

Californians dreaming of shinty going big time

A BUNCH of friends get in some shinty practice on the beach.

The only thing is, this isn't a stretch of sand in the Highlands.

The giant Pacific breakers probably give the game away — it's California!

They're members of a burgeoning shinty club in America's Sunshine State — all thanks to Michael Bentley (48) from San Francisco.

When he was a teenager he joined a group researching Scottish culture and history.

While flicking through a book about the Highlands he came across a description of shinty and was instantly hooked.

"Some of us were looking for physical activities so we thought we'd give it a shot," says Michael. "We didn't even realise it was still being played!"

"I was delighted when I

By James Millar

discovered it's a living game and when I visited Scotland in 1983 I took in some games and returned with sticks and rule books."

Michael and his friends played games against each other but numbers dwindled as they grew up, some moved away and jobs and families took precedence.

Spark

But the spark didn't die and in 2001 Michael and two of the original players decided to try again.

"The three of us figured if we didn't do it then the only game we'd be playing would be wheelchair shinty!"

"We pursued it a bit more seriously but the big



■ Skye Camanachd travelled to San Francisco to play against the Northern California Camanachd Club.

difference was that this time round we had the Internet. That's allowed us to reach more people and it's taken off."

Starting with demonstrations at local Highland games in California the Northern California Camanachd Club attracted more and more players, many with Scottish ancestry some just looking to try something new.

"There's a huge variety

of people in California. On any given weekend you can see Indians and Pakistanis playing cricket, Canadians playing lacrosse and all sorts of nationalities playing soccer or baseball.

"People are willing to try other sports here. Several of our members have come along just out of interest but once we get a stick in their hands most enjoy it and come back."

Now the club runs a

regular league and the players skills have improved.

They've even gained enough confidence to challenge native players.

In 2005 the NCCC toured Scotland playing games at Blairgowrie Highland Games and in Musselburgh.

"I don't remember the scores but I know we didn't win," laughs Michael. "We didn't compare too badly, though the opposition may have been going easy on us."

In 2007 the team returned for ties in Skye. They lost again but there were signs of progress.

"We didn't grow up

with the game, we're still mastering basic stick skills but you could see we were playing the same game this time. And we've a few skilled young players that the guys from Skye Camanachd said would get a game with a league team with a bit more training."

Return

And of course the Skye players were keen to play a return fixture.

"It's not hard convincing people to come to play in California!" beams Michael. "Last year Skye Camanachd brought 16 people to the San Francisco area for two weeks to play some fixtures culminating in an

appearance at the Pleasanton Highland Games, the biggest games west of the Mississippi with a crowd of around 40,000."

Now Michael's keen to spread the shinty gospel.

He explained, "It's always going to be a speciality sport here. I think I know all the people playing it in the US. The nearest club to us is in Portland, Oregon — about 700 miles away. Scottish teams don't have to travel quite that far for a fixture!"

"We'd like to recruit more teams to our league, get knowledge of shinty out there and perhaps one day hold an American championships."



■ Shinty on the beach — but in the Sunshine State of California.

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