

1. THE EVOLUTION OF GAELIC SPORTS

Irish people have always had a natural love of games and gambling on games, and Gaelic sports can boast an ancient lineage. The very fact of being called *Gaelic* games invokes the Pre-Christian era, a claim not altogether false. Of the four sports dealt with here – hurling, football, camogie and handball – hurling can lay the strongest claim to being an ancient game.

There is a reference in the Book of Leinster, written in the twelfth century, to a game of hurling at the Battle of Moytura in 1272BC between the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Firbolgs, two legendary fearsome tribes said to be sworn rivals. Following the game, the Firbolgs slew their opponents – a bloodthirsty action many might feel to be entirely in keeping with the passions hurling provokes. Hurling plays an important role in much of the legend and folklore of Ireland. For instance, the mighty Cúchulainn was said to puck a *sliotar* along as he travelled, to have outclassed all opponents on the field of play, and to have once killed a ferocious hound by thrusting his *sliotar* down its throat.

There is also a reference to hurling in the Brehon Laws, and in the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366) and of Galway (1537) members of the Anglo-Irish ruling class were expressly forbidden to play it – as part of the general drive to prevent them from becoming Gaelicised, or ‘going native’. These interdictions had little effect, however, and the game flourished under the aegis of landlords who would organise teams of their tenants to play inter-barony and inter-county matches on which a great deal of money was wagered.

Football is not as ancient a sport as hurling, but an early form of it, called *Caid* – in which a community ‘team’ would try to bring a ball as far as a neighbouring village and the neighbouring villagers would do everything in their power to prevent them doing so – had been played for centuries.

However, things changed as Irish history took some

dramatic twists and turns. The 1798 rebellion led to a cooling of relations between landlords and tenants, and in the following century the Great Famine had a disastrous effect on native Irish culture. By the mid-nineteenth century, both hurling and football, like the Irish language, were in decline. It looked as though the great native sports would shortly become extinct and be superseded by games imported from England. The inevitable was thwarted, however, by the nationalist fervour and missionary zeal of a group of men who together founded the Gaelic Athletic Association, or the GAA. Their passion for the sports of Ireland proved a catalyst, and would result in the games not only being saved from extinction but being promoted to a level those men could only have dreamed of.

2. THE ORIGINS OF THE GAA

Cumann Lúthchleas Gael, or the Gaelic Athletic Association, was a nationalist organisation from the outset. Its formation was contemporaneous with that of the Gaelic League, and like the League it was a product of the cultural nationalism of the time – it was no coincidence that hurleys were carried as substitutes for guns on ceremonial occasions, for example, Charles Stewart Parnell's funeral. The Gaelic Athletic Association was very much a creature of the political ferment of the late nineteenth century, which would eventually lead to the Easter Rising and Irish Independence in 1922.

Its inception was due to a brilliant, enthusiastic, sometimes fanatical and undeniably difficult man: Michael Cusack. He was a school teacher from Clare who lived in Dublin and was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB); Cusack became familiar to many through his characterisation as the Citizen, a zealous nationalist, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In an article in the *United Irishman* newspaper, Cusack called for the setting up of a national sporting body to preserve the traditional games of the country. The first meeting of this body was

called for 1 November 1884 in the billiards room of Hayes's Commercial Hotel, Thurles, in County Tipperary.

It was an inauspicious beginning for such a remarkable organisation. The minutes of the meeting record the names of just seven attendees – although another six men sometimes claimed to have been present. The seven who did turn up were: Michael Cusack, Maurice Davin, John Wyse-Power, John McKay, JK Bracken, Joseph O'Ryan and Thomas St George McCarthy, and in all likelihood they did not know what they were starting. The GAA entered the world not with a bang but with a barely audible whimper.

The founders were a mixed bunch. Davin, a Carrick-on-Suir man, was probably the best-known of them as he was one of the leading athletes of the day. Wyse-Power was editor of the *Leinster Leader* and a member of the IRB. McCarthy, on the other hand, was a Tipperary man who was a District Inspector in the Royal Irish Constabulary, the police force of the British authorities in Ireland. Bracken was a building contractor from Templemore, O'Ryan was a solicitor from Carrick-on-Suir and McKay was a journalist from Belfast who was working for the *Cork Examiner*.

The new body elected to invite appropriate persons to be patrons of the organisation. They approached Dr Thomas Croke, the Archbishop of Cashel, Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell. While Parnell and Davitt had little to do with the rise of the GAA, the energetic and inspiring Dr Croke proved an excellent choice. His letter of acceptance to the Board was regarded as an unofficial charter for the GAA. Its fiery nationalist rhetoric gives some idea of the heady atmosphere in which the GAA was conceived:

'We are daily importing from England, not only her manufactured goods, which we cannot help doing, since she has practically strangled our own manufacturing appliances, but, together with her fashions, her

accents, her vicious literature, her music, her dances and her manifold mannerisms, her games also and her pastimes, to the utter discredit of our own grand national sports and to the sore humiliation, as I believe, of every genuine son and daughter of our old land. Ball-playing, hurling, football-kicking, according to Irish rules, casting, leaping in various ways, wrestling, handy-grips, top-pegging, leap-frog, rounders, tip-in-the-hat and all the favourite exercises and amusements among men and boys may now be said to be not only dead and buried but in several localities to be entirely forgotten and unknown ... Indeed, if we keep travelling for the next score years in the same direction that we have been going in for some time past, condemning the sports that were practised by our forefathers, effacing our national features as though we were ashamed of them and putting on, with England's stuffs and broadcloths, her masher habits and such other effeminate follies that she may recommend, we had better, at once and publicly abjure our nationality, clap hands for joy at the sight of the Union Jack and place 'England's bloody red' exultantly above the green.'

Sadly, the wonderfully named handy-grips, tip-in-the-hat and top-pegging never did regain their past eminence, but the GAA made a huge impact with football and hurling. This was not due to sharp insight on the Board's part; initially the main aim of Cusack and his cohorts was to take over athletics, hence the organisation's name. They did this to some degree, but it soon became apparent that hurling and football outstripped athletics in popularity, and the GAA eventually farmed out its athletics events to a separate organisation, the National Athletics and Cycling Association (NACA), which dwindled in influence before being subsumed by the more powerful Bord Lúthchleas na hÉireann (BLE) in the 1990s.

The Association also showed that it was in tune with the tenor of the times by undergoing a rancorous split early in its

existence. Less than two years after the Thurles meeting, Cusack fell out with Croke and also incurred the wrath of the GAA in Cork. Wyse-Power engineered the removal of Cusack as Secretary, and the man who had started it all found himself out in the cold. Like Parnell after him in the political sphere, he found it impossible to regain his influence in the organisation he had pioneered. Two years later, Davin resigned as President after another dispute and Wyse-Power quit shortly after that.

Despite the internal conflict, the GAA quickly gained a reputation for being well run and it wasn't long before it could lay claim to being the leading sporting organisation in the country. The attractiveness of the games of hurling and football and the opportunity they gave for the expression of local pride were huge factors in this, but the efficiency of the Association had a lot to do with it too. It spread the revived games all over the country and by 1887 – just three years after its inception – was able to organise the first ever All-Ireland Football and Hurling Championships. The finals, which weren't played until April 1888, were contested by club teams from the counties involved – a pattern which continued until 1922 when the hurling final between Kilkenny and Tipperary was the first contested by two county selections. Back in 1888, Limerick, represented by Commercials, played in the football final, held in Clonskeagh, against Louth, represented by Dundalk Young Irelands. Limerick won 1-4 to 0-3. The hurling final was played in Birr, County Offaly, and was won by Tipperary (Thurles) who beat Galway (Meelick) 1-1 to 0-0. The different mores of the era are apparent when you consider that the Meelick players, thinking the team from Thurles would not turn up as they were late arriving, went to the pub instead, only to find that the game would be taking place after all. The fact that they didn't score at all can be easily explained, it would seem. And that wasn't the only striking difference: one Meelick player, John Lowry, had walked all

the way to Birr only to find he was on the substitutes' bench. Understandably perhaps, he refused to accept this decision and periodically went onto the field to help out his teammates, regardless of the fact that they had the requisite number of players as it was. The teams played in their shirts and trousers. It was a basic enough start, but the GAA was on the move.

Playing with Pride

This book deals with the two major sports of Gaelic football and hurling, as well as handball and camogie – relatively minor but nonetheless important games organised by the GAA. The common thread that runs through all these games is that they are a means of expressing local pride. Players don't go into the fray year after year for money, they do it for their club and their county. This is a defining characteristic of Gaelic sports. Throughout the twentieth century Irish people often needed an outlet, a reason to feel proud, to feel bonded as a community – beset on all sides by economic woes, religious repression and political conservatism, sport was the most immediate means of providing a sense of unfettered joy. And the GAA was the conduit for this good feeling, something the organisation recognised and encouraged.

From the start the GAA made use of the great local pride in Irish society. Clubs were generally organised on a parish basis and the championships were contested between county teams. Players, with a few exceptions, played for the parish or county where they were born and bred, and would spend their whole career with the same club. This gave a unique intensity to local rivalries and endowed the best counties with a powerful, long-standing tradition. For instance, Kerry emerged as the undisputed kings of Gaelic football, while the Big Three of Tipperary, Cork and Kilkenny have long dominated hurling. But the victory wreaths have been passed

around and only three counties – Westmeath, Wicklow and Fermanagh – have never won a senior provincial title. The championship is further divided into four provincial sections – Connacht, Ulster, Munster and Leinster – adding another layer of rivalry that exploits the natural seam of inter-province one-upmanship. Indeed, the Munster hurling final is almost as prestigious an event as the All-Ireland final, with teams playing for their lives in an attempt to lord it over old enemies. The most famous, and most enduring, rivalries include Kilkenny–Wexford and Cork–Tipperary in hurling, and Kerry–Cork, Dublin–Meath and Galway–Mayo in football. When these teams line up against each other, the tension levels are enough to make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck.

Perhaps it was the GAA's appeal to local pride that ensured it was so firmly rooted in Irish society that even when the country changed dramatically in other ways, Gaelic games remained as strong as ever. The games draw huge crowds, with All-Ireland championship attendances up there with those of the Champions League. Put that in the context of Ireland's relatively small population and it's obvious that the GAA is intertwined with Irish communities in a way unmatched by any other sporting organisation in Europe. No part of Ireland is untouched by the Championship Summer. In the end, you don't really know Ireland if you don't know the GAA.

The GAA off the field

Around the turn of the last century provincial structures were established and the number of counties participating in the championships increased greatly. Organisation improved to the extent that the 1909 hurling final was the first decider to be played in its designated year.

The GAA managed to continue in operation throughout the years of the War of Independence (1919–1921) and the Civil