

Irish Road Bowling

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



There is no written evidence as to how or when bowling came to Ireland. One theory is that the sport came with Dutch soldiers when William of Orange came to Ireland in 1689. (A type of bowling called Moors bowling is very popular in Holland to this day). Another theory says that Irish patriots robbed English cannonballs and rolled them down a country lane by the light of a full moon. And a third theory is that the sport was brought from Yorkshire by linen workers. Bowling has always been a traditional game of weavers, especially in the north of England.

County Armagh in the north and County Cork in the south became strongholds of this rural sport, each independently developing their own distinctive style. The first noted “score” (match) between Cork and Armagh was the September 1928 meeting on the Knappagh Road, Armagh, before 10,000 spectators.

After hundreds of years of localized bowling, Bol Chumann nah Eireann (Road Bowling of Ireland), today’s governing organization, was formed in County Cork in 1954. The first “All Irelands” (national championships) between Armagh and Cork were held in 1963. Over 20,000 spectators filled the 3-mile Moy Road Course, in Co. Armagh, to see Danny McPartland of Armagh win over Derry Kenny of Cork, on the final shot by just eleven yards.

In 1969, the first international championships were held in Losser, the Netherlands, in three disciplines – Irish Road Bowling, Dutch Moors Bowling, and German Lofting.

Irish Road Bowling is now mainly played in West Cork, although there are small pockets of enthusiasts all over Ireland and the game is also popular in Armagh. The sport is usually referred to by participants simply as ‘Bowls’ and is played on public roads, usually on Sunday, all over the West Cork area gathering large and enthusiastic crowds of spectators.

The basic rules of the game are simple. A ‘bowl’ – a heavy cast iron cannonball – is thrown from a start point to a predetermined end point, usually 1 – 2 miles away. The winner is the person or team that reaches the end of the ‘score’ (match) with the fewest throws. That is basically it. The bowl themselves vary in weight, adults play with a 7 inches circumference and 28oz bowl while youths use a 14oz one. A road shower advises the thrower about the throw (or shot) much like a golf caddy, while another helper stands ahead of the thrower, feet apart, to show the best line or path in the road. Taking part requires nothing in the way of specialized clothing or equipment – just a bowl and an available road. In spite of its simple rules the best players are truly skillful. Their ability to deal with the bends and undulations in the road and to keep the bowl rolling onward after it lands on different road surfaces is honed by years of experience.

Irish Road Bowling in America can trace its beginnings back to the American Civil War when Irish troops marched over rugged hills and into deep hollers, cutting their way through vast rhododendron thickets all over what is now West Virginia. Union and/or Confederate troops of Irish origin played road bowling as a diversion between battles during the American Civil War. An Irish Roading Bowling Association still exists in West Virginia. Today there are other Irish Road Bowling associations in the United States such as New York, Wisconsin, Ohio and Connecticut, just to name a few.

In any event, always remember, if you’re participating in the sport of Irish Road Bowling and you just happen to get hit by the 28oz bowl, as the saying goes “it’s just too bad.”