

## “Football’s Coming Home”...but to which country? FIFA’s National Team Eligibility Rules Explained

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Representing one’s country on the international stage has long been reported as the pinnacle of a footballer’s ambition. In present times, the development of international club competitions has challenged that notion. For fans of the English national representative team, the FIFA World Cup 2018 was a fantastic event, capturing mass national support for international football, as the Three Lions’ fourth place heroics restored national pride in the country’s ability at national representative level, whilst also uniting the nation during a period of political uncertainty.

The subject of international football, like any other international team sport, brings into play the issue of national team eligibility, with international stars such Diego Costa, Wilfried Zaha and the Boateng brothers (to name a few) considering the rules issued by FIFA to determine which nation or nations they are entitled to seek to represent.

Very recently, West Ham United’s newest prodigy, [Declan Rice, has committed his future to seeking to represent England at full international level](#), despite having made several appearances for the Republic of Ireland at underage level, and having a few caps for the senior side – This case will be discussed in more detail below.

When it comes to eligibility for a national team, many may think that this is a straightforward process i.e. play for one team and one team only – the country of birth. However, these recent cases have highlighted that the situation is more complicated than that, taking account of, inter alia, differing circumstances of geography and citizenship, and on occasion can prove controversial.

The rules governing a player’s eligibility for a national representative team are summarised below.

### **FIFA Eligibility Rules**

The rules surrounding a footballer’s national team eligibility can be found in the FIFA statutes. In particular, Articles 5-8 of the [Regulations Governing the Application of the Statutes](#).

#### ***Principle of National Team Eligibility***

Article 5.1 states: “Any person holding a **permanent nationality** that is not dependent on residence in a certain country is eligible to play for the representative teams of the association of that country.” The terms of this rule prevent temporary residents who are not otherwise citizens of the relevant country being considered eligible.

Article 5.1 further adds: “...any player who has already participated in a match (either in full or in part) in an **official competition** of any category or any type of football for one association may not play an international match for a representative team of another association.” The term “official competition” refers to matches played for representative teams in competitions organised by FIFA or any confederation (i.e. not friendly games).

However, there is an exception to Article 5.1 – explained in Article 8 (see below), which allows a player to change

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association if certain requirements are met.

## ***Nationalities Entitling Players to Represent Multiple Teams***

Some nationalities can, on the face of it, allow a player to play for more than one representative association. For example, the four 'home nations' in the UK are all grouped under the same "British" nationality label.

However, a player who falls under this nationality bracket cannot simply pick-and-choose which country he wishes to play for within that territory. He must first meet the following conditions of Article 6.1:

"A player who is eligible to represent more than one association, may play in an international match for one of these associations only if, in addition to having the relevant nationality, he fulfills at least one of the following conditions:

- a) He was born on the territory of the relevant association.
- b) His biological mother or biological father was born on the territory.
- c) His grandmother or grandfather was born on the territory.
- d) He has lived continuously on the territory for at least two years."

Article 6.2 further states that "regardless of Article 6.1, associations sharing a common nationality may make an agreement under which item (d) (of the above) is deleted completely or amended to specify a longer time limit."

The four British 'home nations' have opted to delete item (d). This therefore means that there is no requirement for British players to have lived in a specific home nation's country for a period of time before representing that country on the international stage - they merely need to be born there or have family ties through their parents or grandparents.

## ***Taking on a new nationality***

Article 7 contains the rules for a player to change nationality and thus represent a new national team. This criteria is identical to Article 6.1, apart from item (d) which requires a player to have "...lived continuously for at least five years after the age of 18 on the territory of the relevant association."

It should also be noted that there is also an exception to Article 7 (d). In cases where a player has lived continuously in a certain country for at least five years **before** the age of 18, and would therefore not meet the requirement of Article 7 (d) - the player can apply to Players' Status Committee (the "**Committee**") to request for an exception to this rule and become eligible. If the Committee can establish that the move was for reasons not related to football (e.g. family, asylum, cultural reasons etc.) then the exception will be granted. However, the burden of proof to establish this lies with the applicants i.e. the player and his representative association.

If the Article 7 criteria is satisfied, a player must then look to Article 8. Article 8.1 provides that players who (i) have more than one nationality, (ii) acquired a new nationality, or (iii) are eligible to play for several teams due to their nationality - will be able to change teams, only once, subject to the following:

"a) He has not played a match (either in full or in part) in an official competition at "A" international level for his current association, and at the time of his first full or partial appearance in an international match in an official competition for his current association, he already had the nationality of the representative team for which he wishes to play.

b) He is not permitted to play for his new association in any competition in which he has already played for his previous association."

In other words, a player cannot change teams if he has been capped at senior international level in a competitive match, such as a World Cup qualifier.

It is also worth noting that Article 8.2 states that where a player has played for a national team but then permanently loses his nationality without his consent or against his will due to government action, he can request to play for another association whose nationality he has acquired. This may apply where there is a break-up of a previous nation or territory.

## ***Administration requirements***

If a player is eligible to change teams, then Article 8.3 states that the player must "submit a written,

substantiated request to the FIFA general secretariat. The Committee will then make a decision". Once the player files the request, he is not eligible to play for any national team until it has been processed.

### **Applying the FIFA Rules to the Declan Rice Case**

20-year-old Declan Rice was born in London – with English being his primary nationality. However, his grandparents were from Cork, Ireland, meaning that despite never living in Ireland, he was eligible to represent both associations in accordance with Article 6 and 7.

Between 2015 and 2018, Rice opted to represent Ireland and went on to make 20 appearances at youth level. Rice also gained 3 caps for Ireland's senior side in 2018, however they all came in friendlies rather than competitive matches.

After a string of impressive performances for his club West Ham United in late 2018, Rice began considering his international options. On 14 February 2019, Rice announced that he is switching allegiance to England and hoping to represent the senior side.

The switch of nationality was permitted as Rice had not played in an "official competition at "A" international level" for Ireland (i.e. a senior competitive match) in accordance with Article 8.1 and thus satisfied the requirements to change association. To make the switch official, Rice will have to submit a written request to FIFA, which the Committee will then action.

### **Future Developments**

In short, players who satisfy the relevant eligibility requirements have the right to change their national team if they have not played a senior competitive match for another nation. Whether this will remain the case over time will be decided by FIFA through its usual consultation process. Speaking in October 2017, Victor Montagliani (FIFA vice president and president of CONCACAF) stated "[...immigration is changing. There are nationality issues that pop up all over the world... So it's a good time to have a look at this and see if there are solutions without hurting the integrity of the game.](#)" More recently, FIFA stated during its Football Law Annual Review 2019, that the association passed more than 80 decisions relating to national team eligibility and change of association in 2018 – demonstrating that this topic is seemingly becoming more prevalent in the modern game.

It will be interesting to see how the position of nationality in football evolves over time, especially taking into account global geopolitical changes. In the meantime, we wish Declan Rice well in his international career, should he be selected.

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