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A British Soccer Team? What's That? Say Scots, Welsh and Irish

By JERÉ LONGMAN and SARAH LYALL

LONDON — The plan seems eminently reasonable: field a soccer team to represent Britain at next year's Olympics, which after all are being held here, the home of the modern game.

But there are several problems. For one thing, there is no such thing as a British soccer team. Instead, in a country where devotion to sports is fueled by ferocious regional and political rivalries, there are instead individual teams representing Britain's fractious, proud and fiercely competitive constituent nations — namely England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Nor are the hypersensitive soccer federations in the non-English nations exactly clamoring to have their players compete side by side with players from their bitter rival, England. Although they have promised not to stop their players from participating, they have refused to officially sanction the idea of a national team and are actively discouraging anyone from joining it.

So angry were the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish at the British Olympic Association's proud announcement in June that it had reached an "historic agreement" to field men's and women's soccer teams in 2012 — Team GB, each will be called — that they responded with a proud announcement of their own.

The associations "[reiterate our collective opposition](#) to Team GB participation at the 2012 Olympic Games in London, contrary to the media release issued by the British Olympic Association," their statement said.

The issue is simple, as Stewart Regan, chief executive of the Scottish soccer federation, explained at the time.

"We need to protect our identity, and we have no interest in taking part," he said.

Still, the Football Association, as England's soccer federation is known, plans to go ahead and organize Team GB anyway, knowing that the only way to satisfy its non-English counterparts would be to choose no one from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

"With the Olympics in Britain, and football being our national sport, we feel it would be an awful travesty if

there were no football team in it from these shores,” said Scott Field, an F.A. spokesman. “It’s like Canada not having an ice hockey team in the Winter Olympics.”

Modern soccer began here in 1863. Through the influence of Britain’s far-flung empire, it spread to become the world’s most popular sport.

But Britain has not played men’s soccer in the Olympics in more than half a century, since the 1960 Rome Games, or even tried to qualify since the early 1970s. The British women have never entered a team since the Olympic tournament for women began in 1996.

While the International Olympic committee recognizes Britain as a combined team in all sports, FIFA, soccer’s world governing body, recognizes England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as separate teams. And there lies the heart of the controversy.

Soccer officials from the three smaller nations fear that merging a team for the Olympics could pave the way for FIFA to follow suit, forcing Britain’s teams to combine into one entry for soccer tournaments like the World Cup and the European Championships. There is a worry, too, that the nations would lose their individual seats on the committee that determines international soccer’s bylaws.

FIFA has given **public assurances** that it will still allow all four nations to compete separately apart from the Olympics, but its pledge has failed to convince everyone.

It is sometimes hard for outsiders to comprehend how deeply tribal Britain is, and how resistant to the idea that there is a unifying notion of Britishness. Wales and Northern Ireland have separate legislative assemblies. And Scotland has its own parliament, now controlled by the Scottish National Party, **whose ultimate goal is national independence**.

The rivalry between Scotland and England in particular runs so deep that when England competes in the World Cup, many Scots employ a position of “anyone but England,” actively rooting for England’s opponents, whoever they are.

The soccer associations appear to have no legal right to prevent their players from participating in the Olympics, and have said they will not retaliate against those who do. But they are openly discouraging them.

“We’ve also asked them to bear in mind that the feedback from Scotland fans regarding Team G.B. has been very negative,” Clare Bodel, a spokeswoman for the Scottish soccer federation, wrote in an e-mail.

The issue has divided commentators, with some denouncing the hard-line attitudes of the football associations.

“What sort of football authority would tell their best young players to avoid participating in what is likely to

be the greatest sporting festival of their lifetime?” wrote [Des Kelly](#), a columnist for the Daily Mail, who called such a body “a pig-ignorant committee.”

It has also divided players. Some, like Julie Fleeting, Scotland’s career-leading female scorer, have said they will not risk their futures by competing on Team GB. “I am Scottish through and through,” she told reporters in June.

But other high-profile players — including Aaron Ramsey, the captain of Wales’s national team, who plays for Arsenal in England’s Premier League, and his Welsh teammate Gareth Bale, who plays for Tottenham Hotspur — have said they would like to play. (David Beckham, the onetime England star, has also expressed interest.)

“I don’t see why anyone would want to stop a player from playing in a massive tournament like the Olympics,” Kim Little, a top Scottish women’s midfielder, told The Guardian.

One incentive to play for Britain, noted by Bale, could be that the non-English national teams have such woeful international records. Wales, for instance, has only ever qualified for one major international competition: the 1958 World Cup.

Meanwhile, Scotland looks back with wistful nostalgia to the triumph of 1967, when it [defeated England at Wembley Stadium](#) in London a year after England won the World Cup. Its team has not qualified for the World Cup since 1998, and its professional league is [struggling financially and performing poorly](#) against top European clubs.

Many soccer fans are far more interested in Premier League and European competitions than in the Olympics; soccer tickets sold poorly in the first round of Olympic ticket sales. The men’s Olympic tournament is seen as a secondary competition, limited to players under 23, with three over-age exceptions per team.

The women’s tournament, though, is considered to be nearly as important as the World Cup.

Supporters of women’s soccer hope that the London Games can lift the sport in Britain in the same way that American women’s soccer was buoyed by the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and the 1999 Women’s World Cup, said Darryl Seibel, a spokesman for the British Olympic Association.

“We know this could be transformational,” Seibel said.

For others, it will be merely uncomfortable. Scotland, for instance, already worries that its soccer federation is “by and large forgotten” and that “for many people abroad, England is Britain,” said Raymond Boyle, a professor at the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow. Many Scots, it seems,

sympathize with Craig Brown, the former Scotland manager who now coaches Aberdeen. “I would rather lose as Scotland than win as Great Britain,” he told *The Guardian*.

And in Wales, Neville Southall, the national team’s former goalkeeper, told reporters recently that he could not conceive of supporting a non-Welsh team. “The whole point of going to the Olympics is that special moment when your flag goes up,” he said.

“What flag are they going to put up if Team GB win the football? The Union Jack? Well, it’s not my flag; my flag’s a Dragon.”