

The History of Gaelic Football and the Gaelic Athletic Association

Jaime Orejan, PhD, Elon University

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the nineteenth century some people feared that the Irish games could face extinction. There was concern that the English games would take over Ireland and the native games would fade away. The establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in 1884 was the defining moment in the history of Ireland's native games. Today the GAA regulates four distinctive games. The most popular are Gaelic football and hurling; the others are camogie and handball. Camogie is a field game played by women while handball is like squash without the rackets. The state of health of the GAA and the level of support for the games is a stunning endorsement of the vision of its founders, and the games are enjoyed by millions of people – players and spectators – every year (Healy, 1998).

The Gaelic games of football, hurling, camogie, and handball are far removed from the glittering ranks of global sport. In fact, large figure endorsement deals and international stardom do not entice Gaelic players. In a world focused on millionaire sports professionals, these Gaelic games provide a remarkable example of thriving amateur sports. Amateur in their character, Gaelic games exist through the bonds of identity they forge among participants and devotees.

Founded out of national pride, sustained through the lean times with that same emotion, few things run so deeply through the core of Irish society than the connection with place and home which the games provide. In a sporting world where players change allegiances for the price of a shoe and satellite television holds fans to ransom, there remains in Gaelic games vital proof of a purer ideal - amateurism, and love of the game (Prior, 1997).

ORIGENS OF THE GAELIC GAMES

Irish games and sports were the main attractions of the Tailteann games (named after a Celtic Goddess), an ancient Celtic sporting festival, which began in 1829 BC (GAA Museum, 2001). The games occurred annually during the feast of Lúnagsha (August 1) for almost 4000 years until 1169 AD. In the 17th and 18th centuries the gentry landowners and noblemen organized the games of hurling, and gambling was very common. Hundreds of people would gather to watch the matches and sometimes the players would be paid for their efforts. The games became a major religious and sporting festival on the Irish calendar. At that time, many trade fairs were held where livestock and goods were bought and sold. However, this fair was more like the Olympic Games (GAA Museum, 2001).

Before the founding of the GAA, Gaelic games had existed in various forms for many centuries. The game's origins are not clearly known. A rough and tumble form of the game was common throughout the middle-ages, similar versions of which abounded over Europe and eventually became the forebears of both football association and rugby. Some believe it was brought to Ireland by the English centuries ago and over time it developed into the Gaelic football we know today (Prior, 1997).

The earliest record of a recognized precursor to modern Gaelic football date from a game in County Meath in 1670, in which catching and kicking the ball was permitted. A six-a-side version was played in Dublin in the early 18th century, and 100 years later there were accounts of games played between County sides (Prior, 1997). Limerick was the stronghold of the native game around this time, and the Commercial Club, founded by

employees of Cannock's Drapery Store, was one of the first to impose a set of rules which was adapted by other clubs in the city. Of all the Irish pastimes the GAA set out to preserve and promote, it is fair to say that Gaelic football was in the worst shape at the time of the association's foundation (GAA Museum, 2001).

There are historical references to a form of Irish or Gaelic football being played in Ireland as far back as the 14th century. It seems that Gaelic football games were cross-country marathons involving hundreds of players, and violent exchanges were the norm. This cross-country football was called 'caid in County Kerry, taking its name from the ball of horsehide or oxhide which had an inflated natural bladder inside it (Healy, 1998).

As recently as the mid-1800's, a typical game of football in Ireland involved hundreds of people playing across miles of open countryside, with the obligatory frequent pauses for bouts of wrestling and fist fighting. The object of the game seems to have been to spend the day crossing fields while eluding flying fists and sprawling legs. The ball was more of an accessory, and the game was a social event as much as a sporting one (O'Hehir, 1984).

At the end of the game all the players joined up in the house of the winning gentleman (a leading figure in the village who organized the fun), and had a few pints of beer. Historically, aggression has always been a feature of Gaelic football. Even when football graduated to a point where two teams consisting of the same number of players met on a marked pitch, wrestling and some violence was still permitted (Healy, 1998). With violence rampant and organization virtually non-existent as recently as 150 years ago, all that could be said for Ireland's native games is that they were being handed on from generation to generation, surviving despite their coarseness, because they offered the people moments of pleasure and respite from everyday problems (Healy, 1998).

The fact that Gaelic games were so popular and caused some considerable damage frightened the ruling class, and through the centuries, laws were passed to ban the games. The Statutes of Kilkenny in the 14th century banned all Gaelic games, while in 1527 the Statutes of Galway allowed only football to be played (GAA Museum, 2001). In later centuries, prohibition of the games had more to do with religious Puritanism than political control. In 1695, the Sunday observance Act banned hurling, communging and football on Sundays and imposed a 12 pence or the equivalent or 12 pennies penalty for each offense (Tierney, 1972).

By the 17th century, the situation had changed considerably. The games had grown in popularity and were widely played. This was due to the patronage of the gentry. Now instead of opposing the games it was the gentry and the ruling class who were serving as patrons of the games. Games were organized between landlords with each team comprising 20 or more tenants. Wagers were commonplace with purses of up to 100 guineas an old unit of currency (Prior, 1997).

By late 19th century, Gaelic games had once again fallen foul of circumstance. A feature of Ireland's history was the demise and rebirth of the games at many intervals in different counties (GAA Museum, 2001). Their survival came under particular threat with the Great Irish Famine, which began to take its toll around the mid to late 1840's. During that time the survival of the people became a more immediate concern than the survival of their games. It took the spirit out of the nation and the politically charged society of the time succeeded in nurturing militarism, not a cultural sense of identity. It is estimated that nearly two million people died and an additional two million or more emigrated as a result of the hardship presented by the famine (Tierney, 1992).

However, there were some who saw the revival of the games and Irish culture as an effective way to display independence from England. Within a decade or so of the famine, however, a resilient people had again turned to football and Gaelic sports as pastimes. It was from this ideal that the GAA came into existence.

THE GAA IS BORN

The establishment of the GAA took place at a time when the Irish people had an intense desire to gain national independence (the Irish people were under British rule), and when the influence of British games at the expense of the native games was much resented (Humphries, 1996). Its founding was set against a backdrop of much political turbulence. It was founded at the beginning of an era in Ireland, which was emerging from the misery of the famine years, and was now once again ready to assert itself both politically and culturally (Prior, 1997).

The people wanted an improvement in their economic circumstances as well as their political freedom. The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), also known as the Fenians, (a secret oath-bound society) founded in 1858, sought to establish an Irish Republic by physical force, and took as its motto "Sooner or Never" (Tierney, 1992). It was their intent to fight the British in a bid to gain Irish independence, and this ideal would be shared by the founders of the GAA out of concern about the British games in Ireland (Healy, 1998).

Even though Irish games were being played, there was no central body to organize competitions and draw-up rules and regulations. In fact, Irish had more of a tendency to take up the games of English origin, made popular by the police and military in the garrison towns (O'Brien, 1960). Any athletic meetings that were held had to abide by the rules of the Irish Amateur Athletic Association, which was an Anglo-Irish body, dedicated to maintaining English standards and regulations (Cuiv, 1969; Tierney, 1992).

Native games were clearly in desperate need of a guiding hand, and many felt that their national sports and pastimes would be forgotten altogether. What the country wanted was an "Irish" organization, to bring order and unity into sport, on a nation-wide basis (Larkin, 1965). A great deal of credit for this being prevented goes to two men that had that vision and desire, Michael Cuzack and Maurice Davin (Ryan, 1965). Cuzack was a fluent Irish speaker from County Clare, who established a school in Dublin called the Civil Service Academy. He was determined to found a purely Irish based and controlled athletic association (Prior, 1997). Davin, who came from Carrick-on-suir in Waterford, was Ireland's most famous athlete of the time. His youth had been devoted to boxing and rowing, and it is said he never lost a race in a boat of his own construction. Davin's fame gave the GAA considerable prestige, and he was noted for his meticulous sense of fair play (Healy, 1998). By mid-summer 1884, Davin and Cuzack's planning was reaching an advanced stage, and one of the most pressing needs was to establish the support of some prestigious patrons. In late 19th century Ireland, this meant the Catholic Church (Ryan, 1965).

They approached the archbishop of Cashel. Dr. Thomas Croke, one of the more liberal clergymen of the time who was known to have a passionate interest in sport. He was more than enthusiastic, providing Cuzack and Davin the momentum they needed to convene the historic meeting in Thurles, which took place on All Saint's Day, November 1, 1884 (Prior, 1997).

Two other important patrons were Michael Davitt, a Fenian who had recently been released from prison, and was the leader of the Land league (aimed at enabling Irish tenants, then at the mercy of landlords, to gain control of their land), and Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Both Davitt and Parnell were in favor of such an organization being established. Nationalist Ireland was at one: Irish games were to be revived and the British influences resisted (Cuiv, 1969).

On November 1, 1884 at "Haye's Commercial Hotel in Thurles, County Tipperary, the GAA was born. Reports vary on the size of the attendance, with some reports mentioning between seven and thirteen men being present (Tierney, 1992). It is significant to note that of the original seven founders of the GAA, four were members of the IRB (Prior, 1997). By the end of the meeting the Gaelic Athletic Association (Cumann Luthchleas Gael) had been formed. The stated aims of the strictly amateur body were to preserve and cultivate Ireland's national pastimes. Finally, Gaelic games would have a sense of direction.

The GAA made a considerable impact upon the life of the nation. First, it acted as a de-Anglicizing force, by its determined effort to sponsor native Irish games and discourage English games. Second, the GAA helped to build a healthy and vigorous Irish manhood. Unwittingly, it provided a kind of militant separatism, and gave the youth of Ireland a feeling of belonging, which stirred their loyalty and patriotism. Third, the GAA provided a recruiting ground for the IRB, due to the fact that the Fenians had infiltrated its ranks since its inception. Fourth, by basing its organization on the parish and county units, the GAA gave birth to a new local spirit in rural Ireland. Ever since the famine, the Irish countryside had become more depressed and depleted with mass emigration. Thanks to the GAA a new focus was given for local enthusiasm and for pride in parish or county.

Finally, the GAA was one of the first great democratic movements in modern times, completely controlled by Irishmen. The movement embraced every form of national opinion in Ireland, and the only people excluded from its membership were the military and the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) to avoid the presence of potential spies in their ranks (Tierney, 1992).

THE BAN

Given the nature of its values and aims - the promotion of Irish sport and culture – it is perhaps inevitable that politics and the GAA would be frequent cohorts (Prior, 1997). The one issue that was more divisive than any other in the history of the GAA is “The Ban” as it is officially referred was introduced into the Official Guide, the GAA’s constitution in 1902. The legislation banned members of the Northern Ireland security forces from participation. Additionally, it banned GAA players and its members from participating in “foreign” games such as football association, rugby, cricket or hockey (Cuiv, 1969). The ban was lifted in 1971. The rules, however, still deny GAA membership to the British security forces, including those stationed in British-ruled Northern Ireland. Inevitably, sport in the six counties of Northern Ireland reflects the religious divisions of the region. Catholics play Gaelic games, while Protestants play football association or rugby (GAA Museum, 2001).

Prior (1997) noted that the reason for the ban’s initial existence was a fear among the association’s leadership that the Anglicization of Irish sport, culture and politics would, if left unchecked, become hugely detrimental to the culture of the Gaelic Games. The GAA felt it could not compete on a level playing field with football association and rugby, and rely solely on the patriotic instincts of its members. Thus, the motion written into the rule book read: “Any member of the Association who plays or encourages in any way rugby, football, hockey or any imported game which is calculated to injuriously affect our National Pastimes, is suspended from the Association” (Prior, 1997, p. 38).

The GAA is more than a sports’ organization, it is a national trust, an entity which the Irish feel they have in common. It is there to administer their shared passion. They are the unifying and identifying force throughout their country, and the games are the thread that runs in all of their lives.

THE GAME OF GAELIC FOOTBALL

The sport of Gaelic football has indeed evolved greatly from its wild origins. Refined and improved throughout the years, Ireland’s national game is now a sophisticated sport which, when played with imagination and in a free-flowing manner, can be beautiful and exciting to watch. When it reaches its heights, it easily compares with any field game in the world. From its primitive origins it has developed into an exciting physical contact sport of which the Irish are understandably proud.

Gaelic football can best be described as a mixture of football association and rugby, although it predates both of those games. It is a field game which has developed as a distinct game similar to the progression of Australian Rules football. It is thought that Australian Rules evolved from Gaelic football through the many thousands of Irish people who were either deported or emigrated to Australia from the middle of the twentieth century (All about football, n.d.).

Modern Gaelic football is played by two teams with fifteen-a-side players. The pitch as the field of play is normally called, is 130 meters (minimum) to 145 meters (maximum) in length, and 80 to 90 meters in width. At either end of the pitch there are two goalposts, which are 6.5 meters apart and are situated at the center of the endline. They are a minimum of 7 meters in height with a cross bar fixed to the goalpost at a height of 2.5 meters above the ground (GAA Museum, 2001).

The two forms of scoring are goals and points, with a goal having the value of three points. A game is won by the team with the greater total score (from either goals or points) at the end of the game. Thus, a team that scores 1-3 (one goal and three points) has a total of six points (Healy, 1998). Most goals are kicked, but it is permissible to score by striking the ball with the hand or hands when it is in full flight. However, at present it is not permitted for a player in possession to fist or punch the ball into the net. Points can be fisted over the cross bar, although the vast majority are scored with the foot (GAA Museum, 2001).

The ball used in Gaelic football is round, and slightly smaller than a soccer ball. It can be carried in the hand for a distance of four steps and can be kicked or hand passed a striking motion with the hand or fist. After every four steps the ball must be either bounced or “solo-ed”, an action of dropping the ball onto the foot and kicking it back into the hand. The ball may not be bounced twice in a row. Players are not allowed to pick the ball up off the ground with their hands, with the exception of the goalkeeper, who is allowed to do so inside his own parallelogram. The other players must either catch the ball before it reaches the ground or flick it into their hands with their feet. When the ball is not on the ground, it can be played with any part of the body.

The essential difference between Gaelic football and football association (apart from the scoring system) is that in Gaelic football all fifteen players can handle the ball. However, unlike rugby, the players are not allowed to carry the ball at will. As mentioned before (Figure 1) each team consists of fifteen players, with the lining out as follows: one goalkeeper, six defenders, two mid-field (or center-field) players and six forwards (Figure 1) (All about football, n.d.).

Also, goalkeepers may not be physically challenged while inside their own parallelogram, but players may harass them into playing a bad pass, or block an attempted pass. Teams are allowed a maximum of three substitutions per game. Officials for a game include a referee, two linesmen (to indicate when the ball leaves the field of play at the sidelines and 45” free kicks, and four umpires to signal scores, assist the referee in controlling games and to assist the linesmen in positioning 45” frees. A goal is signaled by raising a green flag, placed to the left of the goal. A point is signaled by raising a white flag, placed to the right of

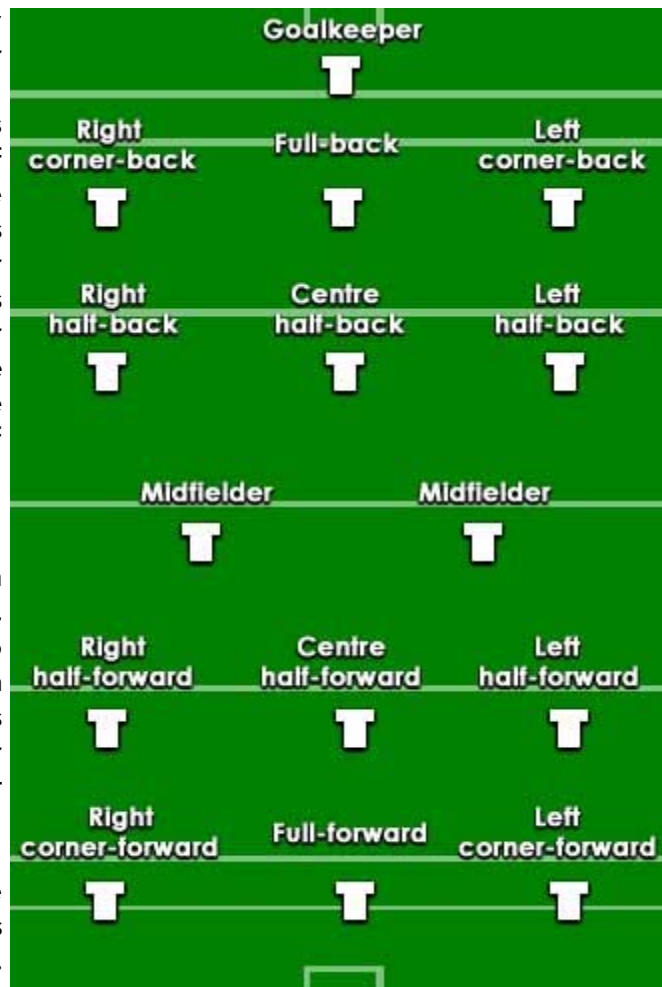


Figure 1
Basic Alignment of Players on the Field
(All about football, n.d.)

the goal. A 45/65" is signaled by the umpire raising his outside arm. A 'square ball', when a player scores having arrived in the 'square' prior to receiving the ball, is signaled by pointing at the small parallelogram.

As the game has evolved over the years it has become more scientific, with less emphasis on physical aggression, and more on ball skills and coordinated team movements. Gaelic football, however, remains a very physical game, and in fact, this is part of its great appeal (Healy, 1998). To outsiders the physical nature of the physicality of the game can seem brutal, but they are much more refined than in the past, are accepted as a vital part of the game by players, and in most instances are loved by the fans.

Gaelic football has always been the most accessible sport of all the games sponsored by the GAA. Any Irish is more likely to get his hands on an old football than a hurley (the name of the stick used for the game of hurling). Gaelic football is therefore in the healthy state it is in largely because its roots are so widespread, and only County Kilkenny opts not to enter the All-Ireland football championship, because they are more obsessed with hurling, and thus, stunting the development of a good county team (Healy, 1998). The game of Gaelic Football is also very strong in the schools, despite the counter-attraction presented by other sports, most obviously football association.

Through the years, the people have remained loyal to the most widely played of the Gaelic games. The love affair between the Irish and the game they have nurtured through the ages shows no sign of fading. The excitement remains, and in thousands of pubs across Ireland every week men and women cheer on their Gaelic football heroes.

CONCLUSION

The Gaelic games, and in particular Gaelic football, have succeeded thanks to the manner in which the GAA has fitted perfectly within the culture, rituals and aspirations of Irish society. On an island where native culture has had to be subordinated for years, the games became a passionate and rugged expression of their souls.

The culture of Gaelic Football has been built upon the Irish need for collective self-expression, and the need for something representative of their indigenous culture. Throughout their history in which their laws and language were driven underground, the Irish needed to find a way to express their distinctiveness. Gaelic football and their games provide that. (GAA Museum, 2001).

Today, 750,000 Irish people are members of the GAA, but that figure is only a fraction of the Irish people who are touched by the games (Humpries, 1996). The influence of the GAA cannot be measured in units of membership or revenue, as even those who devote their lives to turning their faces away from the games are touched by them. The games are so much a part of who the Irish are. They are a national trust, an entity that binds them into common ownership, and passion.

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