

Sport in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is an hour by car from Dublin and one hour by plane from London, which will host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games. The country is approximately five thousand square miles, roughly the same size as Connecticut. Sport and physical activity have played a prominent role in Northern Ireland's largely rural culture.

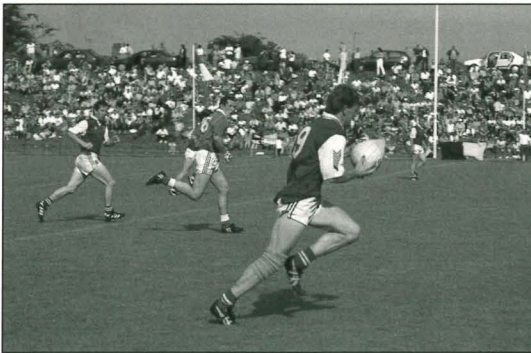
Indigenous Irish games, some dating back thousands of years, are still an important part of contemporary Irish culture. Hurling (Irish *iománaíocht*) was the favorite sport of the legendary Iron Age hero Cúchulainn. Played by teams of up to fifteen hurlers with wooden, axe-shaped sticks ("hurls," "hurleys," or *camán*) and a small hard ball (*sliotar*), it is one of the world's fastest, most exciting field games. *Camogie*, the women's version, is also widely played.

Another indigenous game, Gaelic football, is best described as a combination of soccer and rugby. Opposing teams attempt to carry the round ball, which is slightly smaller than a soccer ball, across one another's goals. Handball and rounders (a team sport that is the ancestor of American baseball) are also popular Gaelic games.

Since 1884, Gaelic games and other forms of traditional Irish culture have been nurtured and regulated by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). With over 2,500 clubs in Ireland alone (500 of which are in Northern Ireland), the GAA organizes Club, County, and All-Ireland Championships that generate enormous interest throughout Ireland, as well as from GAA clubs and fans throughout North America, Europe, and Australia. One of the highlights of the year is the All Ireland Gaelic Football Final held at Croke Park in Dublin, where crowds exceed 80,000.

International team sports have large followings throughout Northern Ireland. Rugby and football (American soccer) are played on amateur and professional levels. The Irish Rugby Football Union Ulster Branch, also known as Ulster Rugby, was founded in 1879. Ulster Rugby oversees the sport throughout Ulster—the six counties that make up Northern Ireland and three Ulster counties that are part of the Republic of Ireland.

Founded in 1880, the Irish Football Association (IFA) is the world's fourth oldest football-governing body. The IFA is an important member of the



Indigenous Irish games such as hurling (right) and Gaelic football (above), seen here in their contemporary forms, trace their roots back thousands of years. Photos courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board



International Football Association Board, the sport's international rule-making body. Northern Ireland's most famous football player was the legendary George Best (1948–2005), who played for Manchester United in the 1960s. Recently, the Belfast City Airport was renamed in his honor.

Golf is played on world-class links golf courses, such as the Royal Portrush, the Royal County Down, and other beautifully-maintained courses throughout the region. Internationally respected Northern Irish golfers include Darren Clarke, Graham McDowell, and Rory McIlroy.

The large network of small country roads has helped popularize motor sports, including motorcycle, or "bike," racing, rally car racing, and carting. They all seem to combine an ancient Irish love of horse racing with the region's long-standing aptitude for heavy engineering. "Rallying" is a type of motor racing held from point-to-point on public or private roads (temporarily closed for the event) rather than on purpose-built, circular tracks. Competing cars or bikes must be "road-legal." Many competing vehicles are standard, production-line models that have been modified in small, family-owned shops and garages.

The North West 200 bike race is Ireland's largest sporting event. Each May, more than 100,000 spectators line winding, two-lane roads along County

Founded in 1890, Ballycastle Golf Club on the north Antrim coast is one of the oldest golf courses in Ireland.

Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Antrim's beautiful north coast to watch bike riders race through "The Triangle" of towns formed by Portrush, Portstewart, and Coleraine. The North West 200 is among the world's fastest competitions, with speeds exceeding 200 mph. Although some street signs are removed and hay bales are wrapped around lampposts and telephone poles, the race is not without risk, and accidents sometimes occur. Motorbike racers are Northern Ireland's homegrown sports heroes; some become legendary, like the late Joey Dunlop, who won thirteen North West 200 races.

Individual sports and outdoor activities are also practiced throughout Northern Ireland. With a long, unspoiled coastline and many miles of rivers, water sports, such as fishing, rowing, surfing, and sailing, are very popular. Bicycling, hiking, hill walking, and mountain climbing are pursued throughout the region, and many local residents and tourists take advantage of Northern Ireland's many beautiful parks and spectacular wilderness areas.