

Hurling

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Hurling has been popular in Ireland for at least 3000 years with the first literary reference dating back to 1272 BC. Hurling is a powerful mark of Irish identity, culture, and history. Many forms of the game have been played for centuries. Hurling is rough – some call it a cross between sport and murder. It is one of the oldest field sports in the world and certainly the fastest. The men who play it may remind you of the days when American athletes lived pretty much like regular folks do. When the national championship of hurling is held – everything in Ireland stops. Two teams battle it out for the honor to hoist hurling's most coveted trophy – The Liam MacCarthy Cup. On a Sunday in mid-July, eighty-two thousand fans will attend the All Ireland Hurling final in Dublin's Croke Park.

Hurling is often referenced in Irish myths and legends, the most famous of which is an early account found in the *Táin Bo Cuailgne*, a legendary tale from early Irish literature, which describes the exploits of the Ulster hero Cú Chullainn, (literally *Hound of Cullen*) who was so named after killing a fierce guard dog by driving a hurling ball down its throat. Such stories often portray Hurling as a form of martial training and proficiency on the Hurling field was equated with skill in battle. Throughout the countryside, Hurling thrived as a wild and often violent practice with few set rules. One 17th century account describes the game as being played on a plain about 200-300 yards long, with victory going to the first team to drive the ball through the goal of the opponent. Hurling is played by men, but the adapted version known as camogie is played by women.



The hurling field of today, called the pitch, is far larger than a football or soccer field. Two teams of fifteen men, each carrying a long club, are whacking a little white ball and each other. There are thirty players on the pitch, the ball travels up to 180 km/hr. (110 mph) and players can hit the ball up to 120 yards. The ball is called a sliotar, the stick is called a hurley (or Camán in Irish).

A player can score a point in two ways: The goal is like a soccer net with a goalkeeper in front of the net. If you score inside the goal, you get three points; over the goal or the crossbar is one point.

The skill and toughness needed to pursue those points are hard to take in at full speed. Players strike the ball as hard as any home run hitter. Defenders fearlessly challenge whoever has the sliotar, sometimes blocking the ball or more often blocking the man. Players for both teams fight for every loose ball and catches the sliotar out of the air barehanded. If you catch the ball out of the air you can run four steps, then you either must strike the sliotar with your hurley or go solo. The ability to solo, carrying the ball at the end of the hurley on a dead run – may be the most impressive skill in the game. Running full speed down the pitch with guys chasing you with hurley's, trying to take the ball from you.

One reason people play the game with such ferocity is that everyone is really playing for their home team. It is a matter of fierce pride and honor and who you represent and how much you are willing to put on the line. It is parochial, it is regional, and lastly, it is tribal. You play the game where you were born. Your club is everything, it is who you are. It is your neighbor, friend, and family.

Boys and girls as young as four are taught the basics of hurling. Those too young to balance a ball on a hurley use bean bags. For six-year olds there are higher expectations. And for the ten-year olds, there is hurling skills and a civics lesson. "What's it like to play for the place you are from?" asked one coach. The boy's response, "pride."

One of the most remarkable aspects about the sport of hurling is the sport is completely amateur. None of the players are paid, no matter how famous or skilled. The Gaelic Athletic Association, Hurling's 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.

How do the amateur players pay their own bills? Henry Shefflin playing for Kilkenny winning a record ten All Ireland Championship medals and regarded as the greatest hurler of all time, works for The Bank of Ireland. Donal Óg Cusack, playing for Cork is regarded as one of the greatest goal keepers of his generation, winning three All Ireland Championship medals, works for Johnson Controls. And other famous hurlers do the same. What they have in common with all hurlers is they will be back to work come Monday morning. That is an amazing concept for the average American to absorb.

My cousin invited me to a hurling match in July 1989. That experience still lives with me and is one of my favorite Ireland memories. If you have not been to a hurling match, you are missing out on a great and exhilarating sporting match. Consider adding it to your bucket list.

Vocabulary:

Camogie (ka – moh – ghee)

Sliotar (Slit - ter)

Hurley Camán (Com - mawn)

Táin Bo Cuailgne (toyn boe kool-ee)

Cú Chullainn (koo hool-n)