

# Ancient Irish Fairs and the Preservation of Irish Sport

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One of the most unique features of Irish history is the significance accorded its fairs and assemblies. Although the fair is recognized in European and American cultural history, it is generally perceived to be an occasion for merchants, for trading and for passive entertainment. The fair is but a momentary gathering of buyers and sellers with a little entertainment included for the attending hordes of people. The Irish fair, or aenoch, has been accorded a more significant role in the shaping of Irish history – whether political, economic, religious or social history. Irish historians meticulously index the fair or assembly, pointing out its special meaning for people at various times in history. The Irish fair was always multi-purposed and was virtually inviolable in its staging.

Historical accountings of the Irish fair have consistently placed an emphasis on sport and athletic contests. There has existed through the centuries, a kind of preservation of sport that is worthy of study and consideration. It is the intent of this paper to investigate sport as a significant part of the ancient, continued gatherings of Irish people and to observe the persistence of the fair concept through the centuries.

The fair responsibly preserved sport and athletic contests of the Irish people in several ways: (1) Sport and athletic contests were consistently a part of the aenoch from the outset, no matter what the original intent of the aenoch was, whether a funeral celebration, a religious pilgrimage, a harvest rite, or some other occasion for a gathering; (2) sport and athletic contests enjoyed the same continuity as the fair; and (3) the fairs have emphasis to unique Irish sports.

The Irish countryside is replete with well-known landmarks that indicate the ancient site of a gathering of people. Most were held at a designated time of year for a designated purpose and traditionally brought together a given segment of the population. There were assemblies at wells, at cemeteries, on mountain heights, and beside rivers and waterways. A number of these assemblies had their inception as funeral games and some grew into yearly provincial fairs and became scenes of

political, social, and commercial importance. No matter where the location of the site, however, there was an inevitable mentioning of the sports contests that accompanied the fair's activity. For example, the assemblies at Ciaran's Well, Cullen's Well, Skelp Hill, Carn Hill, Lough Owe1 and Blackwater River all give accounts of sport and the place of athletic contests at these historic assemblies.

A study of Irish fairs has revealed some sports that may be classified as unique to Ireland: horse swimming, hurling and forms of stone lifting and jumping. These indigenous activities owe much of their preservation through the years to the fair and the opportunities the fair afforded them.

Sport and athletic contests would likely have survived in Ireland the same as they have survived in other societies. But because of their stable and unique association with the fair (aenoch) and its attendant atmosphere, sport and athletic contests seem to have survived in Ireland with a universal acceptance that is brought on by a camaraderie that inevitably accompanies a fair. The ancient Irish fair, in general, was a great preserver of Irish sport and Irish sporting traditions.