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## STAGING AND PERFORMING IDENTITY AT THE CROKE PARK CLASSIC: A NOTE ON SPORT, GEOGRAPHY AND NEOLIBERALISM.

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### Abstract

American Football has seen limited success in international markets until recently. This paper is based on participant observations that incorporate a geographical perspective of sport and identity focusing on an American Football event played in Dublin, Ireland. The aim of this paper is to discuss observations of how a popular American sport is staged and performed in a foreign setting. Many people from the United States travelled to Dublin to follow their university team. The event was staged to allow spectators to create a distinct atmosphere that was similar to a game played in the United States. There was much emphasis on (re)creating an American sporting experience. The match resembled a spectacle and a neoliberal discussion addresses commercialization, power, and contesting spaces.

*Keywords: American Football, Neoliberalism, Sport Expansion, Dublin.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

American Football is trying to exert pressure on consumer markets where they feel they have the greatest chance to attract followers, establish new media contacts, sell merchandise, or spread American sports culture abroad (Maguire, 2011; Wise, 2011). Since American Football represents something different in Europe, showcasing elite amateur talent represents an opportunity to sell the sport in new markets. In 2014 the University of Central Florida (UCF) and Penn State University (PSU) played a regular season match in Dublin, but in front of a majority American crowd. Previous American Football games played in Dublin include the Emerald Isle Classic in 1988 (the first college level game), then again in 1989. An event in 2012 went by the same name. In 1996 there was the Shamrock Classic and in 2016 Boston College will play Georgia Tech in the Aer Lingus College Football Classic. 2014 was unique because the event was staged in Croke Park, a venue associated with Irish sporting identity and nationalism (Bairner, 2001). The 1996 game between Notre Dame and Navy was also played at Croke Park. By introducing a new sport to a venue such as Croke Park, organizers are commercializing the space by introducing a new atmosphere, transcending traditional experiences and semblances of a sporting culture that would normally be consumed in this space.

This paper is based on participant observations of American Football in Dublin and addresses how the sport is staged and performed abroad. Critical interpretations used in this paper align with neoliberal thought pertinent to generating capital, branding, and creating sporting spectacles (Giardina, 2005; Smith, 2012). This addressed, some scholars view the

domestic form of football in the United States as an expression of American exceptionalism, where being different from the wider, and more accepted status quo, allows for the branding and marketing of ‘American’ football as something different in the global consumer marketplace (Maguire, 2011). The purpose of this paper is to reflect on observations made at the 2014 Croke Park Classic Dublin and offer a geographical analysis that discusses the staging and performing sports identity and contributes observational perspective on cultural and commercial expansion.

Participant observations allow researchers to become a part of the study (Kearns, 2010). Researchers engage and interact while also looking at a case critically and conceptually. Reflecting on experiences from participant observations by focusing on a sport is an area that is still an under-investigated. Over the years sports ethnographies have focused on, for example, surfing (Sands, 2002), marathon running (Sugden, 2007), and soccer and sense of place in local communities (Wise, 2014). Each of these studies attempted to achieve similar goals of qualitative analysis by reflecting on the critical situations to produce knowledge through immersion. Such an approach positions experience alongside critical observations of their surrounding and ongoing interactions, and being in a sporting venue and attending an event has much social and cultural geographical significance. Points of reflection from observations are discussed in two analysis sections below, discussed around staging and performing of identities. The staging and performing of sports culture and identity help guide understandings of an American Football event in Dublin. The city was changed to accept tourists from the United States to assume an atmosphere, by creating a spectacle that was much different from an ordinary sporting event in Ireland.

## 2. CRITICAL DIRECTIONS IN SPORTS GEOGRAPHY

Sports studies are developed in sociology; however, sport offers much geographical insight. Geographers have offered perspective on spatial understandings pertinent to collective identities, nationalism, communities, power, and place (Koch, 2013; Wise, 2015). There has been a recent academic tern in sports geography, with increased interest in the last several years (e.g. Conner, 2014; Koch, 2013; Lawrence, 2015; Wise, 2014, 2015), but more work considering sports experiences and place identity is needed. Participatory and observational approaches allow researchers to offer critique and understanding based on how sports are staged and performed when an event is held in a foreign setting—this paper aims to initiate a discussion on American Football’s international endeavours.

In terms of accepted conceptualizations widely recognized in sports geography, scholars have adopted Anderson’s (1991) notion of nations as imagined communities (e.g. Conner, 2014; Shobe, 2008; Wise, 2015). Anderson (1991, p. 7) suggests people are bound together vis-à-vis “horizontal comradeship.” While it is beyond the scope of this paper to look at nationalism, per se, this notion of imagined communities represents collective inclusion and association with a particular team—as observed (especially) among PSU fans in this study. Furthermore, cultural influences of sport involve staging representations of identity (Edensor, 2002; Harris, 2008). While identities can be staged, they are also performed in different settings to increase exposure and influence (Giardina, 2005; Lai, 1999).

When we consider the staging and/or performing of identities in another locale, Wise (2014) suggests this is a form of layering identities. The layering of identities results when a different sport is introduced to space where another (sport) is usually regarded as ordinary or familiar. Moreover, while this perspective offers insight into spatial contestations and multiple meanings, Wise’s (2014) work does not address power relations and new market expansions. This paper attempts to build on this notion of by incorporating a discussion of neoliberalism to fulfill this conceptual void. Since American products are consumed around

the world and the country has had a significant impact on globalization, expanding American sports has either been met with resistance, or they have been adapted locally (Kelly, 2007).

With increased pressures to expand to new markets and extend the reach of American Football, the National Football League (NFL) has organized regular season games in London's Wembley Stadium since 2007, known as the International Series (Maguire, 2011). From a neoliberal perspective, Smith (2012, p. 28) notes that "neoliberalism is supposed to encourage innovation and progress through a healthy competition." However, a sport such as American Football does not compete in international competitions like soccer, rugby, or even baseball—making it difficult to attract wider audiences from outside the United States. American Football is a sport rooted in American popular culture/identity from youths to professionals (Paolantonio, 2008), and the NFL wants to expand commercial exposure to international markets. International events assist with production, promotion, and marketing sports abroad (Van Der Merwe, 2007). This focus on expansion, influence, and promotion of sporting culture, alongside intentions to market sports as a consumer product, links to neoliberal agendas in sports studies (see Andrews and Silk, 2012; Giardina, 2005).

## 2.1. Staging Identity

The presence of UCF and PSU was overwhelming in Dublin. For instance, 'Penn State Global' was advertised across Dublin from the airport to the city and in the stadium to advertise the universities online degrees. While this is a form of staging, this paper is concerned with experiences and observations of activities and those who followed UCF and PSU to Dublin. This was a unique opportunity for Americans to see their current university team or alma mater play abroad. In Dublin, a fanzone was located in the Temple Bar district (which is the city's main tourism area located just over two miles from Croke Park). Given all the American accents, this took away from the experience of an event being hosted in another location, and suggests that this match was not necessarily aimed at attracting Dubliners, Irish, or Europeans. Locals who were interested in American Football did attend, but were a minority among the crowd in the fanzone and at Croke Park. The fanzone included throwing targets, and those successful were awarded with a branded PSU flashlight keychain. Locals foreign to the sport attempted hitting the target, but it was the Americans who were out showcasing their skills and teaching those local fans of the sport how to throw a football.

Although activities were concentrated to the Temple Bar area, known as a tourist consumption area that attracts tourists year-round to experience 'authentic' Irish pubs and food, American Football fans were widely scattered across the city. Fans wore UCF or PSU jerseys, shirts, and sweatshirts to show their purpose for visiting Dublin. Given Temple Bar is an established area of mass-visitor consumption, many of the bars/restaurants welcomed UCF and PSU fans by advertising university logos and hanging banners to mark the occasion. Given more PSU fans were across, the Temple Bar area in the morning before the event saw a sea of navy and white. For those attending the event, the experience would have replicated gatherings in State College, Pennsylvania, except for the location commodified Irish culture which had been adapted to (re)create an American Football atmosphere opposed to more traditional 'tailgating' before the game. Overall, the atmosphere staged in Dublin resembled a home match for PSU, although they were technically the visiting team for this event.

Dublin catered to the American crowd for this event, so advertisements for American Football represented a sense of welcoming UCF and PSU to the city—although Ireland is already a popular destination for Americans. In this case, marketing was adjusted to focus specifically on American Football fans. The same approach is common in London where the NFL hosts a series of international matches each year (see Wise, 2011). In Croke Park the use of the space for American Football transformed, or transcended, the stadium for only a short

time, but the national/cultural meanings linked to the stadium clearly stating this is Ireland's national stadium for Gaelic sport. Controversially, a Gaelic sporting match had to be moved to another city because of the American Football event. For the supporters of the Irish club teams, they were not happy with the decision to stage a spectacle event over a local competition. This shows how commercial rights, and particularly the power to host a one-off event, can remove those who would typically use a particular space. American Football played at Croke Park allowed for the layering of meaning, but was contested on the premises that this was consumer driven to stage a different identity in such a significant national sports space in Ireland. With Dublin temporarily transformed into an American university town, it was not surprising that the city's central tourism area and the country's national stadium were the primary stages. With the ubiquity of American accents, the feeling of being in Ireland was lost, but the American experience was brought to life, or performed, in Dublin.

## 2.2. Performing Identity

*"Heeeey... Penn State football in Ireland"* was shouted over and over by a PSU fan at Croke Park. Attending the event in Dublin felt more like a PSU experience than watching American Football in an international setting. UCF fans were present but the crowd was dominated by PSU fans, students, and alumni. Because so many made the journey to Dublin, the performance of identity composed by the crowd simulated a domestic game in the United States. Just as people follow their college team around the United States, and the most dedicated followed their team to Dublin. Despite the similarities and performances of identity among the crowd, based on observations of those in attendance, the setting and the atmosphere was actually greatly reduced by the fact that only 53,304 people were in attendance with large gaps of open seats in the 82,300 seat venue. Large sections of the stadium left vacant took away from the full college football game experience. In fact, PSU normally plays in front of much larger crowds in a stadium with a full capacity of 107,282. Nevertheless, the American attendees who travelled to Dublin created an experience of attending a game in State College, Pennsylvania or in the suburbs of Orlando, Florida. The cost of travelling to Dublin would have been high to fill Croke Park to full capacity. However, with around 29,000 empty seats in the venue, this suggests local interest was not there, suggesting and this experience was targeted to those from the United States who wanted to see American Football played in Ireland—an opportunity to be part of the spectacle.

Contributing more geographical analysis beyond performing identity, Anderson's (1991) notion of imagined communities, as used by Hobsbawm (1990), suggests athletes represent their nation. However, national identity in an American Football context does not always refer to nationalism because of the regional and local importance of teams. The sport is not widely played outside the United States, but for fans residing in Ireland or Europe, this represented an opportunity to see elite amateurs American Football live. The visiting PSU community showed their support through presence alone—following the team overseas to extending their imaginary overseas. (Re) creating a PSU home game provided a unique opportunity for any Irish or Europeans in attendance to consume PSU culture and atmosphere. The imagined PSU community both relocated and performed their sense of fandom in Croke Park throughout the event—players on the field may not have had the sense they were even competing abroad. Reflecting on PSU Nation's forged presence in the stadium, during the game PSU fans consistently chanted: *'We are...PENN STATE...We are...PENN STATE...We are...PENN STATE...Thank You...You're Welcome'* and *'P...S...U, let's go PSU'*. Additionally, the Nittany Lion mascot and cheerleaders also led the crowd in support of PSU. UCF also had cheerleaders at their end of the stadium to lead their fans. One

PSU fan was interviewed on the field during the match and he mentioned ‘*Penn State is about family*’ and that ‘*Penn State fans travel well and this is the ultimate away game.*’

To entertain the largely American crowd, the halftime show was an attempt by the host city and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) to showcase Irish sporting culture/identity. This was something that was quite different to a typical halftime show in the United States, where the visiting team’s marching band would typically perform. This was one performance of identity that attempted to educate the American fans about the significance of Irish sporting heritage/identity in Croke Park. In the past, Croke Park did not allow non-GAA sports to be played in the venue because it was meant to be a sports space that symbolized Irish nationalism (Bairner, 2001). An amateur hurling match was performed at halftime and the large-display screen was used to explain this popular Gaelic sport to the majority American crowd. These were armature hurling players—college level athletes are also amateur. A GAA announcer noted before the match that this was a ‘*special day in the sporting calendar, American and Irish cultures coming together*’—although noted above there was a clash in the schedule. There is much Irish influence in the United States, and while most would not recognize GAA sports on a daily bases, there exist over 150 GAA clubs in North America (noted by the announcer at halftime). While Croke Park was not crowded for American Football, the stadium is normally at full capacity during hurling matches. In North America the GAA took their national sports to the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana given the institution’s Irish connection/heritage—Notre Dame also played at Croke Park in 2012. The performance of identity in this case was paralleled by American fans creating an atmosphere and having the opportunity to sample Gaelic sport at halftime, performing and layering Irish and American sporting identity in one space.

### 3. DISCUSSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Smith (2012, p. 27) notes, “in the contemporary era, major events are more commercial and more aligned to corporate interests than ever before.” Andrews and Silk (2012) argue that there is a need to look at different trajectories framed around the context of sport to understand how neoliberal practices are at play. Observations and experiences reflected on above refer to the forging of staged identities in a different geographical and consumer market. Cultural sporting motives linked to expansion seek to make the sport available to those who want to learn about and experience first-hand a sport (Giardina, 2005), in this case American sporting culture/identity. However, in Dublin, with a considerable number of people traveling from the United States to follow UCF of PSU, for many it was a chance to see their team in another country. For others it was an opportunity to visit Ireland, learn about and to Irish sporting culture, and attend activities held in Temple Bar.

Corporations continually seek to expand private operations in new markets to widen their consumer base (Van Der Merwe, 2007); however, American Football is years behind and rapidly seeking ways to expand to new markets by offering a different version of ‘football.’ This most recent expansion of American Football is aimed now at specific markets to test the efficacy of broadening the sport’s reach. Relating neoliberal understandings to sport and expansion from a geographical perspective, Harvey (2005) argues power is exerted by the dominant culture in an attempt to influence and force those to accept and conform to new practices and ideals. Giardina (2005) would argue this is a way of reinstating the dominant discourses of culture and identity based using staged events to expand to new consumer markets. American sport expansion is a form of creative capital influenced by a flow of free market exchanges of ideas, but such exchanges have been exploited in various sectors (Maguire, 2011). In this case, identities were commercialized and culture reproduced. Getting PSU fans to travel to Dublin and perform their identity commodifies the experience and

attempts to place American sporting culture before a different audience. This did not seem all that successful, but Irish and Europeans present were offered a different experience. When identities are staged, arguably they are commodified, and such attempts are exploiting culture in new markets conforms to neoliberal practices as seen through the forging of American consumerism—all with the intention of promoting their brands to new markets.

To conclude, geographical notions of staging identity and performing identity offered an interpretation of an American Football event held in Dublin. An atmosphere was (re)created in Dublin and the event was a spectacle. Future work at similar events is needed to study the extent and impact of American Football events outside the United States. Further research is also needed to assess the role of the media in producing and (re)producing the image of American Football as an ‘international sport.’ There is also a need to incorporate a neoliberal approach that evaluates the impacts of commercialization, marketing, and semblances of power involved with operations and media contracts concerning the NFL’s international series in London. The aim of this paper was to reflect on participant observations and offer some critical reflection of the 2014 Croke Park Classic from Dublin.

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