



Which side are you on? The commodification of sport

Emmett Farrell

The most serious threat so far to the voluntary and amateur ethos of the Gaelic Athletic Association, the most significant community-based amateur sports organisation in the country, emerged at a press conference on 26 May when six prominent county players—all of them All-Ireland medal winners—declared that they had agreed to wear Puma football boots during the championship season in return for money. Various rumours put the sums the players would receive between €2,500 and €5,000, but the figures are not as significant as the clear breach with what had gone before since the foundation of the GAA in 1884. This is the first time that individual players have openly received money for playing a team game. One week after the press conference, the only comment from Seán Kelly, the newly elected President of the GAA, was to tell the *Sunday Business Post* that he had some concerns that such individual player deals would conflict with other sponsorship deals between county teams and sportswear manufacturers.

The unprecedented boom in the economy of the southern state has produced a climate of capitalist commodification and individualism which has eroded the active volunteer base of community-based organisations such as the GAA. Capitalism is changing Ireland, and the GAA will inevitably have to reflect these changes. Kevin Cashman, writing on the crisis in Cork hurling (*Cork Evening Echo*, 18 July 2002):

The industrial proletariat into which most of them were born has all but vanished in the maelstrom of capitalism's globalisation. Eleven of the players who won Cork's three-in-a-row [All-Ireland finals] in the early 50s worked on the long industrial half mile of the Marina... supplemented by electricians and bakers and whatnot from villages on the city's periphery, the team had just two professionals... Nowadays the privilege of being sweated by Ford and Dunlop belongs to the peoples of Asia. Cork teams, like most others, are manned by students, company reps, professionals, practitioners in the alleged 'service industries', computer boffins and suchlike persons of nomadic disposition.

The self-styled Gaelic Players Association conference in early 2002 was advised by Brendan Batson of the (English) Professional Footballers Association that the PFA demands were only met when they used the threat of strike action. The Cork hurling panel, under GPA guidance, subsequently went on 'strike' and made a series of demands for gym fees, increased travelling expenses, holidays and the like. The Cork County Board of the GAA capitulated and conceded most of the demands. Most sports commentators in the capitalist media are actively campaigning to end the amateur status of GAA players and, following the capitulation of the Cork County Board and the refusal to act to prevent individual players accepting money from Puma, it appears that the GAA leadership has given up on any struggle against creeping professionalism.

The growing popularity of the hurling and football All-Ireland series, with huge attendances, inevitably invite comparisons with professional soccer and rugby, where players whose training efforts would not be much greater, and whose skills might not match those of D J Carey in full flight, have been receiving hugely inflated financial rewards from the money injected into soccer by commercial television. In this climate, the self-styled Gaelic Players Association emerged, and is supported in its campaigns by most journalists in the capitalist media. The GPA emerged in late 1999 as the brainchild of Dónal O'Neill who

had worked with the International [Sports] Marketing Group in Asia and, having a GAA background, 'spotted a niche in the market' in Ireland. The GPA has argued that a typical GAA county player has lost €175,000 in wages foregone during a ten-year county career, and have issued a demand for €127 per week per player during the championship season. The GPA has appointed former Dublin Gaelic football player Dessie Farrell as full-time secretary, and is targeting county players for membership.

Some comrades argue that the GPA is a union like the professional soccer players' union in Britain, and should be supported as such. But what kind of union is the GPA? In its propaganda to date the GPA has argued solely for the interest of the elite county player. At their 2002 conference the GPA stated that they wished to be recognised by the GAA as the players' representative body, but did not wish to be represented at Central Council level. In reality, they want the right to 'represent' the elite county players where issues of sponsorship money and perks are to be discussed, but they do not want to be under democratic control or to make any contribution outside of playing the game, arguably the most rewarding aspect of being a GAA member. More than three years after its emergence, the GPA has made no comment on the crisis in hurling, how the game might be developed outside of the now strong counties, how women's football could be further developed and how handball might be supported. The GPA leadership show no interest whatever in the club player, nor in the camogie player, the women footballers, the handball player, the referee, the linesman/woman, the underage coach, or any other of the voluntary workers whose contribution makes the GAA the most successful amateur sports organisation anywhere.

Everything about the GPA is oriented to the elite county players and what rewards can be secured for them. Initially, the GPA claimed that they were not seeking payment for playing football and hurling, and that their only intention was to win significant sponsorship money for the county player, but this has been the method by which athletics, rugby and other previously amateur sports have been undermined, and it is clear that the demand for payment will inevitably follow. The print media sports writers argue that it is only a matter of time until GAA players are paid.

The GPA argument continues to be that the county player is making huge sacrifices and since the crowds are flocking to the new Croke Park—six attendances of around 80,000 during July-September 2002 and 63,000 at the Leinster football quarter-finals this May—then the money should be provided to county players. This line of argument completely ignores all the voluntary workers without whom the county player could not perform, and also ignores the fact that the surplus realised from attendances at Croke Park is reinvested in grounds and clubs around the country, and that the GAA accounts for this money in annual audited accounts.

A former Derry footballer (Joe Brolly, on *Breaking Ball*, June 2002) has opposed the GPA, arguing that

The GPA is spearheading a corrosive attack on the ethos of the games. Their approach illustrates a total misunderstanding of what the GAA was and is all about. ...an unrepresentative group of talented footballers and hurlers could well be setting in motion the ultimate demise of our greatest national treasure.

No doubt, the existing nominated GAA players' representative body should be replaced by an elected body which hopefully would represent all players rather than just the elite, but the GPA, however well-intentioned—and naïve—some of the members may be, should be opposed by anyone with the interests of sport and the GAA at heart.

The assault on the GAA is part of the commodification of sport, which has already advanced to ruin many previously amateur participatory sports. The defence of amateur participatory sport against commodification is another task for socialists. Professional sport

is rotten through and through, corrupted by money so that the majority of elite athletes in all professional sports are abusing performance-enhancing drugs to sustain performances which will deliver records and sponsorship money. The so-called Olympic spirit is a sick joke.

An analysis of the role of sport in capitalist society written by French Trotskyists in the 1970s criticises the failure of revolutionary socialists to analyse the ideology of elite level competitive sport, its use to promote class collaboration, to rally the working class behind the 'nation', and to divert the working class from the struggle to change society (Jean-Marie Brohm, *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time* (Ink Links, 1978) p 180):

radicals and Marxists maintain an almost sheepish and, it should be admitted, opportunist silence on sport, dictated, it would seem, by the working class's evident enjoyment of it... mass spectator sport operates as a sort of catharsis machine, an apparatus for transforming aggressive drives. Instead of expressing themselves in the class struggle, these drives are absorbed, diverted and neutralised in the sporting spectacle.

When the essays were written in the early 1970s, international athletics and other Olympic sports were in transition from 'shamateurism' to the fully professional sports of the present. During the thirty years since, the professionalisation of most sports has seen the acceleration of all the worst trends. In 1972, Avery Brundage, then President of the International Olympic Committee, stated that "competitors who allow their names or photographs to be used for the purpose of advertising sports equipment, clothing etc, have become representatives of the manufacturer or retailer... and will be banned from competition". GAA fans should note that this commitment did not last long, and should learn the lesson of the damage done to sport by professionalism over the past thirty years. Previously amateur sport has become a capitalist commodity and been taken over by profit-hungry multinational media corporations and sports and leisure wear manufacturers.

Competition by states and cities to secure the Olympics, the soccer World Cup, or other such prestigious competitions has involved multi-million dollar bribery because of the opportunities for profit involved – any losses being carried by the working-class taxpayer. The dominant view in competitive sport has become the idea that 'winning is all that matters', that 'losers come second'. Performance-enhancing drugs are in widespread use by individual professional athletes, swimmers, cyclists and increasingly in team sports, in attempts to push the limits of human endurance further, to drive for new world records, to secure the sponsorship of Nike or whoever. Sports coverage is at saturation level, moving seamlessly from European Champions League coverage through 'winter' sports to European Championship athletics to the GAA championships, with a major golf tournament every other weekend, televised soccer every night of the week from Britain, Italy and Spain, and the so-called sports of horse, greyhound and motor racing.

The transformation of soccer in England since the 1960s is an example of the inevitable tendency of capitalism to commodify all aspects of life and, in the process, to destroy much of what is best in life. Whereas prior to the 1960s, English soccer, though professional and with a maximum wage, was a sport with community-based clubs, it is now entertainment with highly-paid entertainers, many of whom have little or no connection or loyalty to the community in which the club is based. In the 1960s, players set out to win the division of the Football League that they were then playing in, and they set out to win the FA Cup – for a community of supporters. The FA Cup has been devalued by more monied competitions, and it is unlikely that the players of, say, Chelsea or Middlesbrough when collecting their salaries of £30,000-£40,000 a week think very much of the rich football history of these clubs or the communities that produced them.

Soccer has received enormous sums of money from television and sponsorship over the past 25 years. In England the 92 league clubs generate between £1.5 billion and £2 billion

annually (according to financial analysts Deloitte and Touche). In parallel with the deepening inequality under Thatcher and Blair, the gap between the top Premiership clubs and the rest has continued to widen. In 1981, the top clubs threatened to break away and were allowed to retain home gates – more of an advantage to Liverpool than Wimbledon. In 1985, to prevent a breakaway, the First Division clubs were allowed retain 50% of all TV and sponsorship money – now twenty Premiership clubs share £1.5 billion while 72 others share £500 million. Club wage bills having increased rapidly – £620 million in 1998-9, £747 million in 1999-2000 – but appear to have peaked since the huge inflation in soccer players' wages and transfer fees, together with the failure of soccer-saturated television to deliver the expected advertising revenues, is pushing even the wealthiest clubs towards bankruptcy: 74 of the 92 clubs are in debt.

Football fans on low to average wages have been squeezed by the rocketing prices in the new seated stadia. In 1991, there were 20,000 standing places available at Old Trafford at £4 per head and 90p for children. The cheapest ticket now is over £20. Tickets are up to £50 for Premiership games. Wealthy capitalists can buy soccer clubs and spend tens of millions to buy success so as to bask in the reflected glory, though success by this route is by no means guaranteed.

Football today is dominated by chairmen who often boast larger personalities than those of their players and by the constant need to see a return on investment. So when delving into the origins of many of today's biggest clubs, it is frequently intriguing to find their formations dominated not by financial concerns but by the principles of Socialism, Christianity and togetherness.

– *Pictorial History of English Football*

The sale of naming rights to stadiums is another step on the road to the direct sale of clubs between cities, as has happened with professional baseball and American football clubs in the US. Century-old community-based soccer clubs which generations of working people and their families have supported are threatened with collapse.

Football in the thirties up to the eighties served as a strong social glue. Many supporters left the pit shaft, shipyard, pottery or factory floor from a Saturday morning half-shift and headed straight to see their favourite team for a sense of escape, as well as entertainment.... Too many clubs, having worked hard to rid their stadiums of racism and hooliganism, are now simply practising economic bigotry... The wag on the terraces and the low earner with two children, for whom football is an escape from a harsh working life, have to all intents and purposes been forced out of the game, especially at many Premiership clubs.

– Stanley Matthews, *The Way it Was*

Basic socialist principles suggest we should oppose the increasing commodification of all aspects of life and society, and the rapid commodification of sport and leisure should be resisted. In debate before the 2002 general election, it was argued by Bertie Ahern and other supporters of the so-called Bertie Bowl that 'our elite athletes need world-class facilities', but there was no mention in the debate of the dearth of public facilities for sport and leisure. If you cannot pay to join a private gym or other sports club – €50 per week and upwards – if you are no longer active in a sports club, have a disability, are a senior citizen or live in a small town or a 'disadvantaged area', there is no access for you to sport and leisure facilities. There is surely a case for campaigning for adequate public sports and leisure facilities.

Socialists should oppose professionalism in sport. Despite the evidence that the increasing commodification of sport has led to doping scandals in swimming, cycling and athletics, to professional boxing becoming a farcical playground for Don King and friends, to the breakdown of club loyalty in soccer and to professional sport becoming a huge capitalist

enterprise, some comrades will argue that socialists should not oppose professionalism in sport since it enables some working-class youth to get out of the ghetto. It would be much better, however, to concentrate on replacing the ghetto, than see such an opportunity—a chance in a million—as worth defending.

Irish sports journalists advocate extra taxpayers' funds to provide grants to elite athletes so that more Olympic medals might be won—like Michelle Smith's three gold medals? Why should any taxpayers' funds go to professional athletes, soccer players and the like? They provide exciting entertainment, and it is as entertainment and not as sport that such activities should be treated. Like the spectacularly skilled acrobats, tightrope walkers and contortionists in the circus, professional athletes are entertainers, but this is not sport. Participatory amateur sport is worth defending from the cash nexus. In Ireland, the community-based GAA clubs, amateur soccer, amateur rugby, basketball, athletics and other sports provide good examples of real participatory sport, and socialists should defend amateur sport against the onslaught from profit-hungry capital.

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