



MARS – MEDIA AGAINST RACISM IN SPORT

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NATIONAL MEDIA ENCOUNTER

Media Cross-Production for Inclusive Coverage

'Racism in Irish football'

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Bohemian's manager used to suffer racism for being an Irishman. Now some Irish football supporters, and occasionally players, are indulging in racist abuse themselves.

With additional reporting by Martin Kelleher

Over the last two days in Dublin I interviewed two men who love the beautiful game.

Both of them were taking part in a National Media Encounter for the Media Against Racism in Sport (MARS) project which is funded by the European Union and the Council of Europe.

I interviewed one of the participants in the encounter, and also one of the main speakers.

In terms of full disclosure I was also a speaker at this encounter representing the Irish Executive Council of the National Union of Journalists.

Moreover, this piece is part of the work of the encounter along with my colleague Martin Kelleher of Athlone Community radio.

Hailuu Netsiyanwa is now 24, when he was 14 his parents brought him from Zimbabwe to live in Ireland.

He now considers Ireland to be home.

A promising amateur footballer on the Leinster scene he finally gave up because of the racist abuse he received.

"I came here in 2002, the year of the world cup, my parents moved to Inchicore in Dublin.

"I wasn't aware; I didn't even know what racism was.

"Words like N*** was for the black people on TV, you know the American people on TV. Rap music. There weren't that many black people in Inchicore at the time. I was glad that I played football. I was pretty good as well. That kinda helped. That was the one thing that gave me esteem. I made friends. I broke into the community. If you made a good tackle in a game against the other team people would come up to you afterwards and slap you on the back. You felt like you belonged. It was a good feeling."**

Then he told of the other side of his experience.

"I played in a few of the schoolboy teams and then in the Super league. By that time I had almost become accustomed to it. People wouldn't pass the ball to you in training. Stupid shit like that."

"For me football was a tool. If someone was a racist prick then I would beat him on the ball instead of entertaining his shit!

"I had a friend in the team from Nigeria who was very hot headed about the abuse and he couldn't cope."

Finally Hailuu told me how he was subjected to a racist attack in Blanchardstown.

"I was hopped on by some lads and got a kicking. The thing is four of them were from my own team! After that I just gave up."

He hasn't played football since and is now a community activist with an interest in radio.

At dinner in the hotel that night he proudly wore a t-shirt honouring Celtic's "Lisbon Lions" team of 1967.

Hailuu said that football could be a vehicle to fight racism or it could be an arena where xenophobia could be authorised.

In wearing the Celtic shirt celebrating an inclusive team he was saying he still believed in **joga bonito**.

The following day Aaron Callaghan was sitting in the same chair in my Dublin hotel room that the young Zimbabwean had occupied the day before.

After a 25 year career in professional football in England and Ireland he is now the manager of Bohemians, a league of Ireland club based in the country's capital.

I asked Callaghan about the beginning at Stoke City and he transported himself back a quarter of a century when he was a young apprentice footballer in England.

He spoke about the reality of anti-Irish racism in England at the time.

"It was 1983 I got the offer of a trial with Stoke City. Three months later there was a contract on the table. They put me in a hostel. All sorts of people. I wasn't used to it. I thought I was going to a family. Six weeks after that I came home. I didn't tell them. I was homesick.

"Then going back they accommodated me in a family environment. It was great.

"I still keep in contact with that lady. She is a fantastic lady.

"I then went back to what was in England at the time a huge amount of racism towards Irish people.

"Within England itself in general and in my opinion it manifested itself in the football culture.

"There were maybe two or three players at the club who had an anti-Irish outlook. One was from Sheffield another one was from London. It was name calling, but it led to me getting into fights.

'Irish bastard', 'Fenian bastard' the usual anti-Irish stuff from the time."

He is happy that it is only a distant memory now and that young Irish players going to England have one less problem to contend with.

"I think there is a huge difference now in England. There is a lot more education, a lot more awareness. I still think racism is still a huge issue in soccer, obviously the Suarez incident in the UK. We had a high profile case here with Eamonn Zayed last year."

He acknowledged that anti-Irish racism remained a problem in Scotland and made specific reference to his good friend Neil Lennon, the Celtic manager.

"The treatment of Neil Lennon, who is a very good friend of mine, has been shocking to say the least. I mean how do you cope with that?"

The day I interviewed Callaghan two men were sentenced to five years in prison for sending what they thought were improvised explosive devices to the Celtic manager.

As a manager of a league of Ireland side he is well placed to speak of our own problems with racism in soccer.

Aaron said that he thought that racism in Irish soccer remained a crowd issue and those incidents, like the abuse of Eamonn Zayed by another player in the League of Ireland, was rare.

His "day job" as a sports development officer for Dublin City Council means that he can attest to the reality on the ground:

"There are still racists in this city" he said.

When I related Hailuu's story, he said:

"The abuse that lads get at that level is shocking and I'm not surprised at the treatment that lad from Zimbabwe got.

"Respect and fair play is what we teach our lads, that they are part of the Bohemians family."

Both Bohemians and the amateur teams that Hailuu played for are governed by the Football Association of Ireland.

We asked the FAI to comment on the incidence of racism in soccer in Ireland.

A Football Association of Ireland spokesman said:

"The FAI has a long established Code of Ethics programme which encourages all our member clubs to treat their players equally and to promote the concept of fair play and equality for all participants in the game. The Code of Ethics document specifically states that all children should be treated in an equitable and fair manner regardless of age, ability, sex, religion, social and ethnic background or political persuasion. Children with disability should be involved in sports activities in an integrated way, thus allowing them to participate to their potential alongside other children.

"The FAI in conjunction with its key stakeholders have developed the 'Intercultural Football Plan' The purpose of which is to examine how best, in the context of a more diverse Irish society the Football Association of Ireland can encourage increased participation in football among people from minority ethnic and cultural backgrounds, whilst also challenging and preventing the spread of 'racism' within the game and thereby contribute towards a fully intercultural and integrated society.

"The aim of the plan is 'To ensure every individual can feel free to become involved in football on a basis of equality, confident that they will be welcome if they do so, and to contribute thereby to an integrated society at ease with its growing diversity'

"Our members clubs and leagues are all aware of the importance of dealing with any alleged incidents of racist abuse in the correct manner. The FAI employs an Intercultural Manager in Des Tomlinson, who is available to advise and guide clubs or leagues that may have issues of this nature to deal with on occasion.

"Regarding the Airtricity League, all clubs are provided with a script to read out before all matches highlighting the desire for all players and supporters in the league to be treated in a fair and equitable manner and clarifying those episodes of racist abuse will not be tolerated in any way. The FAI also welcomes the work carried out by groups such as Show Racism the Red Card and Sport Against Racism in Ireland (SARI) to promote equality in Irish football.

"The FAI has been at the forefront of dealing with this issue and has held a number of workshops around the country to promote integration. In September last year Des Tomlinson facilitated a major workshop at Aviva Stadium which was targeted at those involved in sport at all levels as well as individuals or organisations that use sport as a tool to support social integration/inclusion including: club children's officers, coaches, managers, secretaries, Council Sports Development Officers, NGO's, Council Community Development Workers, Youth Workers/Organisations, Community Garda."

We asked Ken McCue of SARI if they were satisfied with the efforts of the FAI in relation to punishing incidents of racist abuse, particularly at grass roots level.

"Racist abuse is a regular occurrence particularly in the amateur game. Players from clubs like Insaka AFC (predominately African) suffer abuse on and off the pitch. In order to prosecute a case, the incident must be recorded in the referee's report and there must be an independent witness (unattached to the club filing the report) and within the statute of limitations (as defined by the FAI). In accordance with the FAI strategic plan, all coaches and referees are to be trained to spot racist behaviour; however, in practice many of the cases don't reach Abbotstown as the officials are not au fait with procedure. This phenomenon occurs at all levels of the game; witness the abuse (monkey grunts) of the Cameroon player Joe Ndo during a Shamrock Rovers v Bohemians broadcast live on TG4 .

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fretxesAwI>

"This case (with recording) was presented by SARI to the FAI intercultural advisory group for consideration but was rejected by that body as the incident was not recorded in the referee's report. SARI is aware of a raft of reports sent to the FAI

from teams and individuals. Many of these alleged incidents go back some years and remain unresolved. SARI has expressed dissatisfaction with the FAI handling of many cases and constantly raises the issue at the Football Intercultural Advisory Group (FIAG)."

On the issue of funding available to the FAI from the EU towards their efforts in the matter of anti-racism education he said:

"The last number of years, the FAI has received direct funding from the State through the Integration Fund. The NGO Show Racism the Red Card, used by the FAI to deliver training, has also received funds from that source. In the UK, players like Suarez and Terry have appeared in Red Card promotions. All funds allocated are subject to audit, tested for value for money."

McCue was asked about the FAI claims that it had implemented a policy and that there had been a marked lessening of the culture of racial abuse, both in grass roots level and professional (LOI) level.

He said:

"Unfortunately the culture of racist abuse is abundant here. Under the EU White Paper on Sport, the FAI is obliged to use the medium of the game to combat racism, and use the medium of the game for cultural integration and social inclusion. As football players, coaches and officials are part of that society, discriminatory practices and prejudices show up on the field of play. This behaviour can only be tackled through a comprehensive integration through coach and official sport education programme (as per German Olympic Council) and robust prosecution process in line with the European Network against Racism Hate Crime protocols. and all forms of discrimination at the same time."

With regard to whether or not there was a mandatory practice by LOI clubs of ejecting individual supporters identified as chanting racist abuse, McCue said:

"Yes. It is the policy of the FAI. However in a recent case taken to the FAI by the Derry City player, Eamonn Zayed, a new procedure was adopted (outside of the FIAG guidelines) resulting in paltry fines for 'fan' groups and suspension of a player for selected games. Since then Zayed has moved to Iran where he has become a folk hero with Persepolis FC."

There is no doubt that racism exists in modern Irish society and this is manifested in football throughout the levels of the game.

Ireland became a multicultural society within a handful of years as the country "enjoyed" a once in a century unsustainable credit boom.

Now that the economy has crashed and the country is run by the IMF the dole queues of Dublin and Limerick provide fertile soil for racist simplicities.

Some of these men go to league of Ireland football matches and they do not leave their racism at the turnstile.

Aaron Callaghan, himself a victim of anti-Irish racism in England in the 1980s, knows the cruel irony of the Irish turning on the huddled masses of other countries.

Hailuu's story tells the truth that football can be both a place where a young person can "break into the community", but also a somewhere hate can be authorised.

Before a problem can be eradicated it must be identified and called out for what it is, and good journalism is a key player in that process.