

Irish Basketball Competes With Gaelic sport

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This study identifies who introduced basketball into the Republic of Ireland, and explains how the sport initially expanded. It also ascertains how basketball was affected while competing with the Gaelic Athletic Association's (GAA) aim of preserving and promoting indigenous sport. It encompasses the post-World War II era, through the early 1950s. Political, economic, social, educational, and religious influences are briefly analyzed in order to more fully delineate the development of the sport.

Nineteenth century Ireland was characterized by British domination and an extensive and devastating potato famine. Repercussions of the potato famine affected the country for decades and were clearly evident in a weak economy, high unemployment and an exodus of citizens. In the twentieth century dramatic political reforms were launched when the Government of Ireland Act was proposed in December, 1920. The Act called for an establishment of parliaments in Dublin and Belfast with a partition of the country along the six county border in the north. A year later, in December, 1921, the articles of agreement known as the Treaty accorded Dominion status to the Irish Free State. The Anglo-Irish Treaty was ratified by the Dáil the first week of 1922. During most of 1922, clashes between anti-Treaty forces and provisional Government supporters swept the country in Civil War.

When the Civil War ended, nationalism permeated the Republic of Ireland numerous endeavors were launched to rid the country of British influence. The Irish people seemed to grasp all that was truly their own. The language, religion, literature, government and Gaelic sport were among the endeavors which ascended to the forefront.

While the sport of basketball was not the object of the ban on English sports by the GAA, it did not benefit from early media support. During the 1930s media attention via the radio captivated the Irish people. Gaelic sport was the beneficiary of the media which offered a feeling of belonging to the nationwide audience and elevated the GAA to national prominence. Servicemen in the army were probably the first to play basketball. The sport was played in the Curragh in 1927 by servicemen and reached a wider population when the Irish Basketball Association (IBBA) was founded.

One of the early pioneers of Irish basketball is Father Joseph Horan. Father Horan had learned to play the sport during the 1940s while studying in Rome. After returning to Ireland, he responded to a newspaper advertisement which requested volunteers for the newly formed IBBA. Father Horan joined the IBBA which was organized to "bring basketball out of the army." Basketball is currently experiencing growth which, according to Patrick Coffey of the IBBA, is a result of the arrival of American players in the 1980s. Coffey credits the Americans with drawing media attention which further increased awareness of the sport.