

# *Sport in the United Kingdom*

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England

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The United Kingdom has given birth to a range of major international sports including: association football, rugby (union and league), darts, cricket, golf, tennis, table tennis, badminton, squash, rounders, hockey, boxing, snooker, billiards, curling and even baseball.

This has meant that in the infancy of many sports, England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland formed among the earliest separate governing bodies, national teams and domestic league competitions.

After 1922 some sports formed separate bodies for Northern Ireland though some continued to be organised on an All-Ireland basis.



Greg Rutherford, gold medallist in the long jump.



Mo Farah in 2011



As a result, notably in certain teams sports such as [association football](#) and [Rugby](#), but also in the multi-sport [Commonwealth Games](#), international sporting events are contested not by a team representing the United Kingdom, but by teams representing the separate "home nations". At Olympic level, however, the United Kingdom is represented by a single national organising committee the British Olympic Association, and competes as Great Britain and Northern Ireland (although some Northern Ireland athletes are eligible for, and compete on behalf of, Ireland).

For more information on most sports you may wish, therefore, to consider reading the [Sport in England](#), [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) or [Northern Ireland](#) articles.

Major individual sports include [athletics](#), [golf](#), [Cycling](#), [motorsport](#), and [horse racing](#). [Tennis](#) is the highest profile sport for the two weeks of the [Wimbledon Championships](#), but otherwise struggles to hold its own in the country of its birth.

Many other sports are also played and followed to a lesser degree. There is much debate over which sport has the most active participants with swimming, athletics, cycling all found to have wider active participation than association football in the 2010 Sport England Active People survey.

## *Administration and funding*

Political responsibility for sport is a devolved matter. As England has no parliament of her own, the United Kingdom Department of Culture, Media and Sport which is headed by a cabinet minister -though the Minister for Sport and Tourism is not in the cabinet- deals with English sport in addition to United Kingdom-wide sports.

Political responsibility for Sport in Scotland lies with the Scottish Government Minister for Sport and Health Improvement, currently Jaimie Hepburn, though is part of the remit of the Cabinet secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport, currently Shona Robison.

Political responsibility for sport in Wales lies with the Welsh Assembly Government Minister for Heritage, currently Alun Ffred Jones. The Minister sets out the strategic policy objectives for Sport Wales, who are responsible for the development and promotion of sport and active lifestyles in Wales. Sport Wales work closely with the Governing bodies of sports in Wales to whom they distribute government and National Lottery funding, through grants and awards.

The Northern Ireland Executive Minister for Culture, Arts & Leisure is currently Carál Ní Chuilín, however virtually every team sport is organised on either an all Ireland or United Kingdom-wide basis, with football and netball being the only exceptions. As such responsibility for most sports lies with either the United Kingdom minister or the Irish minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport.



## *Sports media*

The British media is dominated by United Kingdom-wide outlets, with local media playing a much smaller role. Traditionally the [BBC](#) played a dominant role in [televising sport](#), providing extensive high-quality advertisement free coverage and free publicity, in exchange for being granted broadcast rights for low fees. [ITV](#) broadcast a smaller portfolio of events. In the early 1990s this arrangement was shaken up by the arrival of [pay-TV](#). [BSkyB](#) based its early marketing largely on its acquisition of top division English league football, which was renamed [The Premiership](#) as part of the deal. It has subsequently acquired many more top rights in other sports. However, Sky tends to focus on competitions which can fill its specialist sports channels on a regular basis, and many events are still shown on free to air television, especially annual and quadrennial events such as Wimbledon and the Olympics. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each have their own feeds for BBC1 and BBC2, allowing the BBC to opt out of the United Kingdom-wide programming to show a match in that area. This is often used when all four nations have an International football match on the same evening, but can also be used to show minority interest sports in the country where they are most appreciated (for example BBC One Scotland may show the shinty cup final, while BBC One Wales shows a rugby union match between two Welsh sides). In Scotland the BBC also operates BBC Alba, a Gaelic-language channel which often broadcasts Scottish sports fixtures.

## Popularity

Sport	TV Viewing	Participating	Interested In
<u>Association football</u>	46%	12%	45%
<u>Rugby Union</u>	21%	3%	25%
<u>Tennis</u>	18%	3%	23%
<u>Cricket</u>	17%	2%	20%
<u>Athletics</u>	18%	3%	23%
<u>Snooker</u>	10%	2%	11%
<u>Motor racing</u>	13%	NA	18%



Association footballer David Beckham



## *Elite level sport*

### *Elite level team sports*

Four sports in the United Kingdom operate high profile professional leagues. Football is the most popular sport and is played from August to May. Rugby league is traditionally a winter sport, but since the late 1990s the elite competition has been played in the summer to minimise competition for attention with football. Rugby union is also a winter sport. Cricket is played in the Summer, from April to September. There is also a professional Ice Hockey league operating in Great Britain called the Elite Ice Hockey League.

### *Association football*

The modern global game of football evolved out of traditional football games played in England in the 19th century and today is the highest profile sport in England and Scotland by a very wide margin. This has been the case for generations, but the gap is widely perceived to have increased since the early 1990s, and football's dominance is often seen as a threat to other sports. Football is also very popular in Wales and Northern Ireland, though Rugby Union and Gaelic Games respectively attract much larger crowds and television audiences.

Each country organises its own football league; there are a few teams who chose to play in another country.

The only major national team competition won by a [Home Nation](#) is the [1966 World Cup](#), which England hosted and won, though clubs in both the Scottish and English domestic leagues have had success in European club competitions, most notably Glasgow's [Celtic](#) and [Rangers](#), with Celtic winning the 1967 European cup, becoming the first British team to do so, and the first team to be composed of players born and raised entirely within the local area around the club's stadium (all within 30 miles) as well as Merseyside's [Liverpool](#) and [Manchester United](#), with Liverpool winning the Champions League a total of 5 times, making them the most successful British club in European competitions.



England's [Wembley Stadium](#). It is one of the most expensive stadia ever built.



The [Northern Ireland football league system](#) includes the [NIFL Premiership](#), often known colloquially as the "Irish League". One Northern Irish club, [Derry City](#), plays its football outside of the United Kingdom in the [Republic of Ireland football league system](#). [Windsor Park](#), [Linfield F.C.](#)'s 20,332-seater stadium, is also the home stadium of the [national team](#).

Each season the most successful clubs from each of the home nations qualify for the two Europe wide club competitions organised by [UEFA](#), the [UEFA Champions League](#) and the [UEFA Europa League](#) (formerly the UEFA Cup). England and Scotland have both produced winners of each of these competitions.



[Hampden Park, Glasgow](#)—Scotland's national football stadium

The Welsh football league system includes the Welsh Premier League and regional leagues. These leagues have a relatively low profile as rugby union is the national sport of Wales and the top three Welsh football clubs play in the English league system, for example Welsh Premiership club The New Saints play their home matches on the English side of the border in Oswestry. The Welsh clubs of Cardiff City, Colwyn Bay, Merthyr Town, Newport County, Swansea City and Wrexham play in the English system, while Merthyr Tydfil also played in an English league before they were liquidated in 2010. The main Welsh Cup competitions are the Welsh Cup and the FAW Premier Cup. Cardiff's 76,250 seater Millennium Stadium is the principal sporting stadium of Wales.

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For 100 years until 1984, [England](#), [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#) competed annually in the [British Home Championship](#) but these ended for a variety of reasons. 2011 saw the inaugural Nations cup, in many ways a reboot of the old tournament. When the idea was first proposed to bring back the competition, the English FA had reservations, and so it was contested by the other three home nations and the Republic of Ireland, who were the first host nation and winners. The tournament was intended to be played biennially to prevent fixture congestion during World Cup qualification years with the 2013 event to be held at the Millennium stadium in Cardiff, the tournament was cancelled after the first year as very few fans were prepared to travel and the tournament did not create the expected revenues. Scotland and Wales were drawn against each other in World Cup qualification anyway, and a 150th anniversary friendly was organised between Scotland and England to celebrate the anniversary of the formation of the English F.A.

No United Kingdom national team is regularly formed for [football](#) events in the [Olympics](#). Proposals to have the United Kingdom (designated by the [IOC](#) as [Great Britain](#)) take part in the [2012 Summer Olympics](#) with [men's](#) and [women's](#) teams were not supported by the [Scottish](#), [Welsh](#) and [Northern Irish](#) football associations. The three bodies feared that Great Britain teams would undermine their independent status—a fear confirmed by FIFA president Sepp Blatter.<sup>[9]</sup> England has been the most successful of the home nations, winning the [World Cup on home soil in 1966](#), although there has historically been a close-fought [rivalry between England and Scotland](#).

## *Other team sports*

### *Field hockey*

Field hockey is the second most popular team recreational sport in the United Kingdom. The Great Britain men's team won the hockey tournament at the 1988 Olympics. However British hockey has gone backwards since then, partly because of conflicts between the need to foster a combined team to compete in the Olympics<sup>[dubious - discuss]</sup>, and the commitment of the hockey associations of each of the home nations to the retention of separate national teams<sup>[dubious - discuss]</sup> to compete in other international competitions. It also suffers due to the lack of television of coverage, relative to its participation level.





## *Shinty*

Shinty is Scotland's home grown team game. Once played throughout Scotland, Antrim and northern England, it is now mostly played in the Scottish Highlands, with teams in Scotland's big cities and London. It is highly neglected by the Scottish media. While not administered by the GAA, the similarities to, and composite-rules fixtures with hurling mean that there is more information in the Gaelic Games section of the article.





## *Australian rules football*

Australian rules football is a growing amateur sport in the United Kingdom. The British Australian Rules Football League (BARFL) formed in 1989 and has Premier, Regional and Conference divisions. The Grand Final is an event that regularly attracts growing audience of up to 5,000. Great Britain has a national team the British Bulldogs, it regularly competes in international matches and has competed in the Australian Football International Cup since its inception in 2002. Exhibition matches are regularly scheduled for The Oval in London, and despite the fact that few Britons know of the sport, the most recent match attracted a record crowd of 18,884





## *American football*

American football is a minor amateur sport, with two League associations BAFA National Leagues and BAUFL (University league). The BAFA League has 3 divisions: Premier, 1 and 2, with Premier and 1 divided into a North and South conference (with Coventry being the Most Southern of the Northern teams) while division 2 is further split into 4 conferences, North becoming North (Scotland and Carlisle) and Central and the South being split into East and West. The Championship participants are promoted to the divisions above and the lowest-ranking teams in each division are relegated. Previously, many of these teams competed in the BAFL which entered administration in 2010.

Despite the minor status of the sport in the United Kingdom, the NFL has played at least one game each season at Wembley Stadium since 2007. Wembley hosted two games in 2013 and three in 2014, and the stadium is set to host three games in each of the next two seasons (2015 and 2016).



## ***Basketball***

Basketball is a minor sport in the United Kingdom. The top level league is the fourteen team semi-professional British Basketball League with the English Basketball League and Scottish Basketball League below them. While following an American franchise format rather than using promotion and relegation like most European leagues, the majority of recent additions and replacements for failing clubs have come from the English league. The teams are professional or semi-professional but have modest resources. As with football, the home nations teams were encouraged to work together for the Olympics, while British international basketball teams have not achieved any major successes since then, FIBA officials stated that if they re-entered the European competition after the Olympics as individual nations, they will be treated as unranked newcomers. After meeting with FIBA officials, Basketball Wales voted against making the merger permanent citing amongst other things, the lack of opportunity for Welsh players within a United Kingdom framework (no players in either the men's or women's Olympic squad were Welsh) and for the advancement of the game domestically (The BBL announced intentions to expand into several United Kingdom cities but neither Cardiff nor Swansea had been suggested).



## *Speedway*

Motorcycle speedway, usually referred to as speedway, is a motorcycle sport involving four and sometimes up to six riders competing over four anti-clockwise laps of an oval circuit. Speedway motorcycles use only one gear and have no brakes and racing takes place on a flat oval track usually consisting of dirt or loosely packed shale. The United Kingdom has three domestic leagues, the Elite League, the Premier League, and the National League. The Speedway Grand Prix is the main world championship for standalone riders with an event taking place in Cardiff each year. The Speedway World Cup takes place once a year and England hosts a semi final stage in Peterborough and more recently in King's Lynn.

