

Gaelic Football

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Tír Eoghain Abú (up Tyrone) was the chant on September 11, 2021, when Co. Tyrone took home the Maguire Cup in Gaelic Football's All-Ireland final from Co. Mayo. Despite having reached the final ten times since 1951, and to no avail, the myth of Mayo's curse remains intact. Legend has it that a curse was placed on the team by an enraged priest after they apparently failed to pay their respects to a funeral they passed on their homecoming journey following the victory. The story goes that Mayo would not win again under the curse until all members of that team had died. One member of the 1951 winning team is still alive, so the curse still endures. This all has fueled intense interest in the sport.

The game was held in Dublin's Croke Park. The winning team received the Sam Maguire Cup named after the Irish Republican and a football player himself. The Gaelic Athletic Association sporting events (GAA) are the most popular among the Irish and Gaelic Football may lead them all. Gaelic Football is played on a rectangular grass pitch with H-shaped goals at each end. The sport is high octane, full of speed, precision, accuracy, and intensity.

It is a distinctly Irish field invasion game played with a round ball, slightly smaller than a soccer ball, which can be caught, kicked and hand passed. There are 15 players on each team. The primary objective is to score by driving the ball through or over the goals. If the ball is sent over the cross bar of the goal by foot or fist, scores one point. If the ball goes under the cross bar into the net past the goalkeeper by foot or the hand/fist, scores three points. A goal is signaled by raising a green flag, placed to the left of the goal. The team with the highest score at the end of the match wins.

The ball can be carried in the hand for a distance of four steps and can be kicked or "hand-passed", by striking the ball 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. You may not bounce the ball twice in a row. Players may contest for the ball by playing it with the hand or the shoulder charging an opponent side-to-side. Slapping the ball from an opponent's hand is allowed as well as shoulder to shoulder contact. However, several forms of tackling are prohibited: pushing, sliding tackles, tripping, Jersey pulling, and wrestling. Players are not allowed to touch the goalkeeper when he is inside the small rectangle.

The female version of the game is known as Ladies' Gaelic Football and is similar to the men's game, with a few minor changes. Ladies' Gaelic Football, established in 1974, claims to be the fastest growing team sport in Europe. In 2018, the All-Ireland Ladies Football Final held in Croke Park was the largest female attended sporting event in the world for that year, with over 50,000 people in attendance. In 2019, this figure rose to over 56,000.

Croke Park is the historic site where each year the final matches of the All-Ireland competitions (Gaelic football and Hurling) have been held since 1895. Croke Park is most notably famous for being the site of the tragic Bloody Sunday occurrence in 1920. British soldiers interrupted a game in progress and opened fire, killing 13 spectators and one player. The player killed was Michael Hogan, the captain of the club from Tipperary.

The men who play the sport of Gaelic Football may remind you of the days when American athletes lived pretty much like regular folks do. The big reason players play the sport

with such great intensity is you play the sport where you were born. So, there is much on the line. One remarkable aspect of Gaelic football is that it is completely amateur. None of the players, coaches, and managers receive any form of payment, no matter how famous or skilled. The Gaelic Athletic Association, Gaelic footballs governing body, took in millions from ticket sales from the all-Ireland final. On top of that sponsors pay to have their names plastered all over Croke Park and on the players themselves. There are television rights, radio rights, and merchandise sales and concessions. All this money does not go to the players. The money generated from the game goes back into every corner of Ireland – every town and village. The best sporting facilities in these towns are GAA.

There's a statue of Mick O'Dwyer from Co. Kerry who won four All-Ireland Senior football medals as a player before managing the Kerry team to an unprecedented eight All-Ireland titles during the 1970's and 1980's. Other famous footballers include Peter Canavan from Co. Tyrone and Tomás Ó Sé from Co. Kerry also received the honors of hoisting the Sam Maguire Cup. What these players have in common is that is they will be back to work come Monday morning. This is an amazing concept for the average American to consider.

On my first visit to Ireland, I was taken to a Hurling match with little expectations and walked away completely thrilled with the sport. There was so much energy in the stadium. It was simply brilliant. I consider it to be one of my most thrilling experiences during my visits to Ireland. I have not been to a football match though but will add it to my bucket list when I return to Ireland one day. I hope you consider doing that as well.