

Lives of Our Irish Ancestors: The Sport of Hurling

by Jim Regan

[*An American perspective*] My interest in hurling began when I read in the *Kilfinane Coshlea Historical Journal* that Denis (Dinny) Grimes was captain of the Kilfinane, Co. Limerick, Emmets, the team that won the 1897 All-Ireland Hurling Championship. Since my great-grandmother Mary O'Regan *née* Grimes was a native of Kilfinane, I was determined to learn more about hurling and to investigate whether Denis Grimes was my ancestor.

Hurling, one of the most popular sports in Ireland, was played there by the Celts over 3000 years ago. Chances are pretty good that our Irish ancestors grew up playing hurling just as Americans today grow up playing baseball. There are no professional hurling teams; instead, it is played on the local level by boys and men with a great love of the game. The girls' and women's version of the sport, *camogie*, is played with the same intensity and spirit as the men's version. The only difference is the size and weight of the equipment.

Hurling is played on a pitch, similar to an American football field, only larger, stretching 140 to 160 yards long and 90 to 100 yards wide. At each end of the pitch is an H-shaped goalpost, which is a combination of those used in soccer and football. A net is extended behind the goal and attached to the crossbar, as on a soccer field. Scoring is achieved by placing the *sliotar*—a ball with a cork core covered with leather, about the size of a baseball—between an opponent's goalposts.

A goal, equal to three points, is scored if the *sliotar* goes into the net, and a point is earned if the ball goes over the crossbar. The team with the most points at the end of a 70-minute match wins. In the 1890s when the Emmets were playing in Kilfinane, a team consisted of 17 players. Today, a team has 15 players.

In some aspects, hurling is similar to lacrosse. However, instead of a netted lacrosse stick, a *hurley* is used. A hurley is a flat wooden club, 2 to 3 feet long, made of black sally or ash.

The *sliotar* is moved by an openhanded slap, by kicking it, or by hitting it with the hurley. A good strike with a *hurley* can propel the ball over 90 miles per hour. The *sliotar* can be caught in the hand and carried for no more than four steps. If a player wants to carry it further, he has to bounce or balance the *sliotar* on the end, or *bas*, of his *hurley*.

The goalkeeper's *hurley*, which has a *bas* or flattened, curved end, is usually twice the size of the other players' hurleys. He uses his hurley to block the fast-moving *sliotar*.

An opposing team player can tackle a player who is in possession of the *sliotar* or use his *hurley* to block (trap the ball between his hurley and the opponent's swinging hurley) or hook (block) the swing of a player with the ball.

Hurling, a fast-paced game, is considered by some to be the fastest of all field sports. But except for helmets, which became mandatory only in 2010, the players wear no protective gear.

According to reports about the 1897 All-Ireland Championship game, the Kilfinane team always played barefoot. When it came to the championship match, however, the team's supporters got together and purchased boots for all the players. It was thought that the boots would give them better balance and steadiness on the field. However, for men who had played barefoot all their lives, wearing boots was a disaster. They found themselves slipping and sliding on the wet and muddy field. At halftime, Captain Denis Grimes got his team together, and they all agreed to discard their boots. Playing barefoot, they were able to make up the first half's deficit and go on to victory in the second half.

Unfortunately, I do not have any first-hand family accounts of that championship game, which took place on November 20, 1898. However, I believe it must have been a special day in the life of my grandfather Joseph O'Regan. At the time, the seven-year-old Brooklyn-born Joseph and his sisters Catherine and Mary were living in Kilfinane with their aunt, Bridget Cudmore. One can easily imagine

Joseph's excitement as he, his sisters, and his many cousins experienced the events of the day. People from all over Kilfinane traveled to Tipperary by horse- and donkey-drawn carts to cheer their team on to victory, and I would bet Joseph was among the estimated 18,000 people who attended the game.

Upon the team's return, the entire town came out to welcome Denis Grimes and his hurling champions. The windows in the Cudmore home, like all the homes in Kilfinane, were probably lit with candles in honor of the team. The home was on High St., the main road leading to the hurling fields that surrounded the historic Kilfinane Moat, a 34-foot earthen platform ring fort. It was likely a prime location for viewing the celebrations that went on throughout the streets of the town. The Kilfinane Brass and Reed Band led the cheering residents. A great bonfire was set ablaze high on top of the Kilfinane Moat, and everyone in the surrounding countryside could see that the village was celebrating a great victory. The celebration went on into the wee hours of the morning.

While I have not yet determined if Denis Grimes was a relative, I found something more important in my study of hurling: a glimpse into the early life of my grandfather Joseph.

Sources: "Hurling: The Great Escape" by Jimmy Fitzgerald, *Kilfinane Coshlea Historical Journal*, vol. 1, 2002; "Hurling: Blackrock" by Seoirse Bulfin, *Kilfinane Coshlea Historical Journal*, vol. 6, 2013; "Kilfinane's First All-Ireland Honors," *Limerick Leader All-Ireland Hurling Final Special*, Sept. 1, 2007; "Great Limerick Athletes: No. 139—Denis Grimes of Kilfinane" by Séamus Ó Ceallaigh.



Hurley and Sliothar

Source: Peter Wöllauer, Jan., 2005. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki>