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Stateside camans swinging in unison

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THE ancient sport of shinty is conquering hearts and minds in new territory - in the United States.

The players of San Luis Obispo and Northern California Camanachd Club threw-up for the Glenfarclas Cup in the 90-degree heat of Toro Park in Monterey County in the first organised event of its type to take place outside Scotland.

Intermittent clashes involving exponents of Scotland's indigenous game had been recorded in times past in various spots in North and South America which had attracted settlers - including Canada's Maritime Provinces and Argentina - but the match won 2-1 by Northern California can be viewed as a watershed, and it hoped that it will develop into an annual attraction.

A league structure is being discussed and plans are afoot for a Shinty World Cup in 2007.

Dr Hugh Dan MacLennan, whose 1998 thesis explored the spread of the sport, acknowledged that the Monterey match represented a milestone.

"There is evidence of pockets of Highlanders shipping their culture with them and unorganised games taking place in many countries. But certainly there is no evidence of such an organised game in that form ever taking place before."

In 1983, driven by the allure of things Scottish, Michael Bentley, president of the Northern California club, embarked on a pilgrimage to shinty's heartlands, and trained with Skye Camanachd.

"I guess folks were astonished a Yank even knew of shinty, much less wanted to play," he reflected.

But it was not until almost two decades later that he, Elheran Francis and Karl Davis formed the club, coaching manuals were dispatched from the Camanachd Association, Munroe Camans shipped sticks and the

Beaulieu club provided balls.

Training sessions are held in the San Francisco area each fortnight, and it is planned to encourage new clubs.

"Many of our members originally came through an interest in Scottish culture, but our newer members are attracted by the qualities of the sport itself: the running, hand-eye co-ordination, the team dynamics," Bentley observed.

The newest team in the US, San Luis Obispo, were inspired by Alistair Paterson, formerly of Killearn, who emigrated in 1998 bearing "\$2,000, a 12-year-old dog and two suitcases".

Paterson footed most of the cost for the balls, and enlisted help from the likes of Lochcarron Camanachd. Now the fledgling club have managed to lure sponsorship from Glenfarclas Distillery, have entire families involved in activities, and they recently enlisted their first woman player.

Paterson said: "What we find is that young and old are playing shinty, and it certainly has the ability to grow here."

The president of the Camanachd Association in Scotland, John Mackenzie, feels that the growth of the sport beyond its traditional boundaries can only be of great interest. "It adds a whole new dimension, a new dynamic."

While America looks across the Atlantic to Scotland for its lead, will mixed shinty appeal to diehards in the Caledonian strongholds.

"We are not sure how they'll take to that," said Paterson. "We'll see in a few years' time."

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