

Gaelic Football in Cleveland: Early Days

The Gaelic Athletic Association was founded on November 1, 1884, in County Tipperary, Ireland, to set standards for and invigorate the playing of traditional Irish sports. References in the mainstream American press to Gaelic football matches--at the Pan American games in Buffalo in 1901, the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1903 and under the auspices of the US Army in 1917—serve as reminders that Irish immigrants brought their passion for Gaelic games with them to the United States.

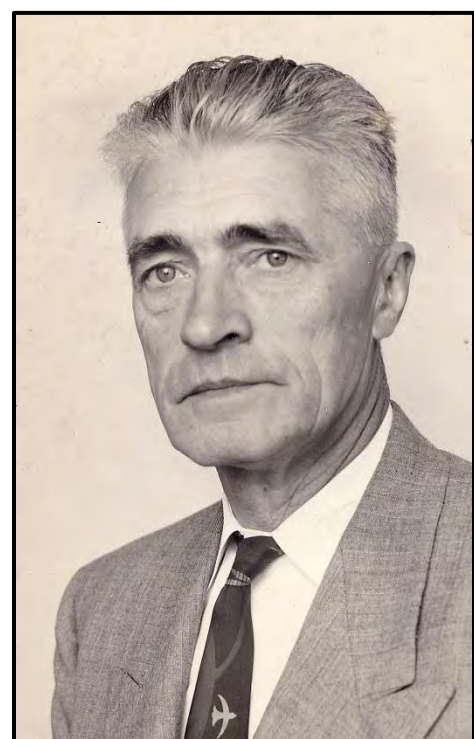
Mention of Gaelic football surfaces in Cleveland newspapers in the 1920s. The close connection between the GAA and the cause of Irish nationalism was heightened by events of the day; in 1920, the Royal Irish Constabulary killed twelve spectators and a player at a Gaelic football match in Croke Park in Dublin. At an Irish picnic held in Cleveland in 1920, to express solidarity with nationalist hunger striker Terence MacSwiney, a Gaelic football match featured prominently. As reported in the *Plain Dealer*, the players “had starred in the game in their native land and [wished] to perpetuate the game in the United States by engaging in contests under Gaelic rules with teams from other cities.” Throughout the 1920s, various groups--the Young Ireland Gaelic Football team, a Municipal Gaelic Football Association, and the Cleveland Gaelic Football league—make fleeting appearances in Cleveland’s newspapers, often associated with the name of Phil McGovern as organizer.



But it proved difficult to find enough players for teams and competition on a consistent basis. In Cleveland, Gaelic football players also found an outlet in soccer, even though playing soccer or other “British” games was anathema to the GAA in Ireland. Attracting immigrants from a variety of soccer-playing countries, amateur soccer was also beginning to organize in the US in the 1920s and provided more frequent opportunities for structured competition. In Cleveland, in the mid-1920s, Frank Gallagher formed the Shamrock Club; the club played Gaelic football on an exhibition basis but also competed in a national amateur soccer league, winning the national soccer cup tournament in 1932. The Shamrock Club continued to play soccer and Gaelic football into the 1940s, helping to keep the Gaelic game alive in Cleveland during the Depression and war years. “Shamrock Field” at West 60th and Herman Avenue was the home field for the team, whose club headquarters were located at West 65th and Detroit.



While Gaelic football had early practitioners and supporters in Cleveland, it is safe to say that Henry Cavanagh was the most active lobbyist for bringing GAA structure to the sport in Cleveland in the 1930s. Cavanagh also became a significant force in the national GAA movement in America. Born in County Sligo, Ireland, Cavanagh was one of five brothers who all played Gaelic football for Kilglass Parish, which won the County Sligo football championship in 1930. Henry Cavanagh and his younger brother Leo immigrated to the US together shortly after the Sligo championship game, arriving in Cleveland in September 1930. Already a dyed-in-the-wool GAA man, Cavanagh was dismayed by the lack of organization and discipline he found among the players here, noting, in his characteristically colorful way, that “it was foul and foreign to a GAA makeup and order.” Finding such kindred spirits as player—and later coach--Pat Duffy, Cavanagh set about swiftly to organize the sport along GAA lines in Cleveland. Among the community leaders he approached, he found a key ally in Pat Lynch, longtime president of the West Side Irish American Club, who took an early turn as president of the GAA in Cleveland.



PHOTOGRAPHS:
Above: Shamrock Club owner Frank Gallagher (top row, in suit).
Center: GAA promoter Henry Cavanagh in 1934.
Bottom: WSIA and early Cleveland GAA President Pat Lynch.
Right: 1933-34 Cleveland GAA team.

Organizing the GAA

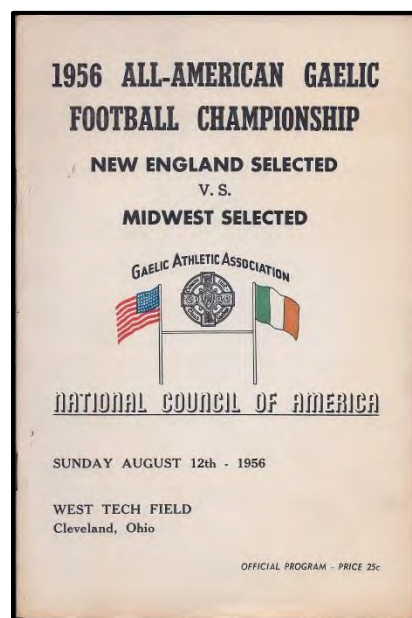
For the Cleveland GAA, Henry Cavanagh proposed a structure that had worked in Sligo. In Kilglass Parish, four equally-balanced parish squads, chosen each year by lottery, formed the first tier for competition. Next, all-stars from all four teams played together when the parish played another parish; all-stars from all of the county's parishes would comprise the county team, and so on, through to the provincial and national levels. Not only was Cavanagh intent on organizing Cleveland's Gaelic football players along GAA lines, but he also dreamed of organizing the Midwest and North America and of gaining affiliation with the GAA's governing body in Ireland.

But demographics and events were working against the enterprise in the 1930s. Legislation in the wake of World War I had already restricted European immigration. With the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s and of World War II, Irish immigration slowed to a trickle, and GAA activity was put on hold.

In the post-war decade, when the pace of Irish immigration to the US began to quicken again, Cavanagh and like-minded compatriots all over North America turned once again to the task of reorganizing Gaelic football in the United States and Canada. By 1948 in Cleveland, Pat Duffy-- who had played on the 1930s teams--was holding practice at E. 110th and St. Clair for the American-born players who were going to be needed if Cleveland was going to field four local teams in 1949. Henry Cavanagh invited colleagues from other Midwest cities to attend the first Midwest GAA convention in Cleveland in 1950. A national convention in Philadelphia in 1959 affirmed the movement toward national unity, and in 1960 Henry Cavanagh and Fr. Peter Quinn of Buffalo traveled to Ireland to win recognition from Ireland for the North American organization. Two exhibition tours by Irish national championship teams--of the Meath team in 1951 and the Down team in 1962--stoked the momentum.

Ink was spilled, typewriters clacked, and phone lines burned with passionate arguments. What were the best American equivalents for Irish parishes, counties, and provinces? Would the term "zones" work, or how about "districts"? Would New York, Boston, and Chicago "buy in?" What about the West Coast? The Midwest and New England regions fell in quickly; their all-star teams played the first American championship game in 1953. Football received the greatest emphasis, but teams for the "ball and stick" games--hurling and women's camogie-- were also organized in the 1950s.

The challenges for inter-city competition were many. Traveling teams bore the expense of getting themselves to the host city--often renting out one or two train cars--while host teams covered the cost of hotels, meals, and a dance and provided a field and referees. GAA correspondence from the early 1950s suggests that many teams had trouble scraping together the money for travel. As a Pittsburgh organizer wrote to Pat Duffy on July 16, 1950, "I am afraid we will have a tough time getting a full team to travel as the players that work in the mills have a hard time getting off + their bosses are complaining of taking too much time off." Bitter words were exchanged when Chicago's letter asking for the postponement of a divisional game arrived after the game was supposed to be played.



IMAGES:

Top row: The 1949 Cleveland All-Star team. **2nd Row:** North American officers elected in Philadelphia in 1959: Jack Courtney (Buffalo), Bill Garvey (Rochester), Peter Donnelly (Pittsburgh), John O'Brien (Montreal), Fr. Peter Quinn (Buffalo), Jack Hehir (Boston), Mickey Cavanaugh (Philadelphia), and Henry Cavanagh (Cleveland). **3rd Row:** Program for the 1956 American championship game; Promotional photograph from the Cleveland archives featuring the three sports of hurling, football, and camogie. **4th Row:** 1961 *Irish Press* article. **Bottom row:** When the County Down team played in Cleveland in 1962, representatives of the team and of Cleveland's Irish-American community met with then-Mayor Anthony Celebrezze.

An Enduring Tradition

The North American GAA league gradually began to take shape. Cleveland rethought its original four-team system. By the early 1960s, immigration reform had resulted in a new influx of Irish-born players, enough to fill one competitive team—Cleveland St. Pat's. During the 1960s and even into the 1970s, American-born players only rarely broke into the lineup. The Cleveland group's consistency and cohesiveness made it a force to be reckoned with nationally. And a new generation of leaders--such as hurler Al O'Leary and, later, footballer Sean Gannon--stepped up to represent the city at national meetings.

Some of the new immigrants already had respected Gaelic football records before they arrived. Fr. Liam Kitt, St. Pat's coach during a run of five straight national championships from 1962-1966, had played on three national championship teams in Ireland. Roscommon native John O'Brien had played on the 1951 All-Ireland minor championship team. He had immigrated first to Montreal and represented Montreal on North-American all-star teams. As a National Council member, he knew Cleveland's GAA men well, and the city's Gaelic football family played a large role in his decision to move here in 1963.

Gaelic football provided new arrivals with a sense of home. Recalls St. Pat's stalwart Joe Boyle, "It was a haven. It was all we knew." In Cleveland in the 1950s and 1960s a newcomer could walk into the West Side Irish American Club at West 98th and Madison and find himself on a Gaelic football team a week later. Practice on Thursdays, games on Sundays, dances at the West Side IA Hall, tug of war games at Irish picnics—all of these familiar activities created a bond. Teenagers grew into men, married, and had children themselves.



All four are Catholics. McGourty, McGee and Sweeney are studying physical education at St. Joseph College of Education in Belfast. Hunter is studying economics at Queens University in the same city.

WHILE HERE, they are staying with Mr. and Mrs. John F. O'Brien, 14768 Westland Avenue N.W., working, and playing for St. Patrick Gaelic football team. Two work in a motel and the others in factories.

Those children also hungered to play the game they had grown up with. And young women tired of watching from the sidelines and formed a camogie team and, later, a ladies' football team. Change was in the air when Tom Weir proposed a second Cleveland team, St. Jarlath's, in 1981—to prove that American-born players could excel at the game. As longtime player Michael "Sporty" Kilbane puts it, "There was more talent than spaces."

Any rivalries only fueled St. Jarlath's competitive drive. They became a dominant team, winning the Midwest GAA championship 14 times, appearing in the North American championship finals 4 times, and winning two National titles, in 2005 and 2006. St. Jarlath's was also a family affair, with fathers on the sidelines, brothers on the field, and broom hockey during the winter.

Infusions of Irish-born players still provided a spark. John O'Brien invited Belfast students to play with St. Pat's for the summer in 1971. A decade or so later, another round of Belfast players also invigorated St. Jarlath's. Among those who made Cleveland home was Paul Fox, now CEO of Skylight Financial Group, lead sponsor for the 2013 National Gaelic Games Finals. Since his arrival in Cleveland 11 years ago, Derry native Mark Owens has helped to renew Cleveland St. Pat's.

IMAGES:

Right, top row: The 1965 St. Pat's Team. **2nd row:** Joe Molloy and Joe Boyle advise then-newcomer Joe Lowry. **Left, above, top row:** 1981 St. Jarlath's Team. **2nd row, left:** 1976 *Plain Dealer* story about camogie player Sissy McKenna. **Right:** 1971 *Plain Dealer* article about Belfast players.

Working persistently to secure Cleveland's bid to host the national games, Owens followed in the footsteps of many dedicated Clevelanders before him. Sean Gannon of Cleveland St. Pat's served as president of the GAA's North American County Board from 1980-1982 and enlisted Jim Goggin, and Kevin McGinty to oversee Cleveland's earlier turn at hosting the national games in 1989. But hundreds of unheralded players have also kept Gaelic football alive in Cleveland, through their commitment to the GAA values of discipline, team work, and love of the game.