

Limerick the Home of Hurling Balls

Hair hurling balls in West Limerick

West Limerick is not known as a cradle of hurling talent, nor is there any record of a team of talented hurling players emerging from parishes along the Kerry border. However, the Museum of Country Life¹, has three hair hurling balls found between the villages of Glin and Athea. Hair hurling balls were the precursors of the modern hurling ball and their design did not change over centuries until the development of the modern cork-filled leather sliotar. An account written in 1698 refers to how people made and used hair hurling balls:

When the cows are casting their hair, they pull it off their backs and with their hands work it into large balls which will grow very hard. This ball they use at the hurlings, which they strike with a comaan.²

Samples of fibres from the balls were radio-carbon dated in 2008 and 2010. The oldest known hair hurling ball in Ireland was found in Tooraree Lower in the parish of Glin and is over 800 years old. The most recently dated one was found in Glenbawn, Athea, separated by one townland from Tooraree Lower, and dates from the late seventeenth century.³

The Athea ball was found at a depth of seven sods during turf-cutting in a bog in Athea and was acquired by the National Museum in 1954. The core was made from ox hair covered with a network made from the tail of a horse. It was noted in 1954 that the core was 'surprisingly hard and solid, and heavier than might have been expected in view of the material and its size'.⁴ Recent research has revealed the reason the ball is so heavy. When it was CT scanned in Galway, it showed that it had bone in the inside of it.⁵ The exact location of where the Athea ball was found is not known.

In 1961 a second ball was found in a bog in the townland of Glenbawn, Athea, stratified in the peat at a depth of 160 cm below the original surface. It was presented to the National Museum by Mr Sean McNally, Main Street, Glin. The find consisted of a core and small fragment of the cover. The core is densely matted cow hair and is stained deep brown by the peat in which it lay. The cord of the cover is believed to be made from plaited tail hairs of cattle.⁶ Even though the fragment of the outer cover was posted to the National Museum first and the ball posted a few weeks later, it is apparent that the cover fits the core.⁷

The third and oldest of the three hair hurling balls was found in the townland of Tooraree Lower, Glin. This ball was presented to the National Museum in June 1980 by Maurice Costello, two weeks after it had been found by his brother Morgan in

a turf bog on his land. The ball is split apart due to its use as a hurling ball which caused wear. Samples of fibres from the ball were radio-carbon dated and it was through this process that it was established that the ball found in Costello's land is the lightest and oldest known hair hurling ball in Ireland. Recent fibre analysis showed that the hairs of the ball were from a predominantly white pie-bald calf that was less than a year old. However, it was not possible to establish the breed of the calf as the DNA was destroyed from being lodged in a bog for 800 years.

The three hair hurling balls found in west Limerick and the period they were used.

Area of find	Period of use	Date
Tooraree Lower, Glin	1157-1227	c1192
Athea parish	1218-1267	c1242
Glenbawn, Athea	1663-1683	c1673

The fact that three balls were found in locations of proximity, near Glin, and spanning a period from the twelfth to the seventeenth century is evidence that the ancient game of hurling was popular in the area. Four other hair hurling balls were found over the border in County Kerry in the townlands of Auhgrim, Rylane, Tooreen and Toornageehy.⁸ While hurling still survives in pockets of north Kerry, it is almost non-existent in the Glin and Athea hinterland.

The earliest reference to hurling and hurling balls is in the ancient manuscript the Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster, which dates from c1160 and this ball dates from the same period.

There is a tradition that hurling balls were made as tokens of affection, by young women, and given to young hurlers for the Mayday celebrations and hurling contests. The use of hair hurling balls appears to have ceased by 1700, as there is no evidence of their existence beyond that date. There is little information on the type of balls used thereafter, but they appear to have been replaced by wooden balls initially and then the modern-day sliotar.⁹

Modern sliotar developed by a Limerick man

The athleticism of hurlers and the speed of the game makes it one of the greatest sporting spectacles in the world. The 2018 All-Ireland Hurling championship has been hailed as one of the best in living memory. The modern ball (sliotar) has been credited with assisting the game to be played at a greater speed.

When Limerick won its first All-Ireland Hurling title in 1897 the sliotar used was much heavier than the one used today. Seven years later, in 1904, the GAA changed its rules to set the minimum weight for the sliotar at seven ounces, which is about double the prescribed weight today. The use of large sliotars packed with horse-hair and hurleys with a smaller end (bas), meant that hurling was played at a much slower pace and the game, played mostly on the ground, was not as spectacular as it is today. It was not until the 1930s that sliotars were reduced in size to more like we know today.



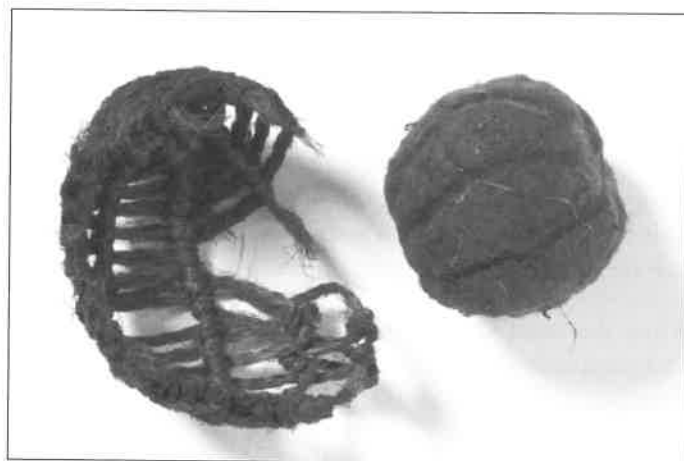
Complete Hair Hurling ball

At the time there was still a difficulty in developing a durable hurling ball that would retain its shape throughout games of intense competition, especially in wet conditions. A Limerick man, Johnny McAuliffe, is credited with coming up with the prototype that eventually solved this problem.

Johnny was born in Tullybrackey, Bruff, county Limerick in 1896. In 1919, he moved to Limerick city and worked in a bakery. He was a good hurler and gained a reputation for his expertise as a ball mender for local hurling teams. He joined Young Ireland, which had many county hurlers and he won a Limerick Senior Hurling championship with his new club.

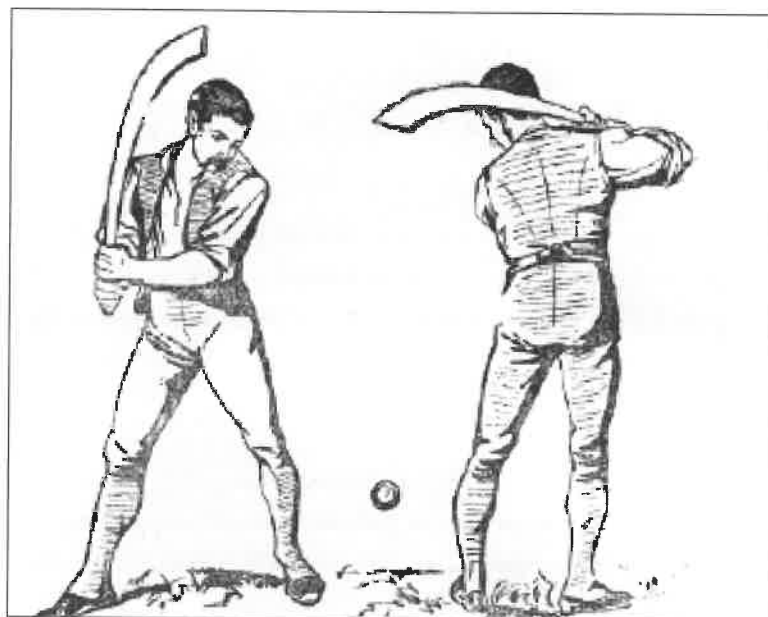
He retired from hurling in 1925, but he remained active in Young Ireland, both as a committee member and in what was then an important role, mending the fragile sliotars in use at that time. He was then asked by fellow committee members, who were having trouble obtaining uniform hurling balls, if he would go into the business of manufacturing sliotars. He took on the challenge and made some sliotars that were welcomed by players as superior to any that were being used up to then. However, the biggest advantage of the new 'McAuliffe sliotar', with its cork core, was its water-resistant quality and unlike all previous hurling balls it did not become heavy in wet conditions. The newly modelled sliotar helped reduce the weight and made it less awkward to play.

Reports of Johnny McAuliffe's sliotar spread quickly and soon he was making a variety of hurling balls suitable for clubs, schools and colleges, and it became the standard sliotar for the Munster Hurling championship. The demand for sliotars was so great that Johnny retired from his job in the city bakery to concentrate on his ball-making business in Thomas Street, Limerick. Hurling balls were manufactured in large quantities and the Limerick-made sliotar soon became the chosen ball in all hurling areas, around Ireland.



Hair Hurling ball broken apart

When the Cusack Stand was erected in Croke Park in 1937 spectators complained about an inability to see the flight of the brown hurling ball, against the background of a crowded stand. Johnny McAuliffe was approached again to resolve the problem. He solved the problem by producing the first white sliotar, but it created another problem, as the new ball would not retain its whiteness when it was in contact with wet grass. Johnny approached a Limerick tannery and they produced the first hurling ball with a hard wearing, distinctive white finish, which was not only waterproof, but also maintained its shape and colour over a longer period. This new sliotar proved an immediate success and was used at all major hurling matches and remains the model for the stitched, two-piece,



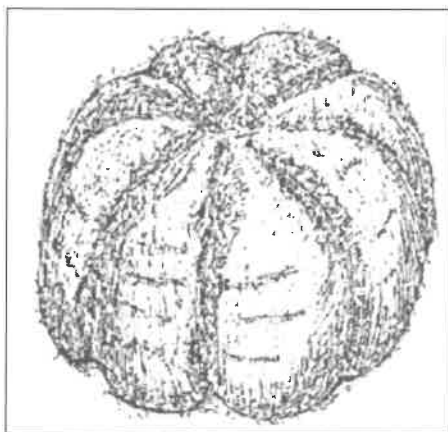
Early demonstration of striking a sliotar

pigskin sliotar, with a core of cork, with which we are still familiar today. The white sliotar proved to be more beneficial with the arrival of televised hurling matches, as the image of the small white ball could be seen more easily as it travelled across television screens at high speed.

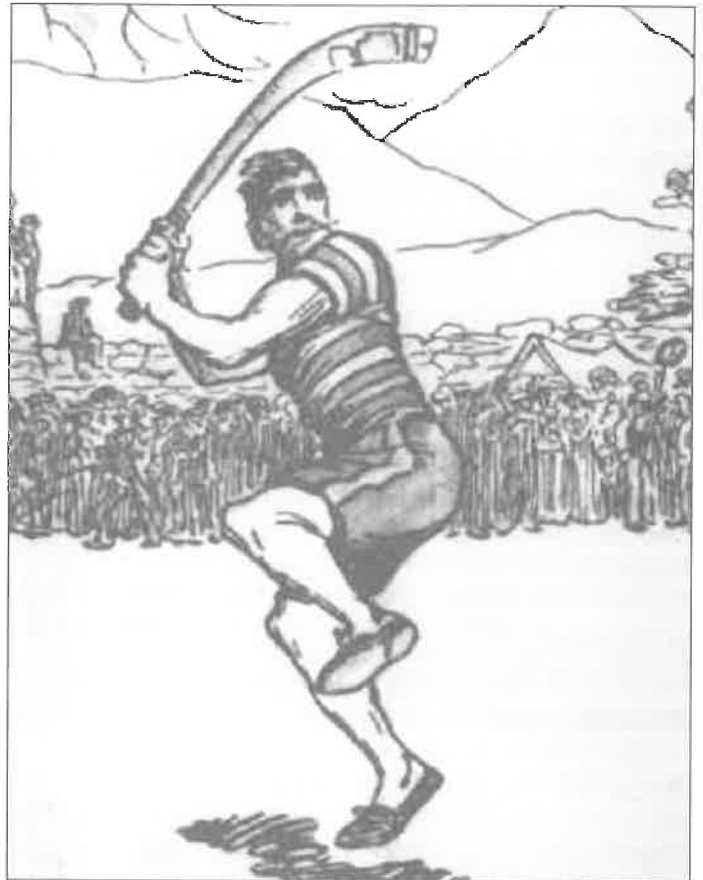
While Limerick continue to celebrate the winning of their sixth All-Ireland Hurling title, it is worth remembering another Limerick man who contributed so much to the beautiful game.¹⁰

References

- 1 Museum of Country Life Turlough Park, Castlebar, County Mayo has an as an exhibition of fourteen hair hurling balls found in the Irish countryside.
- 2 Edward McLysaght *Irish Life in the Seventeenth Century* (Cork, 1950) p.353.
- 3 Details from the exhibition in the Museum of Country Life.
- 4 A. T. Lucas Hair Hurling Ball from Co. Limerick, in *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol. 190, July-December 1954.
- 5 *Limerick Leader* 6 October 2013
- 6 A. T. Lucas Hair Hurling Balls from Limerick and Tipperary, in *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol. 70, 1971
- 7 *Limerick Leader* 6 October 2013
- 8 A. T. Lucas Hair Hurling Balls, in *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol. 57, 1952
- 9 *ibid*
- 10 *The Irish Times*, An Irishman's Diary, Saturday 13 August 2005, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/an-irishman-s-diary-1.479721>



Hair hurling ball found at Glenbawn, Athea.



Depictions of a nineteenth century hurling players.



William Gladstone depicted playing hurling, taken from a cartoon in the *Dublin Weekly News* 11 June 1887.

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