

Hurling: An Irish Social And Political Identity

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The sport of hurling has enjoyed a long and beloved stay in the annals of Irish history. Its purity as a true Irish sport is almost without blemish, for it has not found consistent popularity outside the Emerald Isle.

There are historical references to stick and ball games throughout the world. Yet the original name and original intent of many of these games changed through the years and with the passage of time lost their identity. This has not been the case with Irish hurling. The hurly stick has been mentioned in the earliest Irish manuscripts. Translators and interpreters of these manuscripts have given reference to hurling as a part of Lughnasa festivals dating as far back as 1500 B.C. Legendary heroes carried a hurly stick as routinely as a sword, fields for hurling were maintained on the lands of nobles a important persons; sticks and balls were left as an inheritance; and stories and legends that were such a significant part of the oral history of Ireland abound with incidents of hurling feats.

“A little bit of Irish makes the world kin.” Even though countless people, in the U.S. in particular, trace part of their ancestry to Ireland, their Irish forebears did not bring hurling with them to any great degree. Hurling belongs to Ireland.

Many sports have succumbed to widespread diffusion - soccer, track, basketball, for example - but hurling has remained uniquely Irish. In its native setting, it has been widespread, popular, highly organized, intensely competitive, and played by young men and older men and even by women. Historically, hurling has furnished poets and story tellers with unique subject matter that has helped perpetuate heroic characteristics of a people. In contemporary society, hurling has played that same role. It has helped Ireland assert its individuality.