

Hijabs and Soccer Teams

In February 2007 a controversy emerged over the decision of a Quebec soccer tournament to ban a member of an Ontario team from wearing a hijab during games. That decision was subsequently endorsed by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), and condemned by the Ontario Human Rights Commission in calling such a decision a violation of human rights and of individual religious freedom. The real question at issue, however, is not human rights or religious freedom; it is simply: what does membership on a team imply?

It's absurd to have the wearing of a hijab in a soccer game described as a "human right", and something that "strikes at the very heart of individual religious freedom" (Ontario Human Rights Commission). Playing on a sport team has little to do with human rights or religious freedom, as long as all players who wish to play are free to join a team based on their individual athletic abilities, and as long as everyone plays by the same rules regardless of their particular religion, race or ethnicity. What is really at stake here is the very concept of a team, and the cultural tradition of all sports everywhere.

Players on a team wear the uniform of the team; and that is what a 'uniform' is. It presents the players of the team as a single entity, as a unified whole, wherein their primary commitment and identity during the course of a competition is with the team. On the playing field, an individual's religion, race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, ought not to be distinguished or made evident in what the team members wear. All are equally members of the team, and are identified by their particular uniform as committed solely to the team. A team cannot be composed of individuals dressed in different attire, with different accoutrements indicating different allegiances.

An individual's religious beliefs and character ought to come into play not in deviating from the team uniform, but in how the game is played with your teammates and opponents –in playing by the rules, in respecting your opponents, in avoiding malicious or undisciplined play, and in praying for the safety of all who compete. And ultimately, one's religious beliefs and character are shown in being magnanimous in victory, and uncomplaining in defeat in understanding that although you gave your best for your team, it's only a game of play in the great scheme of things.

Leagues have the right to insist that a proper uniform be worn by members of a team, and what can be worn where safety is concerned. With respect to the controversy over a member of a soccer team wearing a hijab, the issue is not religious freedom, or human rights, but the very concept of a sports team. You cannot have individuals deciding on religious grounds, or personal preference, what identifiers to add to their uniforms. If you are Irish, you cannot put a shamrock insignia on your uniform just because you want to show your ethnicity; nor would it be acceptable for Christian team members to put a cross on the front of their team uniform to proclaim their adherence to Christianity. Yet the hijab is a clear religious identifier proclaiming that the individual is a Muslim, an adherent of Islam; and why should such a special privilege be granted to a team member of that faith? A team must transcend religious, racial, and ethnic differences, and membership in the team must be the identifier when on the playing field, with everyone wearing the same uniform and the players denoted solely by name and team number.

Now that being said, if the local Muslim religious community wants to sponsor a girl's soccer team, as many soccer teams are sponsored by ethnic communities, then such a team would be free to adopt its own distinctive uniform, including the wearing of the hijab; and would be free to join a soccer league, and to play as a team by the same rules as everyone else. Having a religious insignia on the team jersey, and/or wearing a distinctive clothing accessory, would be perfectly acceptable. It would identify the team, and its origins, and proclaim the team's association with its sponsor.

There could be no reasonable objection to a team wearing the hijab, if that were part of their distinctive uniform indicating their sponsorship affiliation with the local Muslim community. As long as non-Muslim girls, regardless of their race, ethnicity, and religion, were free to try out for the team, and to wear the team uniform, including the hijab, if they were to make the team. Such a team would not be based on religious exclusion, but rather would be a sports team open to all and sponsored by the Muslim community.

That is where true freedom and human rights lie in sports – in freedom to join and to compete, and in openness to all with everyone subject to, and adhering to the same rules and regulations, and wearing the same uniform as the other members of the team.

The enjoyment of freedom and human rights entails not only a right to equal treatment in trying out for a team, and in playing for a team, but also a responsibility to respect established cultural traditions and customs when you join a sports team, and to forego seeking to wear particular religious or ethnic insignia and/or accoutrements beyond the team uniform. Otherwise you defeat the whole concept of a team, and the meaning of a team uniform which conveys that all the members are united as one on the playing field with a common loyalty and purpose.

It would indeed be very disappointing if orthodox Muslim girls choose to exclude themselves from playing in soccer tournaments rather than dispense with wearing the hijab during games, but the choice rests with them and their parents. On the other hand, the Muslim religious community has the freedom, and the right, to sponsor girls' soccer teams, and to participate in soccer tournaments with a distinctive uniform that is in accord with their religious beliefs and customs. Indeed, such teams could well serve as a source of community pride.

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