

Fighting Irish

Gaelic culture, in the form of a hard ball, comes to life at a hurling tournament.

By John Patrick Pullen

As the ball falls toward the field, three men jump up, reach, and swing at it. A mess of arms, faces, and clubs crowds the sky until Niall O'Dwyer comes down with the small, rock-hard sphere. He smacks a shot into the top-right corner of the goal. "In the air, on the ground, anywhere he wants to put it," says his former manager Brendan Dunphy, "he has tremendous skill of the game."

The game is hurling, which is played across Ireland and predates Jesus Christ. No pads, few helmets, and even less fear. Broken bones and gashes scar deep like the culture inherent within the game: the ball is known by its Irish name, *sliothar*, and the teams are named for places in the Old Country. Last Labor Day weekend, the North American County Board Playoffs of this fastest and most brutal field sport ever played were held at Canton's Irish Cultural Centre.

Boston's first hurling match was played on the Common in 1888. In 1918, the Gaelic Athletic Association, which oversees Gaelic sports worldwide, established its first local club. Now Boston is home to more registered players and teams than any city outside Ireland. A crowd of more than 10,000 came to Canton to watch all the Gaelic sports last fall—hurling, "Irish football" (which is like rugby), and *camogie* (women's hurling).

Two years ago, O'Dwyer's Tipperary Hurling Club won the North American title in both the senior and junior divisions, an unprecedented feat. O'Dwyer, then 20, played as if he'd spent a lifetime on the pitch. With his pestering defense and punishing offense, the Boston resident, then just a few months in this country, was named North American player of the year.

Tipperary didn't fare as well at the nationals last season, but local teams won 7 of the 13 championships, lifting the Boston Irish above the fray.