

History of Hurling

by Sadhbh Dunne

The earliest known reference to hurling is found in a statute issued in Kilkenny in 1367, in the reign of Edward III, which outlaws *horlinge*, deeming it a distraction and diversion from military pursuits such as archery. The text reads

“Also, whereas a land, which is at war, requires that every person do render himself able to defend himself, it is ordained, and established, that the commons of the said land of Ireland, who are in the different marches at war, do not, henceforth, use the plays which men call horlings, with great sticks and a ball upon the ground, from which great evils and maims have arisen, to the weakening, of the defence of the said land, and other plays which men call coiting; but that they do apply and accustom themselves to use and draw bows, and throw lances, and other gentlemanlike games, whereby the Irish enemies may be the better checked by the liege people and commons of these parts; and if any do or practise the contrary, and of this be attainted, they shall be taken and imprisoned, and fined at the will of our lord the king.”¹

However, the most often quoted source about early medieval hurling is the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, chiefly for the details concerning the hero Cú Chulainn, otheriwise known as Setanta. The widely known story describes the actions of Cú Chulainn, as he journeys to play at Emain Macha. Along with his sword, Cú Chulainn brings his hurl and sliotar. The text reads:

...the little lad asked his mother if he might go to play to the playing-field at Emain..

The boy went forth and took his playthings. He took his hurley-stick of bronze and his silver ball; he took his little javelin for casting and his toy spear with its end sharpened by fire, and he began to shorten the journey (by playing) with them, He would strike the ball with the stick and drive it a long way from him. Then with a second stroke he would throw his stick so that he might drive it a distance no less than the first. He would throw his javelin and he would cast his spear and would make a playful rush after them. Then he would catch his hurley-stick and his ball and his javelin and before the end of his spear had reached the ground he would catch its tip aloft in the air.”²



Alternative texts from this period describe the type of equipment used for hurling by this time:

‘Leabhar na hUidhre’ version (early 12th cent.) - “He went off then with his wooden shield and his toy javelin, his hurley and his ball”.

‘Lebor Laignech’ version (late 12th cent) - “He took his hurley-stick of bronze and his silver ball”

In the Middle Irish *‘Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agu Ghráinne’*, the king of Ireland holds a contest of ‘driving (*iomáin churmórtuis*) during a fair (*áonaigh*)’ on the green at Tara. Perhaps an early version of a Puc Fada contest...

¹ *CELT The Corpus of Electronic Texts*, published by UCC

² O’Rahilly, C. 1967 *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies Táin LL, trans. 158-59

Now looking towards the Evolution of the Hurley:

Our early sources suggest that hurls were often fashioned long and narrow. Here we see a hurl and sliotar etched onto the grave of Mánas Mac Mhoireasdain from the late 15th century. These images evoked associations of masculinity and strength. →

This style seems to have remained popular throughout the centuries, continuing up through the early 1900s. To give context, moving back through the early 1900s, hurls were principally for ground hurling. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, hurls were purposefully shaped with a narrow bas.

Here we see an image of a hurley found at Michael Cusack's house at Carron, the founder of Faughs GAA, which is currently in Clare County Museum. ↓



The National Museum of Ireland's Folk Life Collection also house a collection of hurls from this era which appear to be fashioned similarly:

Wexford (c.1900), Clare (c.1905), Galway (c.1850), Unknown (late 1800s), Wexford (c.1900)

Moving now to the present era, hurls are made to be much broader at the base, to accommodate the evolving nature of the game and the ever-increasing importance of striking in the air. Additionally, we have seen a move to shorter lengths over the last decade to allow the introduction of wristy striking. No longer are hurls build long and heavy, but rather short and light.



Sliotars, Past and Present:

In the 19th century, hurling balls were often made of wood (cnag), the roots of furze/whin bushes, leather, horse or cow hair and woven straw and were often used as betrothal gifts from young women to young men.

The National Museum of Ireland's radiocarbon dating has placed several balls back to the 12th/13th century AD

The literary depiction of sliotars often verge on the fantastical:

In the Middle Irish Aided Conchobuir, it is stated that “At that time it was a custom with the men of Ulster to take the brains out of the head of every warrior who they slew in single combat, and to mix



lime with them so that they were made into hard balls. And whenever they were in contention or at comparison of trophies, these were brought to them, so that they had them in their hands.”



Thankfully, innovation has evolved and the modern sliotar is of course made of leather and cork. Pictured below for reference.

