

Jarvie G (2008) The promise of Scottish sport, *Scottish Left Review*, 47, pp. 4-6.

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The Promise of Scottish Sport

Scotland has given a lot to the world of sport and in sports such as curling, bowls, golf and shinty it has the right to claim cultural ownership of 4 sports. As early as the 1920s the social credit movement recognised the social role that sport had to play in terms of social welfare, education and social mobility. Scottish writers such as Neil Gunn throughout the 1930s have commented upon the in roads being made by a commercialised culture which was failing to recognise the importance of local tradition at events such as the Highland Games. The importance of sport as a form of local pride has been grasped by local authorities which saw places such as Motherwell dominate Scottish, British and indeed European competition in the 1940s and 1950s through the exploits of Motherwell Amateur Swimming and Water Polo Club, Glasgow in the 1960s and 1970s when football clubs such as Celtic and Rangers won European competitions by fielding teams hewn out of exploits of local inner city housing schemes and towns such as Kingussie which throughout the 1990s dominated national shinty.

With the 2014 Commonwealth Games being awarded to the City of Glasgow the opportunity exists to build upon Scottish medal winning success which goes back to at least 1930 when 9 medals were won by Scots in the first Hamilton Commonwealth Games held in Canada. In winning a silver medal for golf in the 1900 Paris Olympic Games Walter Rutherford became the first Scot to win an Olympic medal. A visit to the Scottish Sports Hall of Fame (www.sshf.co.uk/) provides an insight into Scots who have performed on the world stage. The 2006 success of athletes such as Richard Ramsay, only the second Scot in 100 years to win the US Amateur Golf championships is testament to the contemporary role of specialist higher education institutions which understand the promise and possibilities of sport and education to give individuals a positive start in life.

The traditional framework for sports policy in a devolved Scotland has been built on the back of a horizontal axis of health and well-being and the importance of hosting major sporting events and a vertical axis of sports participation and sports performance. The essence of any framework for sports policy that ignores the capacity of education and sport to improve life chances for Scots or ignores the capacity of sport to win friends for Scotland through international development misses an opportunity of realising the national dream.

What is being suggested here is that Scotland should grasp the opportunity to be at the forefront of practical sports policies that recognises that sport has helped to (i) change some people's lives (ii) symbolize change but also contribute to broader sustainable change and (iii) work across societies and agencies to help or attempt make the world a better place.

Following the National Dream

Some of the richest and poorest sectors of society identify with forms of sport in different ways. Contemporary patterns of sports participation in Scotland are illustrative of the fact that sport in Scotland is socially differentiated. Arguably football is the national sport. Its popularity amongst young boys and increasingly girls in Scotland should not be underestimated. In 2002, Scottish football clubs

released 350 players. That was 30% of the workforce with the most common age being that of 19. The following example is not atypical of the youthful cultural patriot who wanted to live the dream of Scottish football and found out that he was being released from a premier professional football league club? His mother worrying about the effect this would have on her son said:

'I would have done anything for him not to experience the hurt, but I didn't have a choice because all he has ever wanted to be is a footballer. I wouldn't mind my son being a footballer, but it would be better if he was one with letters after his name and educational qualifications in his pocket'

Agents of education through sport might reflect upon a system which itself has been critically reviewed but remains internationally respected. A fact acknowledged by the recent Horizons Taskforce which reported in June 2008 on the potential new relationship between Universities and Government. The consultative report acknowledges the role that Universities have to play in developing sport. The partnership of education through sport can really make a difference to the quality of life in Scotland. Yet an effective partnership in action is still in the making. A natural sustainable pathway from education and sport provision from school through further and higher education is a proven winner. It is important not to let down or forget the boy or girl who wanted to live the Scottish dream but look after them better, help to create the conditions to let the relationship of education through sport thrive- that would truly be a partnership in action worth trusting and striving for.

Sport and Poverty

Scotland are World Football Champions having won the World Cup in 2007 and are preparing to defend the World Crown in December 2008. For many Scots the thought of winning the World Cup is but a dream. To be ranked number one in the world ahead of the likes of Portugal not to mention England is not fiction but reality. The first Homeless World Cup took place in July 2003 in Austria. 18 countries participated and teams were completely formed by homeless people or by people making their income on selling street papers. There were 109 games played in front of more than 20,000 spectators. The 2008 Homeless World Cup will be staged in Melbourne with the 2009 tournament having been awarded to Italy. 77% of players involved have said that playing certainly changed their lives. Scotland won the tournament in 2007 defeating Poland 9-3 in the final. At the time Scottish Coach David Duke commented that "After changing my own life through football and the Homeless World Cup it is just great that I can help others do the same. To take Scotland to victory is just superb."

Very few sports policies in Scotland have been specifically associated with addressing issues of poverty in Scotland and yet it might be suggested that sport might develop a sustained evidence based argument about the contribution that it can make. Many examples from around the world might be given. In 2000 the former World Boxing Champion Jim Watt returned to Possilpark in Glasgow to open the then Possilpark Millennium Centre Sports Complex and suggested to youngsters that 'sport could provide a way out of the poverty trap'. A 2003 survey enquiring into the motivations behind Kenyan women runners recorded that the primary motive was money (48%).

One former Kenyan male runner Stephen Cherono added ‘an athlete in Kenya runs to escape poverty and I fight to survive’.

The social challenge should not detract from the fact that increasing competition within some of the poorest areas of the world often depletes social and human capital and leaves its potential fragmented. The informal sector sometimes dissolves self-help networks and solidarities essential to the survival of the very poor and it is often women and children who are the most vulnerable. For example an NGO worker in Haiti, describes the ultimate logic of neo-liberal individualism in a context of absolute immiseration:

‘Now everything is for sale. The women used to receive you with hospitality, give you coffee, share all that she has in her home. I could go get a plate of food at a neighbour’s house; a child could get a coconut at her godmother’s, two mangoes at another aunt’s. But these acts of solidarity are disappearing with the growth of poverty. Now when you arrive somewhere, either the women offers to sell you a cup of coffee or she has no coffee at all. The tradition of mutual giving that allowed us to help each other and survive- this is all being lost’

Local Authority Sport and Civil Renewal

The key accountable agents for social welfare at the local level have been local authorities. The advent of free swimming schemes has been a selective rather than a universal policy across all local Authorities. Scotland unlike the Finns does not have a legislative Sports Act which enshrines a minimum level of provision and entitlement in every town and therefore local provision is very much left to the capacity of different local authorities to provide and they do so differentially. There remain issues concerning the governance of local sport in Scotland. The statutory position is that local authorities are required to ensure adequate provision of facilities for the inhabitants of their area for recreational, sporting, cultural and social activities. It is for each local authority to determine what is “adequate provision”. Traditionally these services have been delivered by local authority departments of leisure services. Councils retain control of the process through the normal system of committees of elected members. At least twenty of the thirty two Scottish local authorities have surrendered that control by hiving off the delivery of some or all leisure, sport and culture services to Trusts. The purpose of setting up Leisure Trusts is to make savings based on 95% national non-domestic rates relief and savings on VAT. Trusts are also able to attract external grant aid from sources not available to Councils. Trusts are normally Charitable Leisure Companies limited by guarantee and not having share capital. Council facilities are leased to the Trust for up to 25 years.

Why is this a matter of concern? Firstly, most of the publicly owned sports facilities in the country are now being managed by unelected bodies. This has received little publicity and it is highly unlikely that the average person knows who the Board members are or how they came to be appointed. Audit Scotland (2008) has reported that Councils invest substantial sums on sports facilities. Between 2002 and 2007 Councils invested £385 million of capital expenditure on recreation, sport and parks. This is in addition to an average annual revenue expenditure of £511 million. It seems extraordinary that having invested heavily Councils hand over the facilities to bodies which, under Charities legislation, they cannot control. Secondly, this process of

transferring responsibility from elected Councils to unelected Trusts has happened without any national debate or Government approval. Thirdly, in the absence of co-ordinating machinery, the amount spent on sport varies markedly between local authorities. In 2005-2006 Edinburgh spent £36 per head of population compared to Glasgow's £118. There is no national strategy to control local or direct expenditure on local sport.

The supporters of trusts argue that they are best placed to get the best value for the public pound while opponents argue that key public services in sport are left to the market place. The issue for Scotland as a whole is that local authorities act differently, have different priorities and therefore the opportunity to narrow the gap between rich and poor through education and sport is left to chance and the market.

There is one further aspect of local democracy that is worth mentioning and that is the relationship between sport and civil renewal. Sports participation in Scotland tends to get headline news because sports participation is viewed as being important in health terms and yet the civil renewal argument is just as compelling. It is an argument that should have a particular resonance for volunteers and non-governmental organisations. A 2005 Department of Culture Media and Sport Report which included Scotland in the aggregate UK data, demonstrated the part played by sports participation and organisation as being a catalyst for civil renewal. Scotland lies below many European Countries in the league table of sports participation. Membership of sports clubs appeared to have a number of beneficial impacts, members were more likely than non-members to vote, contact an official and sign a petition. Countries with high levels of sports participation tended to have higher levels of social and institutional trust.

The correlations were substantial for the level of sports participation and levels of social trust. Life satisfaction was also strong although perhaps not as significant. Countries with high levels of membership of sports groups tended to have high levels of membership of cultural and social groups, suggesting that participation was cumulative. In short membership and participation of sports clubs is associated with being more satisfied with life, more trusting, more sociable, healthier and more positive towards state institutions. Sports members also tend to have slightly more liberal views about immigration.

Sport, Development and Life Chances

The opportunity for Scotland to assist other parts of the world through sport remains an under-resourced and under-valued facet of sports provision in Scotland. Scotland does not have the equivalent of Denmark's International Sport and Culture Association (ISCA) or a specific source of Scottish funding that matches UK Sports International Development Assistance Programme. The Scandinavians and to a lesser extent the Dutch have for some time financially supported and encouraged the capacity of sport to influence relationships with communities and non-governmental organisations. The Norway Cup has taken place every year since 1972. It is one of the world's largest football tournaments for children. Every year more than 25,000 kids play in the Norway Cup. The aim of the tournament is to create bonds between children and nations - particularly poorer areas of the world. The Minister of International Development in Norway in recognising the role that such a projects play

recently stated that ‘producing internationalism and co-operation between Norway and many other countries such as Brazil, Kenya, Palestine is important to us and sport can help us do this’.

However such a message is just as important within Scotland in terms of improving life chances through sport. Improving life chances requires a co-ordinated effort and as such any contribution that education through sport can make must also build upon a wider coalition of sustained support for social and progressive policies. It requires harnessing a strong political narrative and action plan that fits with many people’s intuitive understanding that life should not be determined by socio-economic position and that people do have choices, whilst drawing attention to the fact that some people and places face greater risks and more limited opportunities. Equalising life chances and focusing on areas such as poverty should sit together as part of a vision for a better society. In part the promise and possibilities of education through sport are encapsulated in the words of the former Olympic and Commonwealth athlete Kip Keino (Interview-with the author 5th February 2007):

‘I believe in this world that sport is one of the tools that can unite youth- sport is something different from fighting in war and it can make a difference- we can change this world by using sport as a tool’

‘I’ve run a lot for water charities and children’s charities. I believe we share in this world with members of our society who are less fortunate. This is important. We came to this world with nothing and we leave this world with nothing. So we can be able to make a better world for those who need assistance’

Listen also to the likes of Nelson Mandela or Kofi Annan talking of the role of sport in International Development. The former United Nations Secretary General in 2005 noted the potential of sport to effectively convey humanitarian messages, help to improve the quality of people’s lives while helping to promote peace and reconciliation (www.un.org/sport2005/index.html). It is precisely this type of thinking that Scotland needs to engage with and incorporate further within an evolving framework for sports policy which at present is not international enough. Recent events such as the Commonwealth Games Sports Development Conferences show what can be achieved but such work needs to be firmly embedded within day to day sports policy and not simply around major sports events.

Sport as a Resource of Hope

There is no single agent or group that can carry the hopes of humanity but there are many points of engagement through sport that offer good causes for optimism that things can get better. Historically the power of education and sport in Scotland has been a tried and tested avenue of social mobility and while we need to acknowledge that a changing Scotland provides different challenges the power of education through sport to make a difference to people’s lives remains a very real resource of hope for many. The promise and possibility of sport being able to meet national targets is perhaps the wrong way to approach bringing about real change but even if it were it may be more easily realised if sport not only harnessed the resources and possibilities within the current portfolio in which sport is placed but also the education portfolio. Education through sport in Scotland is important because it can be a symbol of

democratic change, it can promote internationality, it can contribute to different ideas of community, it is central to employability but it can do all of this within a context that everyone has the right to education and sport. Education in Scotland has historically always been associated with preparing people for life as equal citizens in a common culture of community and sport has the potential to contribute to this way of life.

The late novelist Susan Sontag once said about the novel that any novel worth reading is an education of the heart, it enlarges your sense of human possibilities and what human nature can be. She was a fervent believer in the capacity of art to delight, to inform and transform the world in which we live in. Education through sport is the jewel in Scottish sports policy and without its capacity recognised the promise of Scottish sport remains just that a promise but the possibilities are tangibly close. The creation of Scotland's University for Sporting Excellence at the University of Stirling is but one progressive, radical development that provides a real opportunity to make a difference through harnessing the combined capacity of education and sport.

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