Episode Book

EPISODE #5652

Ireland, Israel, and the Price of a Gesture

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SYNOPSIS

When Ireland's national team faced Israel at a neutral venue, the gestures became the story: black armbands, heads bowed through Israel's anthem, and a captain who didn't seek his counterpart's hand. The reaction wasn't what you'd expect — criticism landed from outside the pro-Israel lane, while at home the players returned as heroes and the football association copped the blame. This episode digs into the machinery underneath: why federations refuse to let politics alter fixtures, why forfeit costs everything and an armband costs nothing, and where the line sits between protest aimed at your own country and conduct aimed at a guest. Plus the harder question — what does "skin in the game" actually mean, and why does the costless gesture eventually curdle the cause it claims to serve?

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Okay. So a football match turned into a diplomatic incident, and Daniel watched the whole thing from Jerusalem with a very particular set of eyes.



Herman

Particular is one word for it.



Corn

Here's how he laid it out. He was born in Ireland, moved to Israel ten years ago at twenty-five, never felt at home there as a Jew, and now he's watching the Irish national team play Israel at a neutral venue. Black armbands. Heads bowed during Israel's anthem. The captain refusing to seek the Israeli captain's hand.



Herman

And he's not surprised Ireland is hostile to Israel. His words, roughly.



Corn

Right, he says that's not news. What surprised him was where the criticism came from. He was reading the reaction and it wasn't a pro-Israel echo chamber piling on. It was coming from everywhere. Everywhere except Ireland, where the players got celebrated as heroes. And he watched some of that reaction and called it bizarre. The football authority getting blamed for putting the players in an uncomfortable position.



Herman

After the authority itself asked UEFA not to draw Israel in the first place.



Corn

Which UEFA rejected. And then Daniel asks the bigger thing. Is it ever appropriate to use sport to air a political grievance? Does Ireland have any standing to lecture Israel on morality or on how to win wars in the Middle East? And is there a growing impatience out there with the performative side of pro-Palestinianism. People who aren't at the table, aren't participants, and still make noise. His phrase is skin in the game.



Herman

And then he asks us what reaction we've seen and what we make of his take.



Corn

So let's start with what actually happened on the pitch.



Herman

The Nations League fixture. Ireland had spent weeks, weeks, publicly debating whether to play it at all. That debate is its own artifact. Then they played, at a neutral venue, and the gestures were the point of the evening as far as the Irish side was concerned. Black armbands. Bowed heads through the Israeli anthem. The captain declining the handshake.



Corn

Declining it how? Because there's a difference between not seeking a handshake and refusing one that's offered.



Herman

He didn't seek it. That's the phrasing Daniel used and it's the accurate one. Protocol says the captains walk the line together, exchange pennants, shake hands. He just didn't do his half of it. And that's the detail that matters, because a handshake refusal is a thing the other captain has to absorb in front of a camera. You're not protesting a policy at that point. You're making a specific man stand there with his hand out.



Corn

And the armbands and the anthem were aimed at the anthem and the captain. Not at a settlement, not at a military operation, not at a policy you could name in a sentence.



Herman

That's the thing that got lost. If you asked the Irish players what specifically they were protesting, I think you'd get a sentence about Gaza and then it would fall apart into generalities. The gesture was the message. There wasn't a policy underneath it.



Corn

So the reaction split. International criticism from people who are not in the tank for Israel. And at home, the players came back as heroes, and the association copped the blame for the discomfort.



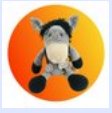
Herman

It's a strange inversion. The federation is being criticized for putting the players in a position the players themselves chose to escalate. Nobody wore the armband by accident.



Corn

That's the setup. The mechanism's the interesting part.



Herman

Which mechanism?



Corn

Why gestures. Why not forfeit.



Herman

Because forfeiture costs you. A forfeit is a loss, it's a fine, it's a competition sanction, it's potentially a ban. An armband costs nothing. You still get the match, you still get the points, you still get the gate receipts, and you get the signal on top. It's a protest with no price attached.



Corn

Free protest.



Herman

And that's why sports bodies have spent decades trying to keep the price attached, because the moment gestures are free, every fixture becomes a venue and the competition stops meaning anything.



Corn

UEFA rejecting the draw request is the tell here. That wasn't a moral judgment. That was a governance judgment. Federations don't let politics alter fixtures because the second they do, every draw becomes negotiable and the whole structure collapses.



Herman

It's not even a new position. Look at how UEFA handles Russia and Belarus. They're excluded from some competitions and present in others, and the pattern doesn't track morality, it tracks federation politics and what the member associations will tolerate. That's not a defense of the outcome. It's a description of the machinery. The machinery does not do moral reasoning. It does precedent.



Corn

So Ireland asked for an exception to precedent, got told no, and then played the fixture anyway with the gestures bolted on.



Herman

Which is the worst of both worlds from a governance standpoint. You participated, so you accepted the fixture. And you signaled, so you rejected it. You can't do both cleanly.



Corn

Where's the line, though. Because there is a real tradition of protest in sport and some of it was right.



Herman

Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Mexico City, sixty-eight. Fists raised on the podium. And notice what they were protesting. Their own country. American racial policy, American poverty, American treatment of Black athletes. They weren't protesting the existence of the Australian silver medalist standing next to them.



Corn

Peter Norman, who wore the badge in solidarity, and paid for it at home.



Herman

Paid for it for the rest of his life, yes. And Kaepernick. Kneeling during the anthem. Whatever you think of it, he was kneeling at his own country's anthem, about his own country's policing. Domestic grievance, domestic target. That's the category.



Corn

And Ireland's gestures were aimed at the other team's anthem and the other team's captain.



Herman

Which is a different category. You've crossed from protest into conduct directed at a guest. And that's why the criticism came from outside the pro-Israel lane. It wasn't people defending Israeli policy. It was people watching a team be rude to an opponent at a neutral venue and finding it small.



Corn

Daniel's point about the echo chamber is the sharpest thing in the prompt.



Herman

It is. Because the standard dismissal is that any criticism of Ireland on this is hasbara, it's the lobby, it's coordinated. And that dismissal falls apart when the criticism is coming from people with no dog in the fight. Neutral observers watched it and thought it was crass. That's the data point.



Corn

Crass is the word Daniel used. And he's not a neutral observer, he's an Irish-born Jew who moved to Israel at twenty-five. So he's got a foot in both.



Herman

Which is why his read on the domestic reaction is worth taking seriously. He watched the Irish coverage and his word was bizarre. The framing was about the players being put in an uncomfortable position. Not about what the players did. About what was done to them.



Corn

The discomfort is the story. The conduct isn't.



Herman

That's a feedback loop. The gesture matters more than the outcome, and the outcome for Palestinians is nothing. Zero. Ireland played a football match and lost or won or drew, and nothing changed on the ground.



Corn

So that's the mechanism and the decorum line. Now the standing question.



Herman

Ireland is militarily neutral. It's not a broker. It's not at the table in any Middle East process. It has no leverage, no mediation role, no troop contribution, no reconstruction money at scale. And it is uniquely, persistently obsessed with Israel.



Corn

Obsessed is doing work there. Because the volume of Irish political energy directed at Israel is out of proportion to any Irish interest in the region.



Herman

It's out of proportion to Ireland's size, its trade relationships, its diaspora, its security interests. There's no material Irish stake in the Israeli-Palestinian question at all. And yet it's a permanent feature of Irish political life.



Corn

Which suggests the stake isn't material.



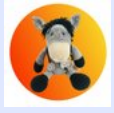
Herman

It's identity. And this is where Daniel's skin-in-the-game thesis gets interesting, because he's not saying you can't have an opinion. He's saying there's a difference between having an opinion and performing one.



Corn

Say more.



Herman

The person with skin in the game is the one who pays a price for their position. The mediator who spends years on a process and gets nothing. The country that takes in refugees, or sends money, or puts soldiers in a peacekeeping rotation and loses them. The Palestinian family actually living it. Those people have standing to be loud. Ireland has a position and no cost.



Corn

And in a more turbulent world, patience for the costless position runs out.



Herman

That's the zeitgeist claim and I think he's onto something, but I'd narrow it. It's not that people have lost patience with criticism of Israel. Plenty of people criticize Israel and Daniel says himself he agrees with a lot of the post-October seventh criticism. The impatience is with the substitution. Gesture standing in for action.



Corn

And the vanity of it. The country gets to feel righteous without doing anything.



Herman

Righteousness at zero cost. That's the thing that curdles. And notice it's not even specific to Israel. You can watch the same pattern with any fashionable cause. The country that passes a resolution and calls it a foreign policy.



Corn

Give me an example outside this lane, because I think that's the strongest version of the argument.



Herman

Take climate. Every few years there's a summit, a country signs a pledge, there's a photo, and the actual emissions curve doesn't move. The pledge is the deliverable. Or take a sanctions regime where everyone announces sanctions and then carves out the trade they actually care about. The announcement is the policy. The performance is the point.



Corn

And nobody pays.



Herman

Nobody pays, and the people who do pay are the ones who took the pledge seriously and disadvantaged themselves against competitors who didn't. Which is why the performative mode eventually collapses. It punishes the sincere.



Corn

So the Irish domestic reaction is the case study. Players as heroes, association as villain, no question asked about what Ireland achieved.



Herman

Because the achievement was the gesture. That was the deliverable. If you ask what Ireland got for Palestinians, the answer is nothing, and the honest answer is that the question was never about Palestinians. It was about Ireland's self-image.



Corn

There's a second-order cost too, and I want to get this right because it's not just about Ireland feeling good.



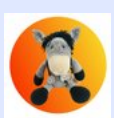
Herman

Go on.



Corn

If sport becomes a venue for this, the cost lands on the athletes and on the competition. You get players put in positions where the safe move is the gesture, because declining to gesture is now itself a statement. And you get fixtures that are supposed to be about football turned into referenda.



Herman

And the cause gets damaged. This is the part the gesture-participants never price in. When the gesture reads as crass rather than principled, it doesn't advance the cause, it inoculates people against it. You've made the cause synonymous with bad manners at a



Herman (continued)

football match.



Corn

Which is a real cost to people who actually care about the underlying issue.



Herman

It is. And that's the tragedy of the performative mode. It burns the credibility of the substantive argument.



Corn

So does Ireland have the standing?



Herman

To criticize Israeli policy in the abstract? Sure, anyone does. To lecture Israel on how to win a war in the Middle East, from a position of military neutrality and no regional role? No. That's not a moral judgment on Ireland, it's an observation about competence. You don't take military advice from someone who's never been in the fight and has no intention of ever being in it.



Corn

And the growing frustration Daniel senses. Is it real?



Herman

I think it's real and I think it's broader than Israel. There's a mood in a lot of countries right now that the era of cheap moral posturing is ending. Not because people got more conservative, but because the problems got more expensive. When things are comfortable you can afford to perform. When they're not, performance starts to look like a luxury good.



Corn

And the split in the reaction tells you where the mood is.



Herman

It tells you the mood has moved. Five years ago the reflex would have been to treat the Irish gestures as brave. The reflex now, outside Ireland, was to find them embarrassing. That's a shift.



Corn

Herman.



Herman

Mm.



Corn

Daniel asked us what we make of his take. I'll go first since I've been quiet on it.



Herman

Go.



Corn

I think he's right about the reaction and I think he's being generous to the criticism. He says he agrees with a lot of the post-October seventh criticism of Israel. Fine. But the criticism he's describing, the international one, wasn't about Israeli policy. It was about Irish conduct. Those are different conversations and he's right to keep them separate.



Herman

The thing that struck me was the handshake.



Corn

Specifically.



Herman

Because the armband is a symbol and symbols are cheap and everyone knows it. The anthem bow is theater. But the handshake is a person. There's an Israeli captain standing there, and his opposite number just doesn't put his hand out. And the cameras are on it. That's not a message to a government. That's a message to a man.



Corn

And the man had nothing to do with any policy.



Herman

Nothing. He's a footballer. He's there because he's good at football. And he got used as a prop.



Corn

That's where my sympathy runs out. Not at the politics. At the prop.



Hilbert

Daniel's got it right about the federation.



Corn

Hilbert.



Hilbert

The request to UEFA was the tell. Once that came back no, the players were stuck. Their own association had spent months telling the public this fixture shouldn't happen, then told them to go play it. So the players had to do something to square it with the people at home.



Herman

You've seen that before.



Hilbert

I've seen the protocol side of it. The anthem arrangements, the handshake line, the walk-out order. There's a sheet. Captains walk together, exchange pennants, handshake, coin toss. It's printed. Everyone gets it the day before.



Corn

And when someone goes off script?



Hilbert

The officials have a word. Quietly, beforehand. I remember a fixture where a team wanted to make a point at a neutral venue, and the match commissioner sat them down and said, you can play, or you can make your point, but you can't do both without consequences. Pick one.



Herman

That's the whole episode in a sentence.



Hilbert

It's not a moral position. It's scheduling. If a team makes a point, the officials have to decide whether the fixture still stands, and that decision has to be made in about ninety seconds, and nobody at the ground has the authority to make it. So they say the sentence and hope the team picks play.



Corn

And the Irish team picked both.



Hilbert

They picked both and the officials let it slide because the gestures were small enough not to force the decision. Armbands and a bow aren't a walk-off. The handshake is the closest to the line, but you can't force a man to put his hand out.



Herman

So the system has a gap exactly the size of a symbolic gesture.



Hilbert

The system has a gap exactly the size of anything that doesn't stop the match. That's the design. It's not built for morality. It's built for ninety minutes of football to happen.



Corn

Which is why UEFA rejected the draw request and then let the armbands through.



Hilbert

Same logic both times. Don't change the fixture. Don't stop the fixture. Let it run.



Herman

And the players knew that.



Hilbert

Everyone knows that. The players know it better than anyone. They know exactly how far they can go before the referee steps in, and they went to that line and stopped. That's not courage. That's calibration.



Corn

Calibration.



Hilbert

I had a job once where the whole thing was knowing how far you could go before someone with authority had to make a call. You learn the line to the inch. These lads learned it too.



Herman

So the blame spreads.



Hilbert

The association put them in it. The players took it as far as it would go. Two different failures and the second one only happened because of the first. I don't let the players off. I just don't think they invented it.



Corn

The domestic reaction blamed the association and celebrated the players.



Hilbert

Of course. The association is the one that asked UEFA for the exception and got told no. That's the embarrassing part. The players are the ones who looked defiant. Defiance plays better than embarrassment.



Herman

And nobody in the coverage asked what Ireland got for it.



Hilbert

No.



Corn

What did they get?



Hilbert

A night where everyone felt good and nothing changed. Same as the resolution they passed the year before, and the one before that.



Corn

Nothing.



Hilbert

Nothing that shows up anywhere you can measure. Which is fine if that's what you wanted. It just isn't what they said they wanted.



Herman

That's the thing that stays with me. The gap between what was claimed and what was delivered.



Corn

What does this actually tell us about Ireland's obsession, and about where the performative politics in sport goes from here?



Herman

The obsession isn't about Israel. It's about Ireland. It's a country working out its own sense of itself and using Israel as the surface to do it on. Which is why the arguments never land, because they're not really arguments about Israel.



Corn

The impatience Daniel senses is going to keep growing, and not because people are changing their minds about the cause.



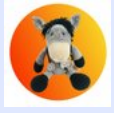
Herman

Because they're tired of the substitution. Gesture for action. Resolution for policy. Armband for anything that costs you something.



Corn

If the gesture backfired everywhere except at home, and the home reaction was to celebrate the players and blame the association, then the only audience that was ever being played to was the domestic one. Which means the question was never about Palestinians.



Herman

It was about Ireland feeling righteous.



Corn

Which is the part that doesn't survive contact with a world that's getting more expensive.



Herman

The countries with skin in the game are going to get louder and the ones without are going to get quieter, or they're going to get ignored. That's the direction.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

We'll be back soon.