks like helping refugees find jobs, navigating social welfare benefits, hosting English language classes, and organizing day trips for children to experience Gaelic Games (GAA, 2022).

Ireland is in no way immune to some of the negative responses triggered by immigration, and the association has worked with the likes of Sports Against Racism Ireland and the UK-based Give Racism the Red Card to deliver training and awareness workshops across the GAA membership. It also recently implemented a progressive rule change that allows members suspended for any act of racism to partially reduce their sentence if they complete an evidence-based education workshop on racism and inclusion.

The GAA in 2018 made global headlines when it introduced a new rule at its annual Congress that banned the sponsorship of any GAA competition, team, gear/equipment, or property by a gambling company or entity (BBC, 2018). At a time when world sport is becoming increasingly linked with such sponsorship, the move was celebrated by many

who fear the pervasive coupling of sport with betting. This follows on from the GAA's progressive position in terms of alcohol sponsorship, since the cessation of its relationship with Guinness as a sponsor of its all-Ireland hurling championship in 2013. Since then, there have been no alcohol sponsors of any Gaelic Game competitions or any of its elite teams, in stark contrast to the likes of soccer and rugby, the other two main sports in Ireland.

As focus once more turns to the mental health of our children (as rates of anxiety and depression grow at concerning rates), the GAA announced in 2023 a new partnership with Movember, the global mental health charity. Movember Ahead of the Game (AOTG), delivered in partnership with the GPA (Gaelic Players Association—the representative body of Gaelic Games elite male and female players), is designed to promote mental health and resilience among young people involved in GAA clubs across Ireland. The program uses a sport-based approach to teach young players, parents, and coaches about mental health, build mental fitness, and strengthen resilience. Rooted in research (University of Wollongong, 2025), the program has been shown to be effective in reducing the stigma around mental health, increasing help-seeking intentions, and improving overall well-being.

The program is delivered through interactive workshops led by GPA members, who are either current or former elite players, targeting young players (U14/15 teams), parents, and coaches. Notably, the GAA has been particularly successful in activating the parent/coach network, compared to some of the other countries where Movember delivers AOTG with other sporting organizations, such as Australia and England/Scotland, demonstrating the GAA club's capacity to act as a hub for health beyond the playing population.

Another important social issue that the GAA is seeking to use its unique position in Irish life to help address is Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV). Its focus in this area was partially prompted by the murder of Ashling Murphy, a beloved member of her local Camogie/GAA club. It was a case that rocked Irish society, and in its aftermath, the GAA made a commitment to work with leading organizations in the field to learn how it could best support their work (GAA, 2025a).

This resulted in a collaborative effort with the charities Ruhama and White Ribbon Ireland, supported by the GAA's sister associations, the Ladies Gaelic Football and Camogie Associations. Supported by funding from Cuan, a new governmental agency charged with overseeing a coordinated approach to DSGBV, Game Changer aims to challenge societal norms that contribute to gender-based violence, promote gender equality, and encourage active allyship in eradicating such violence.

Key components and deliverables include an internal awareness-raising campaign targeting all Gaelic Games members and using high profile ambassadors for all Gaelic Games codes; the development and delivery of e-learning modules on DSGBV for Gaelic Games members on the GAA's Tobar e-learning platform; a public awareness campaign grounded in human rights; in-person awareness-raising workshops for young adults, parent volunteers, and coaches within the Gaelic Games; and the development and implementation of policies and procedures related to safeguarding within Gaelic Games.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has argued for the recognition of sport—particularly community-based, culturally embedded models like the GAA—as a powerful and underexplored vehicle for youth development, civic engagement, and social inclusion. Through its deeply rooted presence in Irish life, the GAA demonstrates how sport can function not merely as a site of athletic competition but as a dynamic and responsive civic institution, fostering leadership, empathy, and resilience among young people and building stronger, more cohesive communities.

We have highlighted how sport contributes to youth development beyond physical health, providing critical opportunities for emotional growth, identity formation, and social learning. Furthermore, when sport is intentionally inclusive and values-driven, it can act as a space of belonging for marginalized populations and a platform for cultivating democratic capacities—such as cooperation, responsibility, and community-mindedness—across lines of difference. Importantly, the GAA model illustrates that the effectiveness of sport as a social tool lies not in the scale or professionalization of its programs but in its ability to remain locally responsive, volunteer-led, and culturally relevant. In this respect, sport becomes a site of everyday civic learning and community formation.

Finally, we should acknowledge that in many cases and settings, sport can certainly be exclusive, elitist, and a setting for toxic masculinity. It can foster "win at all costs" mentalities, it can be co-opted by ultranationalist and racist groups for the worst of intentions, and it can further divide polarized societies if not kept in check. We do not propose sport as a cure-all for these and other ills. Addressing these is critical, but for other articles and books. Nonetheless, we see the unique sport–community–social justice intersection as critical. Often, the emergence of such negative conditions emerges out of a lack of community engagement across the lifespan, a lack of diverse voices, and a lack of inclusion. Sport is a part of local communities, but that part must be connected to all other parts. Sport must also be actively engaged in the building of community as an interactive process where it contributes with other social fields to make a stronger, more inclusive, and functional local society.

Future research and policy must move beyond instrumentalist approaches to sport and instead foreground the relational, cultural, and civic dimensions of sport-based engagement. By investing in inclusive, community-centered sport initiatives that view youth as co-creators rather than passive beneficiaries, policymakers and practitioners can harness sport's full potential to contribute meaningfully to social justice and democratic life. While the societal functions of sport have been researched and shown to be effective as a peacemaking "tool", its role in the more mundane contexts of communal living needs to be valued and utilized more.

Within communities, loneliness is recognized as a major mental health issue; simple sporting interactions like community jogging groups and ones that target new incoming community members have been shown to be very effective. Similarly, the role of sharing sporting occasions where elders and youth watch and discuss sport together can be a conduit that breaks down fear in older, vulnerable people and a source of wisdom and learning for youth. Thirdly, as indicated in this paper, sport as a community hub can be utilized to build local community capacity through practical help (fundraising for local causes) and as a space to gather at times of distress following traumatic events in the lives of the local membership.

For sport and corresponding community development to thrive, it cannot remain exclusive or elitist for insiders and outsiders. This is self-defeating. What is strongly advocated here by the authors is that sport needs not to be seen as events to enable success or failure with the winner taking all, but as a space to cope in life, to coalesce with others and gain useful companionship, leading to better happiness and well-being. The discussion presented in this article presents a more holistic way of looking at personal and community development and how sport can play a critical role. Investing in such programs is an investment in the relationships and capacities of the place. It facilitates building capacity and the future of the community now, all while ensuring a setting that engages and empowers all local citizens. With this, local well-being is achieved and can be sustained.

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