

**PEACE AND HOOPS:  
BASKETBALL AS A ROLE PLAYER IN SUSTAINABLE  
PEACEBUILDING**

CHAD FORD\*

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A few years ago, in 1998 to be exact, I was living in a town called Derry in Northern Ireland. I was doing research for a group called INCORE. INCORE is a United Nations initiative on ethnic conflict resolution headquartered on the front lines of a feud that stretches on for 400 years.<sup>1</sup> The divisions between Irish Catholics and British Protestants have historically manifested themselves with a virulent ugliness similar to South Africa. Schools, busses, restrooms, and even pubs have been historically segregated, not by skin color, but on the basis of belief.

The city itself is an ancient walled city. Outside the main gate of the walls, emblazoned in stone is the city's coat of arms—a skeleton, sitting with legs crossed, in an expression of agony. Depending on who you ask (every narrative in Derry is contested), the skeleton represents the Catholics of Derry who, for 105 days in 1689, starved inside the city walls as a Protestant army laid siege to the city. Since that time, the tension between the two sides has created a violent,

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\* Assistant Professor of International Cultural Studies, Brigham Young University – Hawaii.

1. INCORE stands for International Conflict Research. “INCORE is a joint project of the United Nations University and the University of Ulster. Combining research, education and comparative analysis, INCORE addresses the causes and consequences of conflict in Northern Ireland and internationally and promotes conflict resolution management strategies. It aims to influence policymakers and practitioners involved in peace, conflict and reconciliation issues while enhancing the nature of international conflict research.” INCORE: International Conflict Research, <http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/about> (last visited Apr. 10, 2006).

polarized culture that is just now beginning to come to grips with its terrible past.

INCORE was acting as a mediator, or go between, with militant groups like the IRA (Irish Republican Army). The British called the IRA terrorists. The Irish called them freedom fighters. Most mediators just called them stubborn. In hours of negotiations and discussions, members of the IRA negotiated ancient history as if it were today's headlines. The injuries of the ancient past were still very much at the forefront of the present. The people involved in the conflict, many of whom were well educated and reasonable, were unable to imagine a community where the two sides coexisted peacefully. Almost all talk of a cease-fire included some demand that the other side go away.

One evening, I was invited to a local pick-up basketball game as a diversion from the very real problems we were facing on daily basis. Like everything else in Derry, sports are also segregated. The Protestants play rugby and cricket. The Irish play Gaelic football, hurling and soccer. In the past few years, basketball has begun to take root in places like Ireland as a non-politicized alternative to the more traditional forms of recreation in the area.

After spending months watching how some Catholics and Protestants went out of their way to segregate themselves from one another, my jaw literally dropped when I walked into the tiny gym and saw Catholics and Protestants playing together.

As I was leaving the arena, I bumped into a quite militant member of the local IRA. I was shocked to see him there. His jovial expression changed to stone when I acknowledged him, but warmed as I mentioned how much I enjoyed the game.

"I guess you're wondering what someone like me was doing in a place like that," he said after a few minutes of chit chat.

I was.

"After 400 years, you can find a way to hate a man in almost every walk of life. You can hate his church. His accent. His neighborhood. Even hate his dog. I guess what I'm sayin' is that we haven't had a reason to hate each other in basketball yet. And given all the hate in this place, sometimes it's just nice to get a break from it all."

Shortly thereafter, I left Ireland, but the vision of ancient enemies working together toward a common goal stuck with me. Could sports be an entry point into the process of sustainable

peacebuilding?

This article addresses the role of sports in the conflict resolution process with a specific look at how one NGO, Playing for Peace, is working with Israeli and Palestinian teenagers. Part I of the article discusses the emerging academic field of conflict resolution and how it differs from the more familiar ADR (alternative dispute resolution) movement. Part II considers common assumptions about group interaction and dialogue groups. Part III explores the effectiveness of peace workshops with emphasis on the development of superordinate goals. This section includes a look at how sports training can be used to create such goals. Part IV is a case study from a basketball camp in Israel. Part V suggests questions and obstacles that arose from the case study. Can sport be just an entry point into a larger dialogue process? Or can it be a substantive form of conflict resolution in and of itself?

#### I. FROM ADR TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Legal scholars have been writing about and lawyers have been practicing ADR, or alternative dispute resolution, for years. While multiple definitions of ADR abound, in essence, ADR is an alternative to the adversarial process that dominates litigation in the U.S. courts and justice systems. ADR uses techniques such as arbitration, mediation and negotiation in an attempt to resolve disputes.<sup>2</sup> In other words, ADR is a non-coercive alternative to the legal system that uses third party interveners.<sup>3</sup> For many, ADR is a more humane version of the U.S. legal system.<sup>4</sup>

According to Sally Engle Merry:

[ADR] challenges traditional understandings of the centrality of adjudication the maintenance of social order in modern society. It expresses an anti-law ideology, claiming that nonadversarial ways of resolving conflict can create a better world. ADR urges the legal profession to move away from its exclusive focus on the use of courts to resolve conflicts and to consider a broader spectrum of problem-solving approaches.<sup>5</sup>

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2. See Ilhyung Lee, *In re Culture: The Cross-Cultural Negotiations Course in the Law School Curriculum* 20 OHIO ST. J. ON DISP. RESOL. 375, 381 (2005).

3. Joseph A. Scimecca, *Conflict Resolution in the United States: The Emergence of a Profession?*, in CONFLICT RESOLUTION: CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES 19, 30 (Kevin Avruch, Peter W. Black, and Joseph A. Scimecca, eds., 1991).

4. *Id.* at 31.

5. Sally Engle Merry, *Disputing Without Culture*, 100 HARV. L. REV. 2057, 2058