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Scottish Sport of Shinty Comes to California

By Michael Ross Bentley (mshinty@foundrysite.com)

There's a new sport sharing space on athletic fields in California. Lacrosse? Australian Rules Football? Good guesses all, but the sport in question has a distinctly Scottish flavour and it goes by the name of shinty!

While new to the Bay Area, there is nothing new about shinty. The sport's origins have been traced back thousands of years, making it older than kilts and bagpipes by far. It is thought that an early form of shinty came to Scotland from Ireland, along with the Gaelic language. While the specific "who's" and "when's" of this arrival may be lost, there is ample evidence of its lasting impact on Scottish culture.

An ancient stick and ball sport, shinty is played by two teams whose players attempt to score goals by striking the ball either in the air or on the ground. The sticks (or in Scots Gaelic *camans*) look a bit like simplified golf clubs, having a wedge shape to their heads, and the sport bears some resemblances to field hockey and hurling, games with related histories.

A Brief History of Shinty. Being of great age and having had multiple lives, shinty has several names. In the Scots tongue it is called *camanachd* (derived from *caman*, a hooked or curved stick), or the older name *iomain* (from driving or urging slowly, as one might do with

cattle). Some theorize that the word shinty may have evolved from *sinteag* (skip, bound, hop, leap), becoming anglicized and corrupted along the way.

This ancient sport is referred to frequently in Celtic stories and lore, with one of the earliest mentions appearing in the Irish *Book of Leinster* (c. 1150 A.D.). The text describes an epic match between the ancient Irish race the Fir Bolg and the invading Tuatha Dé Danann, a small part of a larger conflict over settlements in Ireland. Approximately when was this match played? In the 18th century B.C.! Other tales relate

tury Clans of the Scottish Highlands.

Shinty is one of a number of sports in the British Isles that seem to have sprung from common roots, undoubtedly sharing ancestors with golf, field hockey and most especially its Irish cousin, hurling. The research of Rev. J. Ninian McDonald, author of *Shinty, A Short History of the Ancient Highland Game* (1932), revealed descriptions that suggest that early variants of shinty involved hitting the ball into a hole, suggesting some close ties with golf. In recent times, annual shinty/hurling hybrid matches (using combined rules from the two sports) are played between Scottish and Irish teams, continuing the long history of interchange between these two Celtic nations.

From its earliest days through to modern times, shinty is often associated with seasonal celebrations, particularly New Year's Day festivities.

Historically

these games involved entire communities playing on beaches or across meadows and commons, the goals taking the form of paired piles of stones or town squares. In this sense, the sport has long held an important place in Scottish communities and, because of this, came with Highland immigrants to the eastern United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and anywhere else that Scots have settled across the globe. There are



The Northern California Camanachd Club Livemore Cup teams from 2004.

the physical prowess of the heroes Cuchullin and Fionn MacCumhaill, mentioning particularly their skill at *camanachd* and how they could single-handedly defeat a side of many men. Art also reflects the long history of shinty: from a 14th-century stained glass window in Gloucester Cathedral and a 15th-century gravestone in County Donegal to a medieval manuscript of Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert* and McIan's 19th-cen-

stories of Scottish immigrants playing shinty in the New World, and many believe that ice hockey developed through the playing of shinty on the Canadian ice, the flattest surface available in winter. In America, a children's game called shinny or banny (a game involving a ball or tin can struck with a stick) has been played into modern times, especially in the Midwest. So, like the Scots immigrants, shinty has left its mark on the New World.

The path has not always been an easy one, because "the sport of the Scottish Gaels" suffered from the same repression that plagued so many Scottish cultural traditions after the 1745 Rebellion. While both the Kirk and English authorities led attempts to legislate against it (along with golf), shinty, like other traditions, found a refuge in the culture of the Scottish Regiments, with military teams and matches a part of soldiers' lives down through the years. The game persisted even in wartime — World War II POWs from the famous 51st Highland Division handcrafted sticks and formed teams while being held in Stalag IX.

In historic times the sport had many geographic variants, with each village or region playing by somewhat different rules — variations in the number of players, field size and methods for scoring were common, for instance. Beginning in 1869, shinty clubs began to form in the manner of other 19th-century athletic clubs and associations, and soon district organizations sprung to life as interest in the sport continued to grow. In 1880 a set of formalized rules was adopted by the newly formed Strathglass Shinty Club (Comunn Camanachd Straghlais) and the foundations of the modern game were laid. A leading figure in this renaissance was Capt. Archibald Chisholm, the founder of the Strathglass Club and the first Chief of the Camanachd

Association upon its founding in 1893. Shinty has since led a kind of dual existence as both a formalized modern sport, under the auspices of the Camanachd Association, and as a traditional pastime at social and cultural gatherings, although the more traditional village-style games faded away in the 20th century. Shinty is currently played in Scotland by many organized teams, with leagues for all age groups and both genders.

So how did this ancient Scottish sport find its way onto Californian pitches? Well, since 2001 you might have found Northern Californians hard at work learning, practicing, recruiting and generally trying to lay the groundwork for shinty in the greater Bay Area. This group uses modern equipment and plays by current Camanachd Association rules, but the story goes back further than 2001.

The Northern California Camanachd Club. In the early 1980s a small group of Northern Californians who shared an interest in Scottish cultural history came across a brief and intriguing description of the game of *camanachd* in Dr. I. F. Grant's book, *Highland Folkways*. Under the auspices of several living-history organizations this group tried playing matches with hand-carved *camans* (or sticks) as a way of recreating this early version of the game. Interest was piqued and more research revealed that shinty was alive and well and living in present-day Scotland. After several visits to Scotland by members of this small group, an assortment of *camans*, balls, rules books and encouragement were collected, and attempts were made to create a club to play by the Camanachd Association rules. Success was intermittent as people scattered to new jobs, marriages and families, and it would be almost 20 years before the Northern California

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Shinty Comes to California

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Camanachd Club (NCCC) emerged as an ongoing concern.

In 2001 three of the original California "shinty boys" (Elheran Francis, Karl Davis and Michael Bentley) gathered their old equipment along with a few friends and began to practice again. In July of that year the nascent NCCC wandered into the Dunsmuir Scottish Games (held in Oakland, CA) and, thanks to the generosity of the Games Directors and the Scottish Athletics Association, played their first public match while the heavy athletes took their lunch break. At this early stage there were no uniforms and no full-sized goals, but the spirit of the match caught the attention of those running the Games and as a result the NCCC has been invited back every year since.

During recent years the NCCC has staged demonstration matches and staffed a shinty information booth at a number of local Scottish Games, but the main activity has been regular practices. At these meetings (held fortnightly) the club members work on basic skills and fitness and end each session with an intra-club scrimmage. The result is an evolutionary growth in the level of play and a broadening of the membership. While the initial recruits came to the club because of an interest in things Scottish, more recent membership has been drawn from a wider range, with the unique qualities of the sport itself the major attraction. Growth has been slow but steady and at the end of 2004 the NCCC boasts a membership of nearly four dozen players, with several officials and miscellaneous supporters lending a much-needed hand.

The State of the Sport in the U.S. 2004 was not only a significant time for the NCCC, but also for the sport of shinty in the U.S. In the spring, Scottish émigré Alistair Paterson formed a second U.S. club, the San Luis Obispo

Shinty Club (SLOSC) based in San Luis Obispo on the central California coast. With help from the NCCC (and a good many Scots, too), the San Luis Obispo team came together quickly enough to elicit sponsorship of the first U.S. Shinty trophy, the Glenfarclas Cup. In August the NCCC and SLOSC met at the Monterey Scottish Games and played a hard-fought match in the 90° heat. At the end of the day the NCCC won a 2-1 victory and the Cup, but the San Luis Obispo side acquitted itself very well, especially considering their recent formation. A great time was had by all and a bit of Camanachd history was made along the way.

As the 2004 Scottish Games season

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in Northern California drew to a close, Club co-founder Elheran Francis reflected on the NCCC's successes. "This year we attended six Games as a club, played our first major intra-club tournament, won the first U.S.-based Shinty Cup match, hosted a visiting Scottish player who led a skills workshop and made informational presentations...we kept ourselves busy!" The NCCC's final event of 2004 was a major intra-club "bragging rights" challenge match pitting one Bay Area region against another. This year the members from San Mateo formed one

team and those from the rest of the Bay Area formed the other. "It was a grand day! Our match was incredibly competitive, a 1-1 draw after 90 minutes, and I think it showcased some of our best playing. Afterward we retired to a nearby pub and enjoyed a meal, a chance for the club and families to celebrate a bit and to end our year on a real high note!" Francis adds.

Who can say what the future holds for shinty in the United States? The NCCC is laying the groundwork for a Bay Area league as membership increases and future Cup matches between the two American sides seem assured. The NCCC has already been contacted regarding a five-nations shinty tournament to be held in 2007 as part of Scotland's Year of Highland Culture, and while the club members are realistic about their chances against Scottish squads, enthusiasm is high! The NCCC has also sponsored the U.S. Camanachd Web site by way of trying to make information about the game, its rules and contact information more easily available to groups in the U.S. that might be interested in shinty. The experience here suggests that if people get an opportunity to see this wonderful game, and especially if they get a chance to play, the odds for continued growth seem very good.

Perhaps the last word, for now, should come from one of the NCCC's youngest members. "I want to have our club hold a New Year's Day match," says Eli Toney (aged 14), "just like they used to do in Scotland." A fitting way to close a circle indeed, bringing the past into the present and carrying on Scottish traditions in the New World.

For more information, visit these Web sites: Northern California Camanachd Club (www.norcalshinty.com); U.S. Camanachd (www.uscamanachd.org); and Camanachd Association (www.shinty.com).