Football

Whether it be American or Gaelic, Irishmen sure love the game

When American football became popular in the 1870s and 1880s, the sons of Connecticut Irish immigrants loved it so much they took their chances on getting hauled into court just to play the game.

That is what happened to 17-year-old Patrick Hurley. On the Sunday before St. Patrick's Day, 1879, Hurley was among a large group of teenage boys, undoubtedly mostly Irish, who chose up sides and played a neighborhood game of football on a vacant lot at Lombard and Ferry streets in New Haven. Unfortunately for the young athletes, Police Officer Merwin, lived nearby. He apparently worked the night patrol and was unable to sleep with all the noise on the vacant lot. Knowing that the Sunday ban on sports was one of the state and city's more strictly enforced laws in those days, Officer Merwin, the New Haven Register reported, "made a raid, and captured one boy and the football." Hurley was the unfortunate boy.

A few days later in court, even the pleading of Patrick's mother did not move Judge Pardee to give him a second chance or even lessen the sentence. Pardee ordered Hurley to pay "$1 and costs." He explained that the $1 fine, if divided among the alleged 100 youths involved, would amount to only one penny apiece. Poor Hurley was left to round up all the others and collect a penny each from them. Good luck with that.

Perhaps Hurley thereafter kept on the straight and narrow path, but eight years later, six other Irish lads from the same neighborhood ran afoul of the blue laws for the same offense. In October 1887, Michael Delaney, James and John McKiernan, Edward Slattery, Michael Malone and William Reilley were discovered playing on a Sunday in a lot near their homes on East Street and Grand Avenue. All were arrested except "little Johnny McKiernan because he had a broken arm."

Judge Pickett was more lenient than Judge Pardee had been. He let the offenders off "on payment of costs," but did "give the boys some good advice and admonish the parents to keep a better watch over their children."

Despite these early setbacks, football flourished among the Irish, young and old alike, not only in New Haven, but throughout the state. For some other stories about their escapades in both the American and Gaelic versions of the sport, please turn to pages 2 through 5.
Irish immigrants brought their Gaelic football with them

During the 1890s, football was the autumn athletic activity of choice at Trinity College in Hartford. But the contest at Trinity’s field on Nov. 28, 1895, warranted special attention in the media.

“The game was played,” reported the Hartford Courant, “under the rules of the Gaelic Association and bore little resemblance to the rugby football game played by college elevens.”

A quick glance at the rosters left no doubt as to the origins of the athletes. The 17-man lineup of the O’Connells, captained by J. Hayes, included: O’Brien, McKenna, Clifford, Foley, Neill, Keefe, Finn, Dillon, Hubund, Keating, Burke, J. Neill, Bresnahan, Carey, Murphy and Shea.

The Stars included: Capt. P. Rockett, T.D. Murphy, S.A. Murphy, Kearney, Hickey, J. Murphy, Kilmarlin, M. Murphy, Gilthigan (sic), Glennon, McMahon, Doyle, Moriarty, Burke, Vearney, O’Keefe and Highland.

The ball was put into play at midfield, “and the 34 men scrambled about the field after it in a lively fashion.”

The ball was advanced by kicking it or hitting it with the hands, but the rules prohibited its being carried except three steps at a time. There were ways to get around that prohibition and several times Tom Murphy of the Stars advanced the ball by three steps, dropped the ball, and caught it as it bounced. Repeating that combination, he made a handsome advance into the O’Connells’ territory.

The score was by goals and points. Goals counted more than points. A goal was scored by putting the ball between the goal “ports” and points were made by putting the ball between the outside of either goal post and a pole 21-feet distant from it. The Stars made five points and the O’Connells one goal and one point to win the game.

After the game, two players from the Stars and one from the O’Connells visited the office of the Courant to explain the scoring. One of the Stars said that the referee and the captains had decided to call the game a draw. The player from the O’Connells denied there had been any such agreement. “There seemed to be a disagreement over the counting of the points,” said the Courant. And, “When the players left the office, they were not agreed as to whether the game was a tie or a victory for the O’Connells.”

Spread of the Irish sport

The game grew in popularity despite the intricacies of the rules. While Connecticut colleges and schools favored the American version of football, not only Irish clubs, but factories, were fielding Gaelic football teams. The entry of factory teams undoubtedly came about because few young Irishmen went to college while most of them at a young age found work in the state’s many factories.

In 1898, Irish athletes at the Pratt & Whitney Company and at the Pope Company celebrated Thanksgiving with a contest at 10:30 a.m. on the Trinity College field. The Pope lineup included a couple of Murphys, Sinnott, Kenney, Kilmartin, Toohey, Stack, Ducey, Gill, McCarthy, Grady, Conway and Foley.

When the Barber Silver Plate Co. of Meriden held its first annual clambake at Pleasant Grove in 1894, the highlight of the day was a choose-up-sides football game. The 3-1 victory went to the team captained by an Irishman, Frank Waldron.

Among the Irish clubs, there were enough athletes to form a state league before World War I. In July 1914, the Hartford Gaelic team defeated Waterbury 9-5, “for the championship of the state in a game replete with frequent disputes and bickering with the referee over interpretations of the rules.”

In the same era, Gaelic football was one of the major activities at Irish festivals. New Haven held an “Irish Day” each summer. On Aug. 15, 1915, at Lighthouse Point, athletic activities included a juvenile Gaelic football game between Bridgeport and New Haven, and a senior game between the Third Division, Ancient Order of Hibernians, and the Sarsfield Club. That was followed by dancing competition and then open dancing to jigs and reels.

In 1921, Hartford’s Irish held their Irish Field Day at Exposition Field in East Hartford. Two Hartford baseball teams comprised mostly of Irishmen faced each other in early afternoon. Then Hartford and Bridgeport played Gaelic football.

Programs expanded over the years. In 1922, Clarkin Field in Hartford was the site of a day of activities highlighted by a contest between the Kerry and Mayo Gaelic football teams of New York City, and between the All-Hartfords managed by Charlie O’Rourke and the Springfield, Mass., team.

5,000 fans at game

By the 1940s, the Irish-American Home Society of Hartford, and later Glastonbury, had become one of the leading cities in the region for the Gaelic game. In September of that year, Hartford handed the Sons of Erin of Albany, N.Y., their first defeat of the year 13-6. The popularity of the game was obvious in the attendance figure: 5,000 fans at Sterling Field in West Hartford. Father Thomas H. McGurk, pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows Church, started the game by tossing the ball among the rival players. The Hartford lineup featured John and Ed Sheehy, Dinny Glavin, Johnny Duffy, Pat Fitzgerald and Pat Begley.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Gaelic football enjoyed an even greater growth as a new wave of Irish immigrants came to America and Connecticut. It was estimated
that about 200 Irish natives were settling in Hartford annually in that era.

An announcement of the opening game of the season was framed in terms of immigration. “The spring Gaelic Football season bows in this afternoon at Dillon Field where Hartford plays host to New Haven in a contest scheduled to get underway at 3 o’clock. The two clubs are expected to join a planned Eastern League to include Bridgeport and Springfield.

“A large crowd is anticipated with the Irish population of both cities getting together to inspect new players both teams have acquired by plane or by boat from Eire since the close of last year.”

**Fresh talent from Ireland**

The talent arriving on the wave of immigration was summarized in a newspaper article describing Hartford’s 17-14 win over Springfield: “The game featured players from Ireland … Jim McCarten, County Down; John Carroll, Cork; Jim Conroy, Galway, for Hartford, and Mick Tyan, Limerick; Donie Neilan, Tipperary; Manien Quinn, Meath; Ron Cranen, Roscommon; and Ray Carolan, Cavan, for Springfield.”

Instead of hosting two New York teams playing each other, Hartford fielded a team capable of taking on the New York teams. In 1957, a Hartford team managed by Ed Kelly featured “Muldoon, Sayers, Burns and Griffin, new players,” and took on “the Cavan Irish of New York in a return match to last year’s clash when the rivals ended in a deadlock.”

A typical Gaelic football immigrant was Billy Hyland who came to America in 1959. He played all three levels of football in his native County Leix, then went to London playing with the London Irish team in 1956-57. After immigrating, Hyland played with the Sligo team of New York City playing in three title games against the Kerryman of New York, and later with the Hartford team.

Neil Quinlan was another star who began playing with the Hartford team in 1965. He was said to have “distinguished himself on football pitches all over the country. He is an outstanding halfback and has been named to numerous New England all-star selections. In addition to his football talents, he is also an outstanding Irish hurler having played with the famous Glen Rovers from Cork.”

Hartford ranked as one of the best Gaelic football cities in America in the 1950s and 1960s. The team flew to places like Chicago and Cleveland to meet the best competition in the Midwest.

Hartford footballers like Pat Foley and Edward Kenny, were named to All-American Gaelic Football teams that traveled to Dublin to play top-ranked county teams on the “ould sod.” When Irish teams toured America, they stopped for matches in Hartford as well as New York, Toronto, Chicago and Philadelphia.

Touring Irish teams also stopped in the New Haven area. In 1972, the “Irish Colleges Gaelic Football Champions from Ballyourney, County Cork, opened a U.S. tour at Hamden High School.

The Irish collegians were from Cork, Limerick and Kerry, described as “the cradle of Gaelic football. Their opposition was provided by “an all-star selection from the New Haven area, all of whom are American born.”

The Gaelic Highland Bagpipe Band of New Haven provided entertainment prior to the game and at halftime. The teams were feted after the game at the Irish-American Community Center in East Haven.

In 1967-68, Hartford’s football squad won the United States championship. In September 1967, Hartford outscored the Galways of Boston, 10-8, Hartford’s two goals and four points to Boston’s eight points. Boston led at halftime 4-1, but Hartford surged back in the second half with Hyland, scoring both goals and a point, Joe Reilly getting two points and Pat Connelly, one. Mike Fitzgerald was outstanding on defense for Hartford.

In July, 1968, Hartford added a national title by “walloping” Cleveland 23-12. Jim Foley was the top scorer for Hartford with 11 points. Staunton, Griffin and Fitzgerald led the defense.

Irish prominent in early years of America’s gridiron sport

Organizing a football team was one of the first priorities for the young men’s total abstinence club organized at St. John’s Church in New Haven in mid-1893.

It did not take the new club long to get involved in the game because parish and youth organizations all over the state were taking up football. St. John’s arranged a game at the Howard Avenue grounds in New Haven on a Friday afternoon in mid-November. The lineup for the home team was mostly Irish: Doherty at left end; McKay, left tackle; Ganley, left guard; McKenzie, center; Spencer, right guard; McKiernan, right tackle; Fahy, right end; Lyons, right halfback; McHugh, captain and left halfback; Coogan quarterback. Carroll, Dorsey and McCarthy were substitutes.

Thompsonville champions

Within a few years a state league of parish clubs was organized. In 1897, the St. Joseph’s Athletic Club of Thompsonville defeated Wallingford for the amateur championship of the state. A crowd of 2,000 spectators watched St. Joseph’s march to an 18-0 victory.

Thompsonville became a perennial power in amateur football play. In 1900, St. Joseph’s also shut out a team known as “Yale Consolidated” 28-0. Playing for St. Joseph’s were Connors, Malley, Hyland, Cusie, Cavanaugh, Sullivan, Flanagan and Wallace. Yale Consolidated had at least a few Irish players: Tighe, center; Horn, tackle, Downes, end; McGuire, halfback; and Dowling, fullback.

The Yale-Thompsonville box score also revealed how Irish were getting involved in other aspects of football. The umpire was James Shaughnessay; referee, Philip J. Sullivan; linemen, William J. McCauley and John Burns.

Neighborhood teams were also advertising for games. “The Putnam Athletic Club football team will meet any team in the state on Saturday afternoon. Address: Charles O’Neill, Jr., No. 50, Oak Street,” said an ad under “Football Gossip,” in the Hartford Courant. Putnam’s lineup was mostly Irish: Moran, McDonough, Daly, McGee, Harrington, Mulligan and O’Neill.

Manager Harry McCabe, No. 61 Bridge St., placed an item for the West Sides of Middletown “who would like to arrange football games with teams in this vicinity averaging 135 pounds.”

In northwestern Connecticut, the All-Torrington team advertised that its roster included “such stars as Nolan, Dalton and Leary.” The team scheduled a doubleheader: the All-Torringtons took on Harwinton after the North Elms played the Emeralds of High Street in a preliminary contest.

Irishmen were among Yale’s most ferocious bulldogs

Yale University was the dominant college team in the early years of football. A number of Irish athletes contributed significantly to Yale’s success.

The 1902 team, considered by some as the best ever, won 11 games and tied one, with Army, in 1902. That was the year some people spoke of the Bulldogs front line as “the Irish line. Actually only four of the seven were Irish: end and back Tom Shevlin, tackles Ralph Kinney and James Hogan, end Charles Rafferty. Each of the four was on some all-American listing. Shevlin, a native of Minnesota, and Hogan, the only Connecticut Irishman of the four, are both in the College Football of Fame.

Hogan was born in County Tipperary, came to America with his family and settled in Torrington. His Hall of Fame biography begins: “The fine Irish brogue of James I. Hogan would rise above the din. ‘Hard, Yale! Hard! Harder, Yale!’” The biography adds that he “became one of the greatest of Old Blue linemen and its inspirational force during the early years at the turn of the 20th century.” and that he “taunted enemy players with his leprechaun’s smile.” After graduating from Yale, he entered Columbia Law School and set up a law practice in 1908. Tragically, just two years later, he died of Bright’s disease.

Shevlin’s father made a fortune in lumbering in Minnesota. Tom was known as Yale’s premier athlete, starring in track and field, baseball and boxing as well as football. He also had a passion for automobile racing. He owned an expensive French car and was said to have twice put the gas pedal to the floor attempting to beat a railroad train from New Haven to Meriden.

Sources: College Football Hall of Fame website; Wikipedia articles on Yale football.

High schools quickly took up the autumn sport and almost every school had at least several Irishmen in uniform. When Windham High and Bulkeley High of New London played to a 6-6 tie, Windham had Riley at left end, Donohue at right end, Moriarty at right halfback. Bulkeley had an all-Irish backfield: Capt. Shea, quarterback; McMahon and McEnery, halfbacks; O’Neill, fullback.

Talented Connecticut Irish boys soon began to find football opportunities at
Catholic colleges. In a preseason roundup from Worcester in 1910, it was reported that at least two Connecticut men, a quarterback named Whalen and an East Hartford lad named Collins were shot-ins for the Crusaders. Other Connecticut tryouts included Pickett of Ansonia, Brennan of East Hartford, Cannon of Roxbury.

A Bridgeport lad born in this dawning of the era of American football went on to play on the famous Notre Dame football teams of the 1920s. Timothy J. Murphy Jr. was the son of Col. Timothy and Catherine M. Crowley Murphy.

Notre Dame lineman

Young Murphy starred on the Bridgeport High School eleven. “He was a big plunging fullback in his first two years of high school competition,” recalled Hartford Courant sportswriter Bill Lee who was a sophomore at Bridgeport when Murphy was a senior captain of the grid team. “The year that Murphy was to be captain, a new coach came to the school, and a good one. He decided Murph was a tackle. Tim didn’t like it. Like all kids, he wanted to tote the ball. But the coach was right as rain. Knute Rockne agreed with him because Murph was a tackle and end when he got to Notre Dame.”

Murphy played for the Fighting Irish, and while he is not designated with the linemen known as the “Seven Mules,” he was their teammate in 1921, 1922, and 1923. The backfield for that team came to be known, of course, by the apocalyptic designation “the Four Horsemen.”

After graduating from Notre Dame, Murphy went into banking in New York. In 1934, he moved to Hartford to manage the operations of the Federal Housing Administration in Connecticut. He later served as state public works commissioner in the administrations of Govs. Abraham Ribicoff and John Dempsey. He always credited the team play he learned at Notre Dame with assisting him to succeed as a government administrator.

Murphy retained ties with football by coaching amateur and semi-pro teams and officiating high school games.

In 1923, there arrived at Windham, fresh out of Colby College in Waterville, Maine, an Irishman who would leave a substantial mark not only on Windham High football but on all the sports in the eastern Connecticut community of Willimantic.

In his first three years at Windham, Coach Tom Callaghan football teams lost only one contest, a post-season game against the Massachusetts state champion eleven of Drury High in North Adams, and that only by one touchdown.

Callaghan went on to a 42-year career at Windham, coaching football, basketball and baseball. “Besides developing football and basketball to a high plane,” wrote one reporter, “Callaghan has lifted baseball from the doldrums when h first came to this city.”

Gaelic players had ready solution to violence in state’s football

In the 1900s, the violence of football caused such an outcry from the public that in President Theodore Roosevelt summoned the top collegiate coaches in the nation to the White House and demanded that they reform the game to reduce rough play that led to serious injuries.

Connecticut’s Irish sportsmen offered a simple solution. At a meeting in Emmet Hall, 739 Chapel St., New Haven just after Christmas 1909, the Gaelic Athletic Association of Connecticut proclaimed that the violence would end if teams would only switched to playing the Gaelic, rather than the American, version of the game.

Five delegates each from Bridgeport, Hartford, New London, Ansonia, Wallingford, Meriden and New Britain attended the meeting along with 25 representatives from New Haven’s five Gaelic football teams: the Sarsfields, Hibernians, O’Connells, Shamrocks and Young Irelands.

Delegates reported that they had received numerous applications for membership and were encouraged by the growing enthusiasm for Gaelic football among the general public.

After the meeting, Walter Crawford Jr., a Hartford resident and president of the association, told reporters: “The (Gaelic) game is not half as rough as the American game and it is much more scientific and better for the players. A man must be an athlete to play the ame in its entirety. We know what we are talking about and we intend to play the game before the public and have them decide on its merits…”

“Two of the teams in the state,” he added, “are going to tour the state and play in the different cities before the board of education and have them decide upon the merits of the game.”

Tour or no tour, the majority of enthusiasts in Connecticut remained loyal to the American version of football and stuck with it at both the scholastic and collegiate levels. That did not, however, change the love of the Irish for their own brand of football.

Source: New Haven Journal Courier, Dec. 27, 1909
To our members,

2011 was a very good year for the Connecticut Irish American Historical Society.

At Sacred Heart University, more than 22 years of our Shanachie newsletters have been placed online and are now available worldwide through the university’s digital research library. At Quinnipiac University, our book, *Cry of the Famishing*, is included in the An Gorta Mor library collection and exhibit. Several of our books are also part of the Sacred Heart University library.

Our website is very informative and up-to-date thanks to Finbarr Moynihan. Check it: www.ctiahs.com.

We have several genealogy experts among our members and they keep busy year-round on research projects at workshops, festivals, cemeteries and answering inquiries from our members and other family researchers.

Our donation of a bench along the Farmington Canal trail in memory of our longtime Treasurer Tom Slater was a beautiful event that is greatly appreciated by his family and we can all be proud to have been a part of it.

The volunteers at our library at the Ethnic Heritage Center on the campus of Southern Connecticut State University continue to do a great job of keeping our expanding library organized and available for research projects, and helping visitors with their work on research projects about Connecticut’s Irish.

We had committees that worked very well and successfully during the year on these and other projects to preserve the history and genealogies of the state’s Irish community.

I thank all those who have contributed their time and expertise. I am grateful to all those who have performed speaking engagements on behalf of our organization; the feedback from these events is always positive. And I thank our members for supporting us. I hope all will renew their membership and will consider becoming involved in some of our activities.

To my fellow officers, thanks for the time, expertise and cooperation that you constantly give to our organization. It is a pleasure to work with all of you. My best wishes to all for a healthy and happy holiday season.

President George Waldron

Hamden Mayor Scott Jackson, left, spoke at the Oct. 2 dedication of the Tom Slater bench on the Farmington Canal trail. With Jackson is CTIAHS President George Waldron who was master of ceremonies for the event. At right, is the wreath of flowers that was placed at the Soldiers’ Monument in St. Bernard’s Cemetery in New Haven on Oct. 23. The ribbons indicate the sponsoring organizations: Connecticut Irish-American Historical Society, Civil War Round Table, Irish History Round Table and Ancient Order of Hibernians.
ABOVE, left to right, Raymond Sims Jr. and Harrison Mero, re-enactors of the 29th Connecticut, one of the state’s African-American regiments in the Civil War, helped us at our wreath-laying at St. Bernard’s Cemetery on Oct. 23. Center, Father Mark R. Jette of West Haven blessed the graves of Civil War veterans at St. Bernard’s. Right, Mary Ann Quinn of the Civil War Round Table, Dan Ryan of the Irish History Round Table, Jason McWade of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and Vincent McMahon of the Irish-American Historical Society placed the wreath at the 9th Regiment monument on Nov. 6.

BELOW, left, Noreen Slater, widow of Tom Slater, reads the plaque in honor of our late treasurer during the bench unveiling ceremony on Oct. 2 at the Farmington Canal trail in Hamden. Right, sitting on the Tom Slater memorial bench, Pat and Dottie Heslin enjoy the autumn sunshine. The lovely location of the bench guarantees that many other passersby will pause to rest at the site.
## Business meeting on Dec. 10

Please join us on Saturday morning, Dec. 10, 2011, at the Ethnic Heritage Center, 270 Fitch St., on the campus of Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven. Items on the agenda include:

- Genealogy workshops update
- Ethnic Heritage Center activities
- Update on scanning of CTIAHS materials on Sacred Heart University library website.
- Summary of recent activities: dedication of memorial bench on Farmington Canal trail as memorial to Tom Slater; wreath-laying at St. Bernard’s Cemetery commemorating Civil War veterans buried there; wreath-laying at monument to Ninth Connecticut Volunteers.
- Fund raising committee
- Logo selection committee
- Discussion of collaboration with Irish History Round Table.
- Appointment of nominating committee for 2012.

## Helping hands

Many of those involved in the CTIAHS and its genealogy group helped in recent months with the collection of gravestone and other data about Irish Civil War soldiers.

They include: Bernie and Rosanne Singer, Paul Keroack, Ellen Bohan, Patricia Heslin, Jamie Longley, Sally Keyes, and Dan DeLuca.

Also contributing their time and efforts to research, presentations and arrangements for our Civil War projects are George Waldron, Bob and Joan Larkin, Doreen Gilhuly, Mary and Vincent McMahon, Joan Murphy, and the 29th Regiment re-enactors.

## The Shanachie

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Membership $10 individual, $15 family. Send name address and check made out to CIAHS to address at left. In Ireland, a Shanachie is a folklorist, historian and keeper

“We have kept faith with the past; we have handed a tradition to the future.”

Padraic Pearse