Gaelic Sports – History, Culture and Politics

ORIGINS OF THE GAELIC SPORTS

Records of Irish games and sports being played in ancient Celtic sporting festivals begin as early as 1829 BC. They games, particularly hurling, were popular components of the Irish national identity.

The fact that hurling was popular frightened the ruling class, and through the centuries, laws were passed to ban the game. The Statutes of Kilkenny in the 14th century banned hurling. These bans were not effective.

In the 17th and 18th centuries the gentry landowners and noblemen organized games of hurling. Hundreds of people would gather to watch the matches. The games became a major religious and sporting festival on the Irish calendar.

By late 19th century, Gaelic games had once again fallen afoul of circumstance. Their playing was banned as part of the political upheaval as Britain tightened its grip on Ireland. Gaelic games’ survival came under particular threat with the Irish potato famine, which began to take its toll around the mid to late 1840’s.

However, there were some who saw the possibility of a revival of the games and Irish culture as an effective way to display independence from Britain. Within a decade or so of the famine a resilient people had again turned to Gaelic football and hurling as symbols of Irish nationalism. It was from this ideal that the Gaelic Athletic Association came into existence.

THE GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION (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. Its founding was set against a backdrop of much political turbulence. The Irish were emerging from the misery of the famine years, and were now once again ready to assert themselves both politically and culturally. The people wanted an improvement in their economic circumstances as well as their political freedom.

During this time connections began to form between the many organizations which had emerged to advocate for Irish nationalism and resistance of British rule. Many of the goals of the illegal political organizations were also shared by the legal social and sporting associations, and these legal organizations began to act as public proxies for the illegal ones.

Irish nationalism was important to the founders of the GAA out of concern that the British games in Ireland were displacing Gaelic sports. Unlike the British games of rugby and soccer there was no central body to organize competitions and draw-up rules and regulations for Gaelic sports. To complicate matters, any sports matches that were held had to abide by the British laws governing sporting standards and regulations.

Michael Cusack is credited with creating the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884. The stated aims of the strictly amateur body were to preserve and cultivate Ireland’s national pastimes. The GAA set up a structure to organize clubs, leagues and match play and quickly issued an official set of playing rules. These rules continue to the present day.

The GAA made a considerable impact in three areas of Irish life:

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 feeling of belonging among the Irish, which stirred loyalty and patriotism.

Third, the GAA provided a recruiting ground for illegal political and paramilitary resistance groups active in Ireland, the due to the fact that these organizations had infiltrated the GAA’s ranks since its inception.

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. The one political issue that was more divisive than any other in the history of the GAA was “The Ban” as it was officially referred to.

The Ban was actually two bans: 1) GAA rules banned members of the Northern Ireland security forces from membership or participation, and 2) GAA members were banned from playing or being a spectator for “foreign” games such as soccer, rugby, cricket or hockey. The ban against playing foreign sports remained in place until in 1971. The ban against membership by British security forces remained in place until 1999.

Notwithstanding the lifting of the ban, sports in Northern Ireland still reflect the religious divisions of the region. Catholics play Gaelic games, while Protestants play soccer or rugby.

On-Line resources

What is the GAA

<http://www.gaa.ie/the-gaa/about-the-gaa/>

Every Irish county has its own GAA

<http://www.gaa.ie/the-gaa/provinces-counties-clubs/>

Seattle Gaels and Tacoma Rangers are part of the GAA

<http://seattlegaels.com/>

<http://tacomarangers.wix.com/tacoma-rangers>

The GAA and Irish politics

Overview of GAA political involvement during years of opposition to British rule

<http://ireland-calling.com/gaelic-athletic-association/>

Croke Parke Massacre 21 November 1920

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloody_Sunday_%281920%29>

Croke Park Massacre still an important part of Irish history

<http://www.independent.ie/sport/gaelic-games/gaa-to-mark-bloody-sunday-anniversary-with-poignant-croke-park-tribute-on-saturday-night-34219071.html>

Official GAA does not emphasize involvement in political atmosphere of early 20th century Ireland or the Croke Park Massacre. Why?

<http://www.gaa.ie/the-gaa/history/1884-1945>

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