

## Gaelic Athletic Association

By the second half of the 19th century in Ireland, much that was Gaelic in its culture had been lost. Only twenty- five percent of the population spoke



Irish and its ancient culture was not a part of the school curriculum. Scholars had begun, however, to discover the beauty of the Gaelic language and culture and promoted its study through the Gaelic Society, the Celtic Society, and the Ossianic Society. For the working class, it was the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association, which reached out to them to teach them to be proud of their Gaelic past.

Michael Cusack, from the Burren region of County Clare, a teacher and athlete, was the force behind the creation of the G.A.A. He was a blunt spoken man, the model for "The Citizen" in [Ulysses](#), who had developed an antipathy to the "syphilitation" which English rule had imposed on Irish life. He alluded to English games, such as rugby, soccer and cricket, as a "denationalizing plague." He set out to take control of sport in Ireland and to reestablish the traditional Irish sports, notably hurling and Gaelic football.

The Gaelic games are indeed of antiquity. Legend says competed against the Tuatha De Danaan in a game of hurling at their historical Battle of Moytura (1272 b.c.). Cuchulain himself, as the boy Setanta in the [Tain Bo Cuailnge \(The Cattle Raid at Cooley\)](#) of the Ulster Cycle, proved himself with the caman (the hurling stick) and ball by killing the king of Ulster's watchdog by driving a ball down the dog's throat. The Irish word for hurling - [iomaint](#) - means to hurl, drive, toss, fling. Such active verbs well describe a game so physical and so dangerous that the Brehon Laws of the 7th-8th centuries prescribed penalties for injuries inflicted on players during a game of hurling. The Normans were so concerned with the violence of hurling that they proscribed its play in the Statutes of Kilkenny (1.366): *it is "ordained... that the commons of the said land of Ireland use not henceforth the games which men call Hurling, with great Clubs and Ball upon the ground but that they apply and accustom themselves to use and throw lances and other gentle games which pertain to arms."*

On November 1, 1884 Michael Cusack convened a meeting at Hayes's Hotel in Thurles, County Tipperary, to start the Gaelic Athletic Association. Selected as first president was Maurice Davin, the greatest Irish athlete of his day. Most importantly, the first Patron of the G.A.A. was Archbishop Thomas Croke of Cashel, well known for his nationalism. Archbishop Croke was such a powerful force that Cusack himself lost his office as secretary of the G.A.A. in 1886 in a dispute with Croke. Archbishop Croke's name will always be associated with the Irish games, his name given to Croke Park in Dublin, built in 1913 as a memorial to him. Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Davitt, recognizing the nationalistic character of the G.A.A., also became Patrons and the association was an immediate success.

The British authorities were worried about the G.A.A. from its inception. Many members of the G.A.A. were also active with other nationalistic movements, such as the Land League. The police were sure that the association was in the firm control of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The police worried about the athletes marching to matches with caman on their shoulders "like carbines," about young men going to evictions with hurling sticks, and about "semi-military" training of young men. Imagine the concern of British authorities when on October 11, 1891, two thousand "stout, brawny fellows," each with a caman draped in black, marched to Dublin's City Hall to view coffin of Charles Stewart Parnell.

The police reaction to its fears of the G.A.A. was predictable in the light of Irish history: it infiltrated the organization with informers. The association bent but never broke. In some ways it became even more nationalistic, when in 1902 it banned from membership any athlete who played "imported" games. Again the nationalism shows in the 1907 G.A.A. [Annual](#) which describes the ideal Gael: "a matchless athlete, sober, pure in mind, speech, deed, self-possessed, self-reliant, self-respecting, loving his religion and his country with a deep and resistless love, earnest in thought and effective in action." And in 1911, G.A.A. President Dan McCarthy, sounding very nationalistic, said, "We want our men to train and to be physically strong so that when the time comes the hurlers will cast away the caman for the steel that will drive the Saxon from our land."

And when the Rising came-- Easter 1916-- many G.A.A. members fought with the rebels. Subsequently, the association became increasingly militant. It resisted the collection of an entertainment tax and urged resistance when it was rumored that Irish youth would be conscripted into the British army to fight in the Great War. In a most public way, the G.A.A. resisted a permit regulation when on August 2, 1918 it conducted a "Gaelic Sunday" all over Ireland, even in Ulster jails, to defy the requirement that sports teams file for a permit to hold a match.

The Gaelic Athletic Association was a success. It had helped Ireland to recapture its heritage and win its independence. It survives today as the major force in Irish sport, not only in Ireland but in our own Gaelic Park in the Bronx.

(written by John Walsh & originally printed in 1989)

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