



# GAEELIC

## THE

Hard times are falling on communities across the country, and even in the affluent San Francisco area, belts are tightening and the economy is in decline. But on a recent December afternoon, on an island in the middle of the Bay, on a plot of land surrounded by cracked concrete and crumbling buildings, a lively celebration was gearing up, one that defied the growing gloom all around."

By the day's end, Ireland's 2007 and 2008 Gaelic football All-Stars had faced off against each other in front of over 2,000 fans, and San Francisco's Gaelic Athletic Association (SFGAA) had formally opened three new, world-class fields, named Páirc na nGael.

Players and fans of Gaelic football and hurling are ecstatic. Before the park materialized, they had never had their own base. They were "wandering aimlessly," with "no real homes . . . a rudderless ship," according to Pat Uniacke, President of the SFGAA Treasure Island Board of Directors.

In just eight months, workers and volunteers turned unused land owned by the U.S. Navy into high-quality pitches, where players can now pass a football or strike a sliotar without tripping in a gopher hole or having to surrender the pitch to other sports.

But the new fields on Treasure Island go far beyond sport in their significance to the Bay Area and the Irish-American community. The second phase of the project involves a 25,000-square-foot community center and clubhouse, and will be open to any organization that wishes to use it. The space will host feiseanna, banquets, conferences, and the like and serve as a center where people can gather to socialize and celebrate — a physical hub in an increasingly virtual society.

This new foothold for Gaelic games is also a link between families and across decades. Irish President Mary McAleese praised this aspect when she appeared later the same week at the opening ceremony for Páirc na nÓg, the new youth field that is part

# GAMES

## A New Future in the City by the Bay

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS RYAN

of the same project.

In front of children from 25 area schools dressed in brightly colored football jerseys, McAleese recalled the largely Irish immigrants who came to San Francisco in the 1850s "with so little – but they still had the love of their games. And here we are a century and a half later, in very different times, honoring their memory.

To the Irish-American families and the dignitaries, fans, players, and volunteers who attended the opening ceremonies that week, the new GAA center is more than just well-kept grass for games and competition. It's a knot joining America back to Ireland, and the Irish-American past to its unwritten future – a knot that's being tied and tightened even as you read.

### A Long Time Coming

Work was finished on the fields less than a year after the lease was signed, but in a sense they were 155 years in the making. Ever since Irish immigrants played Gaelic games in San Francisco as far back as 1853, they've never had fields of their own.

In the decades since, participation levels have waxed and waned, largely in relation to the economy here or in Ireland and to the resulting immigration rates. But the sports and the culture have always lived on, in one way or another. McAleese likened it to a baton handed on from generation to generation. That baton has never been dropped, but now – with a home base – Gaelic games are much better positioned to grow.

As is the culture at large. John O'Flynn, another key SFGAA board member and chair of the Irish Football Youth League, sees Gaelic games as "a very important cog in the wheel in promoting Irish-American culture." The games get people together who might not know each other, and those connections last throughout life.

Ray O'Flaherty, a native of County Offaly



Left: Two players jump for a high ball during the All-Stars match at Páirc na nGael in San Francisco. Top: President Mary McAleese and her husband Martin mingle with young GAA supporters. Above: Irish-American stars of tomorrow stand ready to welcome the Irish President to the youth field at Páirc na nGael at Treasure Island.

and owner of a popular Irish pub an hour's drive south in San Jose, considers the games as an important cultural link to bygone days. "It keeps us living with the past, with stuff we all did when we were young people . . . it's the preservation of our traditions."

Indeed, the desire to preserve Irish culture and pastimes inspired the very creation of the GAA back in 1884 in Thurles, County Tipperary. At the time, hurling and other Gaelic games seemed threatened by British rule and the general dilution of Irish language and identity.

Those threats seem distant now, but other things challenge the growth of Gaelic games in the U.S. today: the peri-

exposure to Ireland beyond family stories and a Gaelic surname.

So what may seem to some like merely sport or competition is in fact a link to the past and a gateway to Ireland.

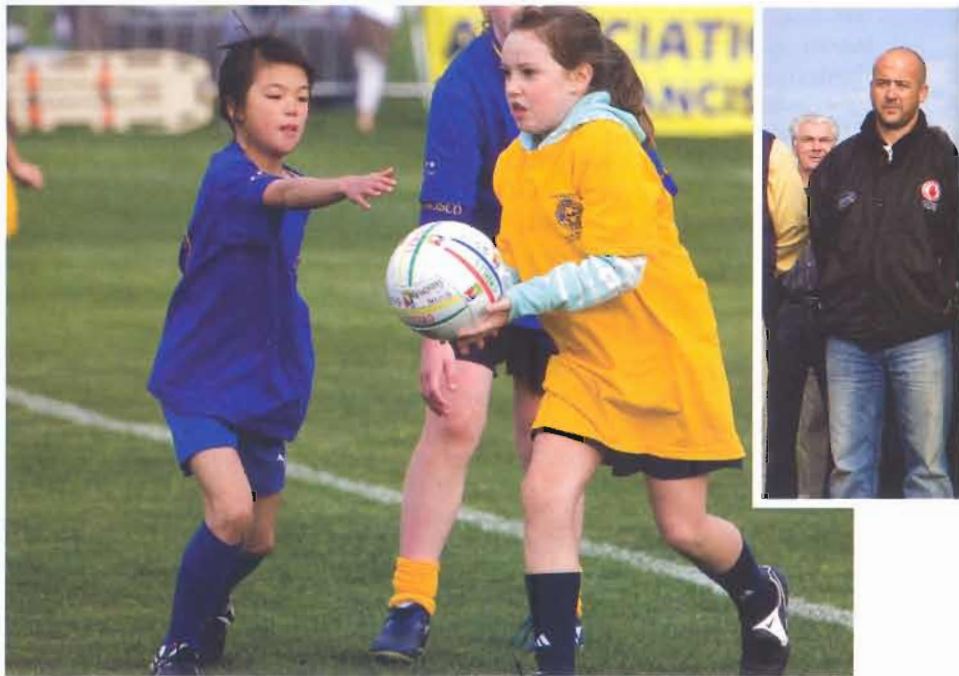
Thanks in part to the new home for Gaelic games on Treasure Island, Irish sport and culture in the region now looks well situated. But there was nothing inevitable about Páirc na nGael. In fact, it owes its development – on a deserted piece of real estate, in the early days of an open-ended recession – to a combination of vision, volunteers, and plain luck.

## Leaves of Grass

Treasure Island is a former naval base on a

fields would not be there today without the labor and equipment offered by volunteers. Alan Coughlan, an electrician from Cork, spent a day and a half each week over the course of eight months "doing anything: laboring, operating machines, electrical work . . . if volunteers didn't step up, it wouldn't get done." Coughlan is looking forward to using the fields with his local club, The Séan Treacys, which won the 2008 North American Senior Football Championship.

Volunteer Pat Power from Waterford worked most Saturdays over the course of the project. Power has lived in the States for 32 years and his children all went through the youth program. Kids want an



odic declines in Irish immigration and competition for the youths from other sports, like soccer.

Supporters of the games see Páirc na nGael as a counterforce to those factors, and a unique opportunity to build community.

The games also link Irish Americans to their Hibernian roots in another, more direct way. Many of the youths know little of Gaelic culture or of Ireland itself. But every two years or so the GAA raises money to send some of the underage teams back to Ireland to take part in the Féile na nGael, a tournament for youths.

"It's a process of acculturation," says Liam Reidy of the SFGAA, "to take them home to Ireland where a lot of their parents and grandparents were born and raised." For many, it's their first real

man-made island nearly a mile square, sitting in the bay halfway between Oakland and San Francisco. The GAA's 13 acres are surrounded by neglected land and abandoned buildings, but in the background stand the iconic towers of the Bay Bridge and the downtown skyline. And soon, a large-scale, high-tech, eco-conscious "city" is due to spring up around it, a massive development that promises to make the whole island a greener and safer place.

The GAA's \$5.2-million project started with a \$100,000 donation from an anonymous individual and received two half-million-dollar boosts along the way: one from Croke Park (the GAA headquarters in Dublin) for infrastructure like fencing and bleachers, and one from the Irish government to develop the community center.

But everyone I spoke to stressed that the

extra connection to their culture, he said, and parents want a link to their kids. He thought it "marvelous to be able to give something back."

The All-Star players certainly appreciated the final product. President McAleese described them as "absolutely thrilled . . . as well they might be, knowing how much love and passion and commitment have gone into every single blade of grass."

According to Pat Uniacke, the fields are "as good as you'll get in Croke Park or any field in Ireland."

Beyond the devotion of the 300 or so volunteers, the project also benefited from luck. Uniacke reflected, "We were very fortunate in our timing. When we commenced last March the economy had not started to turn down yet." Since then, he

knows, capital has grown quite scarce.

Uniacke added, "We were [also] fortunate that there were so many Irish contractors involved in the business of heavy earthmoving equipment."

Fortune works in mysterious ways.

Money to complete the community center and pay off debt will be raised by renting out the fields to other sporting groups in the off-season and throwing fundraisers like "Gaelic Fests," Gala Nights, et cetera.

John O'Flynn reflected on the hard work and planning and what it has achieved. "In our own little parishes in Ireland, we all strived to have our own place to play. We're doing the same thing here."

To expand participation among youths, the SFGAA is taking the Gaelic games directly to them. It has convinced Rhythm and Moves, a company which provides physical education curriculum to schools, to adopt Gaelic football as one of their programs. And it has exposed hundreds more kids to it through the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Club of America. In fact, the latter group is active on Treasure Island and through it the GAA has introduced Gaelic football to about 500 disadvantaged kids.

And what do they think of it? John O'Flynn, who for 14 years now has been bringing the games to thousands of young people, says kids like Gaelic football because

Italian Americans, Latin Americans, African Americans. They may connect to the Irish community through marriage, or may have the ubiquitous 1/4 or 1/16 Irish heritage.

"Gaelic games here amongst Irish, Irish Americans, and other cultures is actually growing now for the first time," Reidy added.

In a city as diverse as San Francisco, in a country comprised of immigrants from many lands, preserving one culture too



Far left: President of the Gaelic Field Development Committee Pat Uniacke says a few words at the opening ceremony. Left: Players from all backgrounds enjoy playing Gaelic games at Páirc na nGael. Above: A proud day for all SFGAA members (including John O'Flynn, third from right) at the official opening of the facility. Top right: The 2008 and 2007 All Stars are led out onto the field by local children. Bottom right: No matter what age, there is always an opportunity to improve your ball skills! All photos by Chris Ryan, Viewsoftheworld.com



## Writing the Future

The first major event the fields will see is the Continental Youth Championship in July, the biggest youth GAA event in North America. It connects players throughout the U.S. and Canada – wherever there's an Irish diaspora that plays Gaelic football or hurling. Over 2,000 young players will compete in 250 games over the course of three days.

The event is growing fast, as are Gaelic games among youths in general. This is partly due to a conscious effort to focus on younger players.

Liam Reidy concedes, "For generations we were relying on the immigrant influx" from Ireland and "too heavily on adults to play the games." But now the philosophy is, "Today's juveniles are tomorrow's seniors."

it's very aerobic, you're able to move with the ball, "and there's a lot more scores." And, he added, "There's the opportunity to travel."

Organizers hope that many of these youths will go on to play as adults, helping to establish the games better in the long term.

Interestingly, their strategy seeks to involve not just more Irish Americans – though they are still doing that, through the Catholic Youth Organization, for example. They're now more actively inviting everyone to participate in Gaelic games, in part through the groups mentioned above.

"When you look at the team sheets now," Liam Reidy remarked, it's not just "O'Connells and Ryans and Murphys." It's Berillios, Medinas, and so on –

strictly can backfire, detaching it from the larger community and leaving it to grow stale and irrelevant. If culture is valuable – and if it is to stay vital and lively – then it seems it should be shared far and wide.

Pat Power appreciates that spirit in his children's teams. "The kids' friends come out and play, they're from diverse backgrounds . . ." It's not as much about the sport, in the end, as the community it fosters.

Speaking to the children gathered on their new pitch, President McAleese summed it up well: "Whether you're Irish or not . . . it's a wonderful thing to be able to share the Gaelic games with our friends and with our neighbors."

More than ever, those games and the bonds they create look set to shine, whatever the economic forecast. IA