

Sport, citizenship and nationality – from antiquity to the present

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ABSTRACT

In this Special Issue we introduce the topic of citizenship in sport, a topic pursued within the 4EU+ Alliance project, Flagship 2, devoted to the theme of Europeanness: multilingualism, pluralities and citizenship. The following five articles explore the concept of citizenship, its historical perspectives in the citizenships of ancient Greece and Rome, its contemporary legal and political context, and its relation to sport. The articles also discuss the relationship of the political concept of citizenship as belonging to a nation, and the idea of athletes becoming citizens within and through sport. We believe this topic warrants renewed attention in light of current challenges to citizenship in European society, and the opportunities offered by the particular situated power of sport as an agent of cultural learning and change.

KEYWORDS

citizenship; sport; belonging; eligibility; nation

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OVERVIEW AND INTRODUCTION

Citizenship has been an important theme in the historical development of the European Union, especially since the enlargement projects of 2004 and 2007 concentrated attention on emigrant communities and questions regarding eligibility for citizenship (Baubock et al., 2007). The 4EU+ Alliance, a strategic association of universities aiming to collaborate in research-intensive engagement with European issues, has this theme as one of its four Flagship themes. Specifically, Flagship 2 is devoted to the theme of Europeanness: multilingualism, pluralities and citizenship (<https://4euplus.eu/4EU-418.html>).

Currently, citizenship is most commonly defined in political terms as “one’s legal status as a member of a nation state with related rights and responsibilities” (Guschwan, 2014, p. 859). It presupposes some scope for freedom and public participation, and in its fuller sense citizenship is more closely associated with liberal democracies, whereas in authoritarian settings it often persists as a primarily legal-formal status with constrained exercise. Thus, while citizenship need not disappear under authoritarian rule, it may be hollowed out, when authorities treat people as subjects rather than rights-bearing participants.

Citizenship is typically examined within political philosophy and sociology, and its relationship to sport has been explored by several scholars, although it remains underdeveloped in sport studies. Still, this is not the first Special Issue of a journal on this topic. In 2014, the journal *Sport in Society* organized a Special Issue titled ‘Sport and Citizenship’ (Guschwan, 2014). In academic literature, citizenship has been mainly discussed as closely related to the theme of nationality, especially representing athletes as belonging to a nation state, which informs the possibility of international sport. It also looked at issues of athletes’ migration and change of affiliation within club and national sports organisations and also, in a limited way, the idea of ‘belonging’ to sport-communities, seeing athletes as ‘sport citizens’.

We believe these topics warrant renewed attention in light of current challenges related to citizenship in European society. Moreover, we think sport has a special role to play in citizenship development. Sport is a suitable area for thinking about citizenship, since it involves large groups of people, whether athletes or spectators, who are engaged in communities by a common practice that is based on democratic principles (McCoy & Martínková, 2022).

This Special Issue presents a collection of articles that examine various dimensions of citizenship and its relation to sport; and this essay will act in part as an introduction to these articles. Some contributions draw on historical perspectives from ancient Greece and Rome, while some focus directly on contemporary sport. In the context of sport, the discussion is centred primarily on athletes and their potential role as ‘sport citizens’. Since citizenship in sport is closely intertwined with political notions of citizenship, the issue also explores themes of national belonging, change of affiliation, and community building.

Citizenship in historical context and its conceptualization

At its most general level, ‘citizenship’ can be defined as a relational status of belonging of an individual to a (political) community. Citizenship is usually understood in political terms as belonging to a *polis* (city-state) or a nation state, participating in its life and decision-making. Citizenship affords people a specific status in their community, defining their rights and responsibilities. (See e.g. Guschwan, 2014.) The rights and responsibilities that define this relationship of belonging differ for individual communities throughout history, changing with the development of these communities. But we need to start first with the question of what citizenship is and where the idea historically arises.

Manlio Cinalli, in his contribution ‘Citizenship as a Relational Field: Interests and Identities across Cleavages and Seams’ reconceptualizes the concept of citizenship as relational, by drawing on the examples of ancient Greece and Rome and connecting

them to contemporary issues. His approach sheds fresh light on the way we might think about citizenship today. Whereas contemporary debates frame citizenship either as a property of individuals (rights, identities, etc.) or as a feature of society (nation, social cohesion, etc.), Cinalli suggests a 'relational' understanding that reveals the underlying 'architecture' of citizenship. This architecture is strung along two axes. The vertical axis addresses the relationship between citizens and political authority – between the governors and governed, focussing on the engagement of citizens with their rulers and the accountability of the rulers. The horizontal axis captures the relationship among citizens themselves, addressing how they recognise one another as members of a shared community. Citizenship, according to Cinalli, is configured at the intersection of these two axes, which define concrete instances of citizenship, whilst operating neither in symmetrical nor parallel fashion.

This relational architecture of citizenship emerges from the genealogies of the Greek and Roman traditions and continues to shape contemporary configurations of citizenship. Cinalli's account makes these roots explicit, identifying ancient Greece and Rome as the first crystallisations of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of citizenship, which can be seen as complementary. In the Greek *polis*, citizenship was characteristic of collective decision-making. The *agora* functioned as an open space enabling encounters between the governors and the governed, thus developing a vertical axis of representation, accountability, as well as potential contestation. By contrast, the Roman *civitas* formed a horizontal understanding of citizenship. Their civic status was grounded in the reciprocal recognition of equal rights and duties among individuals who otherwise differentiated by ethnic origin, local territory, social rank, etc. Civic equality was articulated through rights, legal protections, shared rituals, festivities and games that reinforced a sense of common belonging.

According to Cinalli, two main forces that shape citizenship are interests and identities. They both simultaneously cut across vertical and horizontal axes of citizenship, bringing calculation or mutual benefit as well as symbolic boundaries and emotional attachment into the picture. From this framework, Cinalli distinguishes four relational logics (ideal types) of citizenship: contentious, democratic, liberal-clientelist, and full citizenship.

In his article 'Citizenship and the Ancient Olympic Games' Jiří Kouřil explores the origins of the political understanding of citizenship and its relation to sport by describing the historical origins of citizenship in ancient Greece and Rome. In ancient Greece, full citizenship was initially limited to free adult males who were born to parents who were already citizens, and this was only later partly extended. Kouřil describes the criteria for citizenship and its changes during the period of Greek and Roman civilisations. He also presents the duties and benefits of Greek and Roman citizenship status, and the relationship of citizenship to sport, especially the Olympic Games.

In the early development of the Olympic Games, eligibility required citizenship in a Greek city-state, whether on the mainland or in the colonies, with the condition that the city-state was not banned (Crowther, 1996, p. 40). However, citizenship in a Greek city-state was not the only eligibility criterion. Kouřil also lists other criteria (such as compulsory training) as well as moral criteria (e.g. excluding individuals guilty of crimes, such as murderers and blasphemers). The criterion of citizenship evolved over time. In later periods, the eligibility criteria were broadened beyond the Greek city-

states – first to include non-Greeks of Greek ancestry (e.g. Macedonians of Greek origin), and later to include athletes from across the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, even during the Roman period, the Greeks retained a strong attachment to their city-states. For example, according to Finley and Pleket: “The Greek cities had lost their ancient political autonomy, but not their hold on the imagination and pride of their citizens. An Olympic victor in the third century A.D. still identified himself with his city, as had his predecessors a thousand years before, and his city with him” (1976, p. 11).

Citizenship and contemporary sport

Irena Slepíčková’s contribution ‘Sport and citizenship – thinking about contemporary trends and problems’ examines contemporary issues in citizenship related to the functioning of civil society, such as immigration and the weakening of citizens’ engagement in civic affairs, and the importance of a sense of belonging.

She focuses on two ways in which sport and citizenship are related. Firstly, legal and political sports citizenship asks who can represent a country. This requires a definition of the ‘state’, which she sees as mainly a question of geographical borders, and attention to the rules for obtaining a passport. Importantly, international sports organizations must then establish clear rules for representation, and for changes in the affiliation of especially elite athletes, either for reasons of immigration, or for the recruitment of athletes to national squads. Secondly, community sport citizenship relates to everyday civic life. Sports in municipalities and various smaller communities are based on a sense of belonging and of contributing to the welfare of the whole.

Breana McCoy focusses on the development of athletes’ citizenship within sport, in the context of the democratization of contemporary international sport organizations. In her earlier article, McCoy (2025) examined the purported commitment of international sport organizations to democratic governance, which she exemplified by the International Olympic Committee and its Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance (IOC, 2022). She argued that one of the problems of limited development of democratic governing lies in an overreliance on institutional dimension of democracy, and the need to cultivate the cultural dimension of democracy.

In this Special Issue, against the backdrop of the need for top-down reforms of international sport organizations (the institutional dimension of democracy), McCoy centres her analysis on athletes as a key stakeholder group in sport (situated within the cultural dimension of democracy). Although sport involves many stakeholders, athletes are its principal stakeholders (see de Coubertin, 2000, p. 739), as sport is created and organized primarily for their participation and benefit. To capture athletes’ rights as well as responsibilities, McCoy uses the term ‘sport citizen’. Her central argument is that meaningful inclusion of athletes as stakeholders in sport governance hinges on targeted education. She examines one of the democratic principles – ‘challenging of authority’ – and argues that education can strengthen athletes’ capacity to exercise it. McCoy explores ideas on civic education and development of skills such as reasoning, critical thinking and communication skills, complemented by sport education. To this end, she draws on Eichberg and Jespersen’s (2009) education ‘for’, ‘by’, and ‘through’ sport.

It is important to emphasize that democratic thinking is not merely grafted onto sport through reasoning and critical thinking about sport; rather, participation in sport itself

cultivates a distinctive openness, akin to that fostered by philosophic inquiry and democratic practice – enacted in competition, where athletes compare their skill and abilities, trying to improve to overcome an opponent, under the ideals of equality and meritocracy (McCoy & Martínková, 2022; Parry & Martínková, 2024, p. 2). Accordingly, it is reasonable to contend that sport helps prepare athletes to be democratic citizens.

This kind of thinking about citizenship leads us to focus on athletes as citizens in more detail. When doing so, we can see that the large numbers of athletes, with different levels of groups of practitioners, allow us to distinguish at least the elite/professional sport level and its citizenship from the community sport level. So it is useful to distinguish between different levels of citizenship, such as ‘community sport citizenship’ and ‘elite sport citizenship’.

Sporting communities give people opportunities to practice sport together, to improve their physical abilities and skills through rule-defined tasks within often friendly community settings. The theme of ‘elite sport citizenship’ concerns high-level competitive sport, in which athletes of different countries form an ‘elite sport community’ (Henne, 2015). It aims at excellence and serious competition with higher stakes, with victories often bringing extrinsic values of fame and finance. ‘Community sport citizenship’ can nurture the idea of citizenship in competitive sport within local communities, i.e. especially club sport at lower levels of competition. Since competitive sport is the connection between these two groups (elite and community), they learn the same kinds of skills, but they are distinguished by level of intensity. Apart from improving physical abilities and skills, athletes also learn other skills necessary within competition, such as, for example, learning to win and lose, to communicate with others, and to deal with various moral issues arising from competition. Their sporting practice brings them sport-specific values, including interpersonal and moral values (Martínková, 2013).

Citizenship and nationality in contemporary sport

While these ideas on athlete citizenship are crucial for development of athletes as active citizens within their communities as well as helping to improve sport through active engagement, in contemporary sport citizenship is most prominently expressed in political terms – specifically in competitions where eligibility is determined by affiliation with a nation state. This is different from ancient Greece, since the concept of nation state did not exist in antiquity, emerging only in 19th century European political thought. Sport in ancient Greece was organized around city-states, originally also with a restriction against participation for those without Greek identity, which was based on shared language, alphabet and religion, even though individual city-states were spread over a wide geographical area. Whilst there are some similarities, such as athletes from smaller units competing against each other in a higher-level competition, this did not entail the mingling of people of vastly different backgrounds. That is why we cannot speak about international sport in the context of ancient Greece in the way that we do nowadays.

The categorization of athletes according to nation is one of the usual eligibility rules in international competition (Martínková & Parry, 2024). The category of nation is a necessity for the Olympic and Paralympic Games (and International Federations), and the rationale behind this category is to promote sport all over the world. For ex-

ample, the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) structure goes down as far as the nation, i.e. to National Olympic committees (NOC) and athletes in national sport federations. Rule 44 of the Olympic Charter states: "The invitations to take part in the Olympic Games shall be sent out by the IOC to all NOCs one year before the opening ceremony... An NOC shall only enter competitors upon the recommendations for entries given by national federations..." (IOC, 2025, p. 82). And the athletes to be selected must be citizens of the country in question – Rule 41.1 states: "Any competitor in the Olympic Games must be a national of the country of the NOC which is entering such competitor" (ibid., p. 80). However, this does not prevent some athletes from changing their citizenship in order to compete for other countries.

Currently, athletes can change nationality in accordance with the Bye-law to Rule 41.2, which permits such a change after a period of three years (IOC, 2025, p. 81). This provision allows foreign athletes to join national teams following a period of adaptation. This is not a new approach within contemporary sport; even in ancient Greece: "[s]ome Greek cities took an interest in trying to recruit athletes from other cities, again for reasons of national prestige" (Crowther, 1996, p. 34). Nevertheless, beyond the eligibility criterion, club sports are already open to athlete migration, attracting skilled athletes to boost their teams' performance.

William Crossan and Martin Chalupník use the concrete and topical example of football to examine attitudes towards the inclusion of foreign players and coaches in Czechia. Complemented by interviews with club executives, marketing directors, and sport managers, analysis of their five-year survey data highlights how foreign players and coaches can be integrated in ways that strengthen not only club performance but also broader forms of citizenship, understood as practices of belonging, respect, and inclusion within Czech football and society.

With reference to the recent experience of Sparta Prague the results suggest that, although there is still some scepticism towards internationalization, this is not to be understood through simple explanations relying on the idea of nationalism and prejudice. Crossan and Chalupník develop a more sophisticated analysis that draws on the importance of on-field performance and the notion of cultural proximity, and they emphasise the significance of value-driven communication from clubs.

Racism cannot be ignored as a factor, although (for example) African players are increasingly visible in football in recent times. This highlights the fact that elite clubs are not only sporting institutions, but are also important civic actors at the forefront of racial inclusion. For example, coaches and fans of English Premiership clubs want the best players – who cares where they come from? Thus, the perhaps (politically) insignificant football club contributes to the formation of inclusive racial and national narratives. The personal, and the social, become political.

In a wider perspective, we might consider issues of cosmopolitanism, in addition to those of nationality. The FIFA initiative with the Global Citizen Education Fund (Global Citizen, 2026a, Insideworldfootball, 2025) seems to raise such issues, although its rationale mainly relates to the relief of poverty and to community education through football. The alliance of FIFA with the Global Citizen (2026b) organisation might seem to promise something important with regard to the development of sport citizenship, but its terms of reference are much narrower, and its conceptualisation with regard to citizenship remains under-developed.

CONCLUSION

In this Special Issue, we have begun to explore various aspects of the concept of citizenship, in order to illuminate the role of sport in developing attitudes and practices that contribute to the humanising of sport and the promotion of liberal democracy. The hegemonizing practice of sport (Parry, 1983), based on its isomorphism with political liberalism, sets sporting practice at the forefront of contemporary political debates about who should play against who, and on what basis.

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