Throughout history, the Irish people have held sports as a high priority and a critical piece of cultural heritage. Traditionally, Irish sports, such as hurling and Gaelic football, have created a unique sense of community within the country. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was created to promote and uphold the integrity of these games. The organization’s historical political ties and nationalistic beliefs have propelled Irish sports to the forefront of public policy and debate about governmental control. The GAA is still prevalent, as it expands internationally to spread Irish culture and the love of sports around the world.

Founded in 1884, the GAA was created to organize sporting events and increase accessibility for all Irish people. Initially, the GAA was closely connected with the Catholic Church. Clergymen managed teams and membership in the GAA was just as critical as attending Sunday mass. By promoting participation in native Irish sports, the GAA was also resisting imperialist forces from British culture. Hurling sticks were used to resemble guns during military training and funerals during this time. Notable Irish nationalist and patron of the GAA, Charles Stewart Parnell, was remembered after his death by 200,000 Irish people. Mourners raised their hurling sticks high to symbolize his work for Irish independence. Soon, hurling sticks became a symbol of Irish nationalism and unity against the British Empire, ultimately illuminating the connection between sports and politics. During the Rising, many GAA members were arrested for associating with the Irish Republican Army. As a result, the GAA came under the suspicion of the British Empire. This culminated in the Bloody Sunday massacre at Croke Park, which killed innocent spectators and a Gaelic football player on the field. The earnings from this football game were intended to support Irish Republican prisoners. The GAA still recalls the tragedies inflicted on their organization with a remembrance posted on their website, detailing each victim’s story and a timeline of events. Their dedication to the Irish people and their culture has transcended generations, as evidenced by this current posting on their website.

By promoting indigenous Irish sports, Irish people were protecting their own culture and resisting British culture. Sports became a way for people to express their political associations and patriotism. Supporting northern teams meant you upheld the British crown, while rooting for southern teams reflected nationalism and independence from British imperialism. When tensions between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland were high, sports matches became tricky to navigate. What flag would be displayed? What would teams be named? What national anthem would play? Composed in 1910, a political rally song became the unofficial anthem of the Republic of Ireland. “The Soldier’s Song”, or “Amhrán na bhFiann,” details the struggles Ireland faces against imperial control and the constant yearning for freedom. In 1934, “The Soldier’s Song” became the official anthem of the Republic of Ireland and was played at sporting events. It was 1995 before the anthem was changed to a non-politically associated song entitled “Ireland’s Call.” The Irish people have historically leaned on sports to carry them through the toughest of times. They were able to express their desire for freedom, their patriotism for the Republic of Ireland, and their unity as a community.

The GAA is an amateur association, which differs significantly from the professional sports leagues in other countries. Starting at the parish level, the GAA encourages county pride, volunteerism, and becomes the fabric of Irish life. The GAA has teams at all age levels, from childhood to adulthood. This inclusivity of all age groups makes Gaelic sporting events ubiquitous in Irish daily life and the fabric of the community itself. The absence of professional sports in Ireland contributes to the dynamic interplay between the spectator and the athlete, both are there for the love of the sport. In the United States, the biggest teams have contracted players that make more than any of the spectators will ever see in their lifetime. Various sports leagues attract the best players because of the immense potential monetary gain. The profit has overshadowed the love of the game. Players switch teams often for different contracts and goals. This lessens the sense of local pride in the organization itself. The NBA, MLB, NFL, etc. are billion dollar corporations that have grown in intense popularity. However, American spectators do not feel personally connected to the players themselves. The GAA protects the best parts of sports by remaining a completely amateur organization and has spread to many countries. Irish immigrants can still feel like a part of the Irish community by tuning into sports matches.

My family are Irish immigrants and we cherish our Irish athletic history. The namesake for my middle name is Rose Martin, my great-great aunt and an All-Ireland Senior Camogie Champion in 1942. She played for Dublin and won in a replay match against Cork. The replayed final was the first to ever be broadcast on Radio Éireann. My family remembers her incredible accomplishments, both on and off the field, with a photograph of her hanging on my living room wall, which inspires the passing of her story through generations. Sports are incredibly important to the Irish people as evidenced by my own name.

Since its origination, the GAA’s principles reflected the Irish people’s desire for freedom, frustration with Great Britain’s politics, and an enduring national pride. Its key tenants of volunteerism, amateurism, and community engagement set it apart from the dominating professional leagues in other countries. Amateur athletics conserve the critical aspects of sports: a love of the game and strong sense of community. My pride in my family’s athletic Irish history is emblematic of the strength of sports, connecting generations of Irish.

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