

## Chapter 11

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# CIVIL SOCIETY AND SPORTING ELIGIBILITY

**I**N 2001, [WHEN Lionel Messi was thirteen](#) years old, Futbol Club Barcelona brought him over from Argentina on a starting salary of €600,000 per annum. How good can a thirteen-year-old be, you might wonder? But Barcelona knew what they were doing. In the years since, Messi has matured into arguably the finest soccer player of all time, and at the time of writing he is still under contract to Barcelona. Nowadays it would cost any other club upwards of €200 million to take him off Barca's hands.

The pressure to scour the world for promising youngsters has intensified in recent years, thanks to [the European authorities' attempts](#) to make the big soccer clubs more representative of their countries. Their regulations now require at least eight “homegrown” players among the twenty-five on first team rosters. This was a silly idea to start with—who really cares how many Spanish players are playing for Barcelona?—but in any case it has backfired.

This is because European Union law currently prohibits any employer, like Barcelona Football Club, from favouring Spanish employees over, say, French ones. So, in an attempt to get around this, the European soccer rules don't equate “homegrown” with nationality, but with being “locally trained”. To qualify under this heading for Barcelona, you must have been registered with a Spanish club for three seasons between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. The hope was that, in the natural course of events, most of

these “local” players would be Spanish.

But you can imagine what has happened. The clubs have realized that, if they want top foreign players, they need to catch them young, or at least young enough to satisfy the “homegrown” rule. So there has been a marked surge in the number of youngsters being imported from other countries by the big clubs since the new rules came in.

One curious result has been uncertainty about which national teams these talented kids will end up playing for. Take Messi for a start. He has lived in Spain since he was thirteen, and he now has Spanish as well as Argentinian citizenship. He could easily have followed in the footsteps of his great Argentinian predecessor, Alfredo Di Stéfano, heart of the all-conquering 1950s Real Madrid side, who became a fixture in the Spanish national team once he was naturalized.

As it happens, Messi has remained loyal to Argentina on the international stage. In other cases, however, it is a genuinely open question which country will benefit from some prodigy’s talent.

[Consider Adnan Januzaj](#), who has been on Manchester United’s books since shortly after his sixteenth birthday. Januzaj’s parents are ethnic Albanians who fled Kosovo in 1992 to avoid the Yugoslav army draft. Adnan was born in Belgium three years later, and moved to Manchester to join United’s youth programme in 2011.

Once Januzaj broke into United’s first team two years later, his talents generated much debate about which national team he would end up playing for. Kosovo doesn’t have a side—not yet anyway—but Turkey, Albania, Serbia, Croatia, Belgium, and England were all mentioned as possibilities.

The idea that Januzaj might in due course qualify for England prompted some interesting reactions. Jack Wilshere, the very homegrown Arsenal midfielder, was particularly forthright: “[The only people](#) who should play for England are English people,” he insisted, when quizzed about Januzaj by the press.

I’m a great admirer of Wilshere’s onfield skills, but his attitude strikes me as indefensible. As someone whose maternal grandparents were born German Jews, and whose formative years were spent in apartheid South Africa, I am naturally sympathetic to those who seek to forge a new life in a new country. But even those who don’t share my cosmopolitan sentiments should think twice before siding with Wilshere’s little-Englandism.

The crucial issue here is citizenship. By and large, national sporting eligibility in the modern world depends on citizenship. And citizenship in turn depends on residence. Nearly all countries allow those who have been legally resident for some fixed period to become “naturalized” citizens. In Britain the required period is five years, which would make Januzaj eligible for citizenship at any point past his twenty-first birthday, assuming he is still with Manchester United or another English club.

Somewhat less familiarly, most countries make residence necessary for citizenship, as well as sufficient. Use it or lose it. A family that takes up residence outside its original country for too many generations will find that its descendants stop being citizens.

True, most countries allow a bit of wiggle room. Children born abroad are normally granted their parents’ citizenship. But this is basically a device to avoid mothers having to scurry back to their homeland to give birth. The basic principle is still that citizenship is for residents. That’s why scarcely any countries allow expatriates to transmit their home citizenship down generations indefinitely.

The rule in Britain used to be that you were all right as long as you had a grandparent who was actually born in Britain. Nowadays it’s rather less permissive. You need your father or mother to be British citizens in their own right, and not just courtesy of their parents’ citizenship. The United States is even keener on residence. Children born abroad to one American parent don’t automatically acquire citizenship unless that parent has lived in the States for five years, two of which must have been after the age of fourteen.

Curiously, France is one of the few modern countries that allow expatriate families to keep their citizenship indefinitely. In its view, it doesn’t matter if you’ve all lived in Tashkent since the seventeenth century. If you are French, then your children are French, until the end of time. (But don’t assume that in practice you can get accredited as French just because you have a set of French great-grandparents. The bureaucratic barriers are formidable.)

Actually, this isn’t the oddest feature of the French attitude to non-resident citizens. They also allow expatriates who have never set foot in France to vote in parliamentary elections. You might think that there would be an obvious problem—which constituency do these exiles vote in? But

the French are ahead of you. They have divided the rest of the world into [eleven special constituencies](#), precisely to enable non-resident citizens to vote for their own deputies. There's someone in the Assemblée nationale who represents the French voters of South America. Amazing. Good luck to them.

Anyway, whatever their rationale for these strange arrangements, the French are outliers. As I said, in most other modern countries residence is both necessary and sufficient for citizenship, give or take a bit, and ancestry doesn't really come into it.

It might seem surprising that residence counts for so much and parentage for so little. As a political policy, you wouldn't expect this openness to new citizens to command widespread support. By and large, sympathy for far-flung "kith and kin" wins far more votes than enfranchisement of immigrants. It was ever thus, and if anything anti-cosmopolitan sentiments have been growing in recent decades.

Moreover, chauvinism isn't the only motivation for wanting to restrict citizenship to those with a shared background. You don't have to be Enoch Powell or Donald Trump to recognize that civil society depends on more than common geographical boundaries. A healthy community requires a mutual sense of acceptable public behaviour, of how to settle disputes, of your obligations to neighbours and acquaintances, and so on.

Rising levels of immigration in the modern world have prompted a fierce debate among philosophers about the nature of citizenship. On the one side lie the "universalists", who focus on the shared rights and obligations of citizens, and emphasize the need for immigrants to assimilate to the customs of their new country. As the universalists see it, equal treatment by the law and public institutions calls for a shared commitment to the traditions of the nation.

In opposition to the universalists, "differentialists" argue that an insistence on a common culture often serves as a disguised defence of established interests. Respect for so-called national traditions can result in the marginalization of minority groups. According to the differentialists true equality requires a respect for multicultural diversity, not an imposed cultural uniformity.

There are good points to be made on both sides of this debate. Still, pretty much everybody involved agrees that citizenship needs to follow

residence. Only an extreme fringe wants to tie it to ethnic origin. Even those universalists who stress the importance of shared traditions accept that citizenship needs to be available to immigrants.

The reason is obvious enough. After all, movement of people across national boundaries is inevitable in the modern world. Political realignments, refugee crises, and above all commerce lead inexorably to a buildup of non-citizens inside national boundaries. And the problem is that, if these newcomers are left as non-citizens indefinitely, they are likely to start resenting it and stirring up trouble. They are paying taxes and are subject to the laws of the country. So how come they don't have a vote and access to the full range of opportunities open to citizens? Any immigrant groups who find themselves permanently excluded in this way are likely to be limited in their enthusiasm for their hosts' way of doing things.

The smart solution is to incorporate them, to sign them up to the deal on which all modern democracies rest. We will make you full citizens with all accompanying rights, and in return you will respect our shared way of doing things.

This has long been the modern solution to religious minorities. Dissenters have often found themselves at odds with the official religion of the state. Persecution and insurrection are one way things can develop. But from the seventeenth century onwards, civilized countries have moved in the direction of toleration. Provided you subscribe to our public practices, the nonconformists are told, you can uphold your religion in private and enjoy all the rights of full citizenship.

The xenophobic fringe will say it won't work with immigrants, even if it does the trick with religious minorities. How can a Ghanaian become Italian, or a Vietnamese Australian, or indeed a Kosovan English? Still, history gives the lie to this chauvinism. Maybe you can't lose your ethnicity easily (although that in itself is a complex question, to which I shall return in a couple of chapters). But ethnicity alone is no barrier to gaining a nationality.

The experience of many modern nations over the last century shows that the universalist demand for a shared sense of identity can coexist with a multicultural diversity of communities, each with their own ancestral traditions. My maternal grandparents, who remained loyal to the Orthodox synagogue all their lives, were obsessed with becoming English. (My

mother was an encyclopaedia on the niceties of English manners.) Or just think of modern America, where successive waves of immigrants have retained much of their identity as Italians, or Germans, or Jamaicans, while embracing their new citizenship with excitement and pride.

In 1990 the Conservative [British politician Norman Tebbit](#) formulated a sporting criterion to decide whether new citizens with foreign backgrounds were sufficiently committed to their adopted country. According to the “Tebbit test”, Britons with an Indian background, say, aren’t properly loyal unless they support the English team when it plays cricket against India.

That is chauvinist crap. I am properly British all right. All my grandparents were in Britain by 1900. Still, because my father’s job took my family to South Africa during my teenage years, I root for South Africa whenever they play the perennially one-dimensional English rugby union team. I don’t see that it follows that I’m somehow wanting as a citizen.

To resist the Tebbit test is not to deny that new citizens of a country are under some obligation to respect its way of doing things. The universalists are right to insist that a healthy community rests on shared ideas about proper public conduct. Immigrants should certainly adjust some of their behaviour to accommodate to their new society. But this doesn’t mean that they have to disown their origins. There are many dimensions to identity. You can respect the public customs of your new country while still celebrating your religious holidays, or dressing in a traditional style, or indeed supporting your country of origin on the sports field.

And even the last can be a nuanced matter. While I support South Africa at rugby against England, I am conversely frantic for England to win when the two sides play soccer. Similarly, I would expect that most young Britons of Indian background will back India against England at cricket, but will be firmly behind England when they play soccer. (All right, maybe they would side with India at soccer too, if India ever played England—but I can’t say that I have ever noticed an Indian soccer team.)

Still, what about immigrants actually representing their new country on the sports field? Clearly there is no room for divided loyalties at that point. You wouldn’t want Adnan Januzaj playing for England against Belgium if his heart was really on the other side.

Such things are by no means beyond the bounds of possibility. The cricketer Kevin Pietersen was born and bred in South Africa, but eligible to

play for England because of his British mother. As a young player first forging his career with the KwaZulu-Natal side, he felt he was being held back by the preferential treatment given to players of colour in South Africa.

So he transferred his allegiances to England. He scored a lot of runs for the England test team, but was always a disruptive influence in the dressing room. After a number of tumultuous years, England decided that they were better off without him.

A [cricketing memoir](#) by the Australian Ed Cowan includes a telling anecdote. He describes a cricket lunch break when Pietersen, nonplussed by an item on the buffet, asked, “What the fuck is this?” Cowan explained that any true Englishman would recognize bread-and-butter pudding. Pietersen replied: “I’m not English, Eddie. I just work here.”

Still, it is not to be assumed that all immigrants will be similarly halfhearted in their commitment to their new countries. Loyalty is particularly to be expected from those who actively choose naturalization, rather than benefitting from some ancestral qualification like Pietersen. It’s a pretty reliable indication of commitment to their new country. After all, those eligible for naturalization will usually have gained permanent residence rights already. If they take the extra step of becoming a citizen, swearing allegiance and so on, it’s typically because of their emotional identification with their new country.

Of course, there will always be some carpetbaggers who switch nationalities for advantage rather than loyalty. I don’t think the media tycoon Rupert Murdoch ditched his original Australian citizenship to become American because of some emotional affinity with the Stars and Stripes. Nor are such mercenary manoeuvres unknown in the sporting world, as we’ll shortly see.

Still, if Adnan Januzaj were to become British by naturalization, I don’t think that it should be up to the rest of us to decide if his loyalties are in the right place. If he were to say that this is his new country and he wants to represent it, then I don’t see that the rest of us have the right to doubt his word.

Remember the deal on which modern societies rest. You respect our way of doing things, and we will make you full citizens with all accompanying rights. If this deal is to work, it needs to be wholehearted. You’ll risk losing

the allegiance of the newcomers if they think they are still being treated as second-class citizens. They need to feel that all institutions are open to them—including national sports teams.

That is why I think that Jack Wilshere's attitude is not only mean-spirited but destructive. Once people are living in your country, it does nobody any good to discriminate against them. There is already enough danger of aggrieved minority group members taking violent action against perceived slights. To insist that they can't become really English, however much they want to, doesn't strike me as a great idea.

Unfortunately, though, it seems as though Adnan Januzaj won't be eligible for England after all, at least not unless some rules are changed. The reason is that nowadays sporting eligibility isn't always a simple matter of nationality. A number of international sporting bodies have become uneasy about the readiness with which some countries hand out citizenship, and so have started adding further requirements to citizenship before you can sign up for a new country.

Perhaps the most notorious instance of country-hopping was the Georgian beach volleyball teams in the 2008 Olympics. Both the men's and the women's pairs were Brazilians who had probably never heard of Georgia until they were recruited and fast-tracked into their new citizenship a few weeks before the Games.

The women didn't get past the group stages, but Renato Gomes and Jorge Terceiro took the Georgian men all the way to the last four, only missing out on a medal when they lost to the real Brazilian team in the bronze medal match. The Olympic authorities have since tried to block such abuses with extra rules, but the position remains complex, with each Olympic sport having its own eligibility requirements.

English cricket has long faced a similar issue. Here the problem isn't too-easy naturalization, but the large number of colonials, like Kevin Pietersen, who count as citizens because of their British parents. This has resulted in every England side from 2004 to 2015 fielding at least one player born in southern Africa, and often a lot more. Matches against the South African Proteas came to be a matter of whether our South Africans were better than theirs.

The solution has been to require that even those born British must satisfy a substantial residency condition before they can play for England.



[Nowadays any British player](#) who hasn't moved to England by the age of eighteen will have to wait a full seven years before they can play for their country. Future Kevin Pietersens will need to think carefully before committing themselves.

It's the same in soccer. A few years ago [FIFA got fed up](#) with the number of Brazilians turning up in other countries' teams, à la Georgian volleyball. So, since 2008, they have decreed that, in addition to citizenship, you must have lived in a country for five years before you can represent it on the soccer field.

Why is any of this a problem for Adnan Januzaj? If he were to become British on the basis of five years' residence, wouldn't that automatically satisfy the extra FIFA requirement too?

Well, that would work fine if there were a British soccer team—but there isn't. For better or worse, Britain divides itself into four different "Home Nations" when it comes to soccer. As well as England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are all recognized as soccer nations by FIFA. This is something of an anomaly, harking back to the long-past time when Britain was the predominant force in world soccer. But it lives on, and somehow nobody seems particularly keen to change it.

Perhaps simple lack of success will eventually eliminate this surfeit of nations. Though Scotland was once a world force, and Wales is enjoying a resurgence, none of the Home Nations apart from England has made it to the World Cup finals since 1998. Still, as long as the system survives, it adds an extra layer of complexity to national eligibility. Since there is as yet no such thing as Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, or indeed English citizenship, but only simple British nationality, a special set of rules is needed to decide who gets to play for which Home Nation.

These have evolved over the years, but since 2009 the British soccer authorities have settled on these requirements: in order to play for one of the Home Nations, you need to have been born in that country, or to have a parent or grandparent born there, or to have been educated there for five years before the age of eighteen.

If you ask me, this wins the prize for mindless chauvinism. It means that you could be a British citizen, required to fight for your country in a war, yet be permanently ineligible for any of its soccer teams. Even if Adnan Januzaj became British, and lived in Manchester for the rest of his life, he

would never be able to play for England. Nor, if you think about it, would anybody who moved here after the age of thirteen.

I'd say that the Home Nations have got it badly wrong. They have put too much weight on descent, and left no room for newcomers to opt in.

But somehow I am not surprised. English soccer administration has a well-deserved reputation as a sanctuary for moral dinosaurs. [When the chief executive](#) of the Premier League acquired a new personal assistant a couple of years ago, he seemed genuinely surprised when she complained about his emails to colleagues mentioning “big-titted broads”, “female irrationality”, and “cash for gash”. Nor did his employers see any reason to discipline him.

Even the outward-facing press office of the England Football Association seems to live in some long-lost world. Their congratulatory tweet for the returning England women's World Cup semifinalists in 2015 started with the words “Our Lionesses go back to being mothers, partners, daughters today.”

A generous view would be that the Home Nations authorities didn't fully think through the consequences of their new eligibility regulations. However, I fear it is all too likely that they knew exactly what they were doing. Still, whatever their intentions, the result just seems wrong.

Think about what their rules mean. If they had been applied in cricket, for instance, the South African exile Basil D'Oliviera, stalwart of the England side in the 1960s, and a hero of the anti-apartheid movement, would never have played for his adopted country. Nor would Cyrille Regis MBE, one of the first black Britons to succeed in top-flight soccer, have played five times for England, because he didn't move here from the Caribbean until he was fifteen.

On the other hand, the Home Nations regulations do nothing to rule out carpetbaggers like Kevin Pietersen who can produce parents or grandparents born in one of the Home Nations, even if they have no other connection with that country. So the Canadian Owen Hargreaves, who gained forty-two soccer caps for England in the early 2000s, courtesy of his English father, would have been eligible all right, even though he had never lived in England at the time he was first selected.

As it happens, these pernicious Home Nations rules do not seem to be widely known. As late as 2013, the England manager Roy Hodgson was

talking about the possibility of drafting Januzaj once he had lived in England for five years.

In the event, the issue went away. Januzaj finally opted for Belgium in the run-up to the 2014 World Cup, and has since played for their national team. Perhaps that is where his heart always lay. After all, he did live in Belgium until he was sixteen. But who knows? Maybe the lad fell in love with England once he moved there, and would have chosen them if he could.

I would far prefer Januzaj to have been given the option. The British soccer eligibility rules strike me as taking attachment to kith and kin to extremes. It is one thing to insist, with the universalists, that new citizens must show genuine loyalty to their new country, both on and off the sports field. But that is no justification for permanently rejecting anybody who spent most of their childhood elsewhere. That is nothing but a slap in the face to all immigrants and refugees, telling them they will never become real citizens, however long they live in the country. It is no recipe for a harmonious society.

I'll leave the last word to the athlete Mo Farah, probably the greatest long-distance runner the world has ever seen. Farah moved to Britain from Mogadishu as an eight-year-old in 1991, speaking very little English. His talent was spotted early on at his school in West London, and he progressed through the ranks of British athletics on his way to his unprecedented collection of World and Olympic medals.

After he won the 10,000 metres in the 2012 London Olympics in front of an ecstatic crowd, a gauche interviewer asked whether he wouldn't rather have been running for Somalia. [Farah responded instantly](#), in his strong cockney accent: "Not at all, mate, this is my country and this is where I grew up. This is my country and when I put on my Great Britain vest I'm proud. I'm very proud."