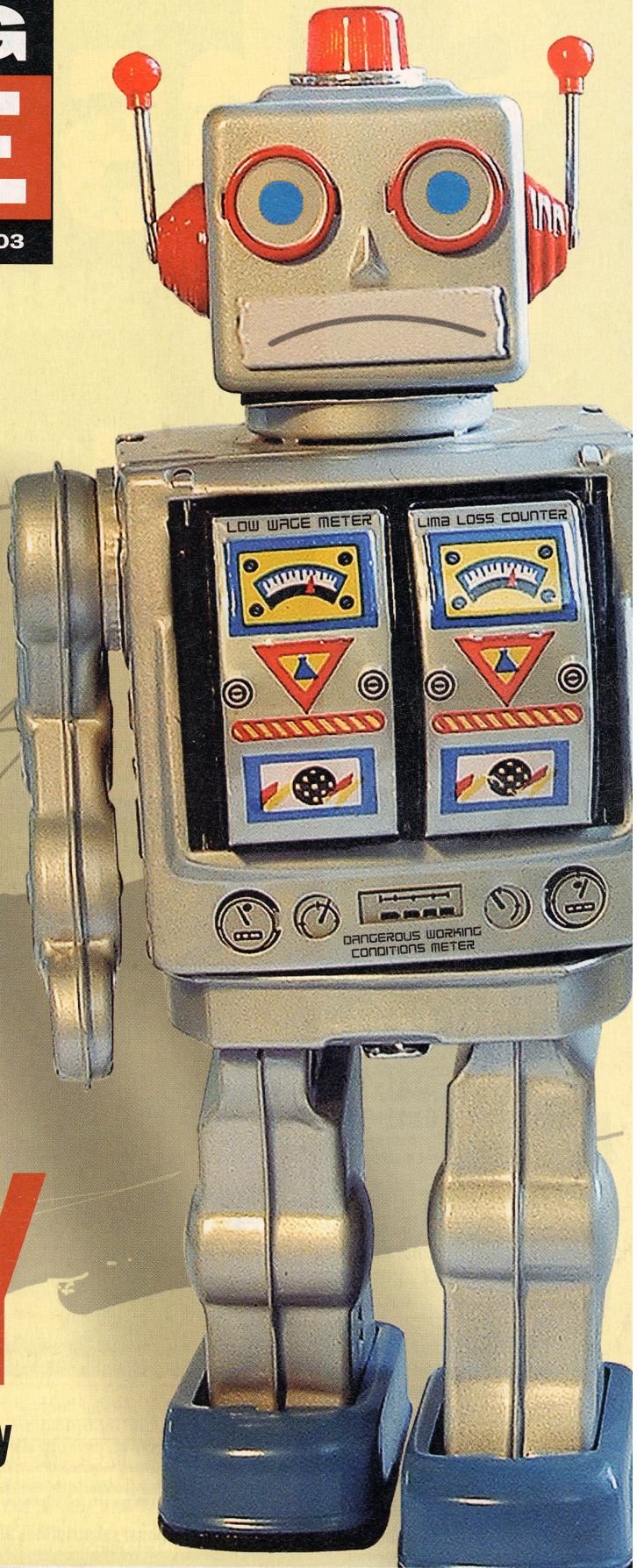


THE BIG
ISSUE
IN SCOTLAND
ISSUE 430 JUNE 12-18, 2003

£1



TOY STORY

**Big business plays a deadly
game with workers' lives**

60p of the cover price goes to vendor - please buy from badged vendors only

Play the game

There may be fewer Gaelic speakers in Scotland than ever before, but one celtic sport, shinty, is experiencing a revival, writes [Catherine Coyle](#)

You probably think you recognise it from the latest Guinness ad. The exhausted, sweat-soaked player summoning up every last ounce of energy to score with the last hit of the ball, against an opposition akin to the orks from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. But he's playing hurling, which is to Ireland what shinty is to Scotland. Only, on the Emerald Isle, hurling (along with Gaelic football) is the national sport. It's an intrinsic part of Irish cultural heritage; more than just a sport, it's a way of life.

Here in Scotland shinty has existed for decades as a fringe sport. It was introduced by Irish missionaries about 2,000 years ago with the first written reference to the game dating back to 1589, according to shinty expert Hugh Dan McLennan.

But the stick and ball game, known in Gaelic as iomain or camanachd, is still played in Scotland; it's heartland is in the Highlands and Argyll and Bute. Currently there are around 2,000 shinty players in Scotland and the numbers are rising. Despite Irish hurlers outnumbering shinty players by around 100 to one, the re-organisation and re-structuring of the Camanachd Association looks set to shake up the Scottish sport. But the question is whether it will ever achieve the same status as its Irish counterpart.

"In purely historical terms, shinty is as bound to Scottish history as hurling is to Irish, in that it's been around for centuries," claims Highlands journalist and author of *Camanachd: The Story of Shinty*, Roger Hutchinson.

"At the end of the 19th century, the vast majority of western sports became constitutionalised and proper ▶

'If there were three or four Kingussies in the game shinty could challenge other sports such as football and rugby. But it needs more Kingussies, simple as that'

rules and regulations were written up. This happened for everything from soccer to hockey, shinty and hurling included. But the bodies which institutionalised hurling in Ireland and shinty in Scotland were vastly different."

In short, the Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA) in Ireland became the governing force, a Nationalist body politically, concerned primarily with the promotion of traditional Irish sports within an independent Ireland. Meanwhile, across the water shinty was largely organised by the upper classes and land owning families. So, although the two share a similar history, politics has shaped the sports' modern forms.

Politics aside, shinty is enjoying a renaissance, says Duncan Freshwater, development manager at Camanachd Association. "I see the number of children picking up a caman and playing in youth teams increasing every year.

"It's difficult to get shinty played regularly in schools as teachers are increasingly banning the carrying of camans in the playground. In an overly protective and litigious world, teachers feel that they cannot risk children playing a sport that, to them, looks dangerous. This viewpoint is borne more out of ignorance than fact but it is a view that we're finding difficult to change."

The introduction of 'first shinty' in the last 10 years, a variation of the game for children aged between eight and 14, has created a new generation of potential shinty players. Alterations to the kids' game include a shorter stick with a rubber head and a lightweight ball that travels more slowly, making control and ball skills easier to master. It is generally played on a smaller indoor pitch and headgear is available to ease the minds of safety conscious parents.

Freshwater has noticed a marked growth in the uptake of the sport, particularly at primary school level. Though shinty's popularity continues in the Highlands and Argyll & Bute, interest in first shinty has extended to some of Scotland's urban areas, particularly Glasgow.

Safety, claims Freshwater, is the greatest barrier to new recruits to the game. "If you play it from childhood, you become aware of one or two very simple elements to protect yourself. The caman, as well as being your playing instrument, also functions as a guard to protect you from being hit.

"Those who have most say about whether children can play are the parents and all they see are wooden sticks. They would often rather their children played football. If you don't start playing at a young age, there isn't much uptake from people coming in at a later stage."

That said, however, there are currently 34 clubs fielding 55 teams at senior level in Scotland. The sport boasts its own equivalent of Glasgow's Old Firm, between Kingussie and Newtonmore, two teams from villages three miles apart in Badenoch, as well a player elevated to god-like status as a result of his phenomenal talent. Ronald Ross, of reigning champions Kingussie, is shinty's Ronaldo. Kingussie have just won their 18th consecutive league title, as well as winning a run of 95 consecutive league and cup games, making the team a favourite for the *Guinness Book of Records*' title of best team in the world.

Roger Hutchinson of the West Highland free press reckons that shinty's profile would be given an automatic lift if there were more teams like Kingussie playing. "I don't think there has ever been a more dominant shinty team than Kingussie. The problem is that

PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVE FALLOWS, NEWTONMORE



shinty operates from such a narrow base that you wonder if there are the players around elsewhere to challenge Kingussie.

"They have to be the greatest shinty club of all time. Kingussie High school elevated shinty to being its first sport 20 or 30 years ago so they have a kind of a youth academy on their doorstep.

"If there were three or four Kingussies playing in the modern game, then shinty could challenge other sports such as football and rugby but it needs more Kingussies. Simple as that. More teams of that calibre would automatically increase participation and the number of spectators because the competition would be fantastic," says Hutchinson.

The sport's minority status however has not prevented it from being exported. Though not on a large scale, the game is played in various locations around the globe. The San Francisco bay area is home to a dedicated group of shinty players in the form of the Northern California Camanachd Club (NCCC). In the last couple of

years, interest has been growing and the club now has 60 members, with a committed, regular turnout of between 10 and 20 players.

NCCC goalkeeper Michael Bentley explains that it's not so unusual for a traditionally Gaelic sport to be played as far afield as California. "A number of us have been involved in various other Scottish cultural and historical activities. In our research into Highland social history we came across a description of shinty. We threw together some camans (made in the old style - carved out of conveniently curved branches) and began playing. We loved it!

"While our first attempts probably looked more like field hockey than shinty, over the years we were able to gain more information as well as modern equipment. Now we're playing in the modern Scottish style as best as we can," says Bentley.

With a number of Scottish expatriates in the bay area, the NCCC have had workshops, coaching advice and visits from Scottish shinty players. They are



also incredibly proud of the fact that they exist as one of only two shinty clubs in the US – the other, situated in Seattle, formed only recently.

So, what's the attraction? "For me, it's a connection with my heritage and ancestry as well as being a great sport," says Bentley. "Shinty combines a lot of different skills: the aerobic aspect and the strategy of the stick and ball technique are all very engaging. It has different elements of other games all rolled into one. My experience in ice hockey and baseball has probably been most helpful in learning shinty. I play in goals much of the time and that's very challenging, especially as our group is hitting the ball harder and higher all the time.

"But the team also has a social element. Many of us have known each other for a long time and from other activities, so this provides a vehicle for us to get together."

A little closer to home, the renaissance of the sport has witnessed more women and girls taking up shinty. Glaswegian club

Tir Conaill Harps boasts the unique title of being the only women's camogie (the women's equivalent of hurling) team currently in Scotland. Founded in 2001, the Women's Camanachd Association promotes shinty in Scotland but there has been some resistance from those who believe it is a men's game.

Just as hurling and shinty have reached a composite relationship, the benefits of linking camogie, shinty and hurling cannot be underestimated, believes Grace McBride, manager of the four-year-old Tir Conaill Harps camogie and ladies shinty team. "It's really important because it helps all of these sports to survive. It makes more people aware of Gaelic sports in general.

"There are only a few minor differences in the rules of camogie and hurling and those who have played one sport can adapt easily to the other. Irish camogie teams who have visited us have really enjoyed trying shinty, they usually win easily. In addition, it allows hurling and shinty players the opportunity



to play at a higher level in the composite rules international match that is played annually."

Shinty, according to Hutchinson, remains the oldest team sport played in a recognisable form in the western world. Following a period of plateau, it looks set for a revival but continues to rely on support: player, spectator and financial help. "The sport needs more money and

more official support. Shinty in Scotland has been stymied for too long." ●

The Glenmorangie Camanachd Cup final will be played on June 14 at An Aird, Fort William at 3pm, with the youth final preceding the main event at 12 noon. Tickets available at the gate. For further info, log on to www.shinty.com or call the association on 01397 772 772