

Madison is one of 60 cities across the United States to host a hurling and Gaelic football club.



Image By: [Courtesy of Terry Imaging](#)

‘Hooked after the first practice’: Hurling and Gaelic football club intersects sport with community

By [Molly Sheehan](#) | April 3, 2025 3:00 am

As the festivities of the St. Patrick’s Day parade on Capitol Square came to a close in 2007, brothers Jason and John Kenney gathered on the lawn with their hurls in hand, skillfully hitting a sliotar back and forth off the wide end of the stick.

The wooden stick, known as a hurley, and the small ball, known as a sliotar, are used in the Irish sport of hurling — a sport not widely known to Americans but recognized as a [national sport](#) in Ireland.

The brothers’ back-and-forth play caught the attention of Bill Jones, who recognized their equipment and expressed interest in joining them.

“I understood that it was hurling, but I didn’t know any of the rules. I didn’t know anything about it. I just thought it was interesting,” Jones said.

Since that Saturday afternoon, and the first practice that they held just a week later, the Kenneys and Jones have worked tirelessly to build a group of individuals dedicated to the sport. Their club, the [Hurling and Football Club of Madison](#), would continue to recruit players over the years.

Jones, who hadn’t picked up a hurl until he was almost 38 years old, immediately felt drawn to the sport.

“I had found the sport that I’ve been practicing my whole life for,” Jones said. “It’s a very personal experience to play the game.”

The sport may be likened to lacrosse, rugby, soccer or even football, where players battle across the field to hit the sliotar over their opponent’s crossbar and between the uprights for one point or under the crossbar, past a goalkeeper and into the goal for three points. To Jones, it’s a fast and physical game that’s “easy to pick up but difficult to master.”

“It’s a really thrilling game,” Jones said. “You put on helmets and you crash into each other, and it’s just got an opportunity to feed your competitive side.”

The game thrives in Madison among the tight-knit community that expands beyond the start of a match and beyond when the players clatter in their cleats off the grass.

“Everything that happens on the field stays on the field, and that has been almost a catalyst to create meaningful relationships,” Kenney said.

By 2015, the club expanded beyond hurling to include men’s and women’s Gaelic football, a sport likened to rugby or football where two teams of 15 players compete with the objective of kicking or punching the ball into their opponent’s goal or over the crossbar.

“It was kind of unheard of, certainly in the United States, to have a team that did both [hurling and football],” Kenney said. “I’d like to think that we were one of the first teams to really become well-versed on both sides and to welcome Gaelic football, and I think that was what really helped us grow.”

That year, the Hailstones went on to win their first Junior C championship. From there, participants flooded in. Once the team notched a win, Kenney said it became “easier to attract people.”

Since then, the club has won four more national championship titles across different grades of the United States County Board of the Gaelic Athletic Association.

Among the newcomers was recent graduate and former member of the UW-Madison women’s rugby club Abby Frisinger, who came across the Hurling and Football Club through word of mouth. Frisinger and her friend gave the club a shot and found themselves “hooked after the first practice,” she said.

Like many of the Hurling and Football Club’s members, Frisinger plays both camogie — the women’s version of hurling with similar rules — and Gaelic football. With camogie, the sport’s uniqueness attracted Frisinger.

“I’ve never really experienced it in sports I’ve played before,” Frisinger said. “You have to be really skilled to handle the hurl and the sliotar in a way that is easy to forget when you’re playing Gaelic football.”

Kenney said the club created a community for people to find a place to belong and connect with others interested in hurling.

The club has also greatly benefited from the experience of Irish players who grew up playing the sport and brought an understanding of the nuances to the club. From the outside, the sport appears fast and furious and frantic, but when you learn the intricacies of the passing and skill positions, it becomes apparent that it’s not simply a fast, physical and brute-force game.

The Hailstones continue to practice each week in the summer on Thursday evenings. But to many, hurling and Gaelic football are more than sports.

“It’s a great sport, but it’s also a really incredible community. And I’m really privileged to have been a part of that,” Kenney said.