



THE FASTEST GAME ON GRASS

HURLING, THE NATIONAL SPORT OF IRELAND, IS THE FASTEST FIELD SPORT IN THE WORLD AND IS BELIEVED TO BE THE WORLD'S OLDEST FIELD GAME. YET FEW OUTSIDE IRELAND KNOW HOW A MATCH WORKS. **GISELLE WHITEAKER** DELVES INTO THE BASICS

The player scoops the ball from the ground with a stick and flicks it into his spare hand. He runs a few steps before flinging the ball into the air and smashing it across the field. His team-mate plucks the ball from the air and bounces it on his stick as he races down the field like a high-speed technical egg-and-spoon race. He deftly flicks it into his hand and slaps it across to another player, who thwacks it past the goalie and into the net. Score.

Hurling combines the skills of baseball, hockey, and lacrosse into one high-speed, high-scoring, high-octane sport. When the Celts came to Ireland as the last ice age was receding, they brought with them their own culture, language, music, script and pastimes. One of these was the game that became hurling, which has been chronicled as a distinct Irish pastime for at least 2,000 years.

Administered by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), but played only as an amateur sport, hurling shares a number of features with Gaelic football – the field and goals, the number of players, and much terminology. The hurling pitch is similar to a rugby pitch, but larger and the same pitch is used for Gaelic football. Played with two teams of fifteen players, two goals and a ball which is referred to in Gaelic as a sliotar, the objective is the same as almost every other field sport – to get a goal.

The *sliotar* has a rubber centre and a leather cover, much like a baseball. It is between 69 and 72 mm in diameter, and weighs between 110 and 120 grams. It is moved around the field both by hand, and by hurley. The hurley looks something like a flattened hockey stick. The goalkeeper is given a small advantage with a hurley that has a *bas* (the flattened, curved end) twice the size of other players', necessary when you consider that a solid strike with a hurley can propel the ball over 150 kilometres per hour over extended distances.

The goal is a combination of a football net and rugby posts – a ball hit over the bar is worth one point, a ball hit under the bar is a goal, worth three points. The sliotar can be caught in the hand and carried for not more than four steps, struck in the air, or struck on the ground with the hurley. It can also be kicked or slapped with an open hand for short-range passing. A player who wants to carry the ball for more than four steps has to bounce or balance the sliotar on the end of the hurley, requiring incredible balance and precision.

Add in a tackle and the game becomes even more challenging. Players can be tackled by a block, where a player smothers an opposing player's strike by trapping the ball between his hurley and the opponent's swinging hurl; a hook, where a player approaches another player from a rear angle and attempts to catch the opponent's hurley with his own at the top of the swing; and a side pull, where two players running together for the sliotar collide at the shoulders and swing together to win the tackle. It's perhaps this element of the game that Jason Statham's character refers to in the opening scenes of the film *Blitz*. Statham's character is heard to say, "This, lads, is a hurley, used in the Irish game of hurling, a cross between hockey and murder".

From the moment the match begins, with the referee throwing the sliotar in between four midfielders on the halfway line, the action doesn't stop. "Hurling is innate in us," explains Paul O'Dwyer. "You're given a hurley when you are a chap and it's natural and indeed commonplace to see young lads, and indeed lassies also, walking to school or to the >>

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playground carrying the hurley stick.” Paul would have been one of those lads - he started playing in his home Parish of Dunnamaggin County Kilkenny when he was only four or five years old and finished playing aged 45. That’s if you consider managing school and underage Parish teams to be finished playing.

Paul has passed the mantle on to his three children, who have all been involved with the sport in one form or another. His daughter Caoimhe has stopped playing, but his oldest son Diarmuid loves to play and practices religiously. He hopes to make the next grade up representing his County at Minor, the under 18 level. Oisín also plays.

“It’s what everyone plays around here. It’s sociable. We did it in school so it was just a natural progression,” explains Caoimhe. “It was bred into us,” Diarmuid adds. “Our dad and mam played it and we shared their passion for it. They brought us to the matches and it grew from there. It’s the most popular sport in the area and we made a lot of our friends through hurling.”

Diarmuid’s ambitions with the sport are realistic. “The toughest aspect is that it demands a huge commitment in terms of time and effort but it remains on an amateur status only,” he laments. “You train so hard and then you can lose. The top sports stars get endorsements but that’s just a few who are successful.” The lack of a professional league also impacts on adult involvement – particularly the rough and tumble aspect. “The injuries can be hard to handle,” says Paul. “As an adult

player your work will suffer if you are injured. Some employers are understanding of this fact some less so.”

While the game has become more safety-conscious over time, it hasn’t always been that way. “In a county final once I was hit with a sliotar in the head and knocked unconscious,” Paul says. “I soon recovered to play the second half of the match. I have had other minor scrapes and scratches. You become accustomed and accepting of these knocks and in the throes of ‘battle’ you don’t notice them.”

Each of the family members have hurling achievements under their belt. The awards and accolades achieved by each at the different levels - at schools, colleges inter-provincial and All-Ireland levels, to date have been impressive but they are quick to point out that they owe it all to their Parish team and coaches.

There is something special about this sport, so closely tied to Ireland. “It’s a family thing passed down from generation to generation. It can be played by young and old together and the skills folklore and so on are passed on in that fashion,” explains Paul. “It’s part of who we are. In Kilkenny we don’t like our hurling, we love it.” ■

Hurling is played all year around. For more information about the sport see: www.gaa.ie