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Gael Force

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A young GAA fan, from Hong Kong, at the All-China Gaelic Games in Shenzhen, China.

Photograph: Clifford Coonan

GAA IN ASIA: Gaelic games fever is spreading so fast among Irish and other expatriates in Asia that it now has county-board status. For its growing ranks, the GAA social network is a winning formula, writes **Clifford Coonan**

THE HUMIDITY IS intense, and tropical evening falls abruptly as the Gaelic footballers, some Asian and some Irish, struggle in the heat and go through their paces, soloing the ball, then hoofing it over the bar at Kuala Lumpur International School. For tonight, at least, there is a little piece of Malaysia that is sacred to Irish sport.

It is a surreal sight. Gaelic football matches tend to evoke images of burly young men with their socks rolled down, playing at high speed in the rain. But Ireland's national game has an altogether different flavour in Asia, and one that is growing in importance. GAA is a long-established feature of life among Irish emigres in places such as London and New York, but Asia has only recently begun to catch the bug.

Up to 1,000 people play the sport regularly on teams such as the Shanghai Saints, the Dubai Celts and the Singapore Gaelic Lions. Half of them turned out for last month's Asian Gaelic Games tournament, in the Malaysian city of Penang. It's the biggest gathering of Irish expatriates in the region each year.

The Asian GAA has been given county-board status by the organisation's headquarters, at Croke Park. It is appealing to increasing numbers of new players, especially women, who are attracted by the aerobic benefits of playing. The GAA All Stars have made three successive tours to Asia, a sign that the organisation recognises the importance of the region in spreading the word.

Danny McBride, from Milford, Co Donegal, has spent eight years in Malaysia, many of them on the road travelling, but he tries to make time for his GAA training. I meet him as he takes part in the final session before his team, Orang Éire, head to Penang for the games.

"Traffic is backed up, so we've started training early," he says. He togs out in the school car park and runs on to the pitch as if it were his home club in Co Donegal. But the training session has Australians, Austrians, Canadians and Malays toging out, too. Bats flit through the balmy evening air. After one exuberant punt over the bar, the ball is briefly lost in the creepers behind the goal. It's a jungle out there.

"Solo. Hop the ball. Good stuff," says Liam Mallon, an ExxonMobil executive who is teaching some players how to do a solo. They are keen to learn, and their growing proficiency and, more importantly, their enthusiasm will help them earn them the title Club of the Year in Penang.

It's a strange sensation, somehow, knowing that all over Asia in the evenings, people from Ireland and 20 other nations are toging out to play a sport whose rules were set by impressively bearded men and earnest clerics in Thurles in 1884. Odd in many ways, but when you watch the teams training and playing it seems entirely natural. The Asian game seems very far removed from the founding principles of the GAA, but it is totally in line with the principles of the organisation. "It's faster than football, and I like that you use your hands," said Hafizah

Abdul Ghani, 22, from Kuala Lumpur, who says: "We all want to catch the All-Ireland final. It's...

Abdul Ghani, a 52-year-old lawyer from Kuala Lumpur. "We all went to watch the All-Ireland final, Kerry versus Tyrone, in the Hilton, and it was great fun. That was the first full game of Gaelic football that I've seen." Also new to the sport, but learning quickly, are Jen Collins and Sandra Hacker, from Canada, who play the game for its social dimension and to keep fit.

The Malaysian team's performance is all the more remarkable when you consider that it has been going for only a year and a half. "Last year was our first outing at the Asian Games, in Singapore. We fielded nine players, then picked up a few from other teams. Now there are 45 of us going to Penang, including kids. A big group," says Pat Gorham, from Belmullet, Co Mayo. Pat is among the players downing a few cleansing ales after the training session. The social aspect is important to the expatriates.

Malaysia has decided to go for two B teams, so that everyone gets a chance to play and no one feels that their skills are not being recognised. "It's all about having fun, after all," said Gorham.

This is true, but the fun has become a very serious business in recent years. Start-up teams also chose to compete in the B category in recognition of the fact that certain countries in the region come to dominate. At the moment Hong Kong are the best team in Asia. They have a few former county players in their ranks, including the former Laois forward MJ Tierney, who won an award for being the most valued player of the tournament, and Diarmuid Kinsella, who played for Wexford.

"Hong Kong has had a few intercounty players, and this is a fantastic vote of confidence in the Asian game. This is the equivalent of Premier League players choosing to play out here," says Peter Ryan, a diplomat currently working as director of the Asia Europe Foundation.

The experienced intercounty players are confident, assured and talented athletes who raise the game to a new dimension and who stand out from the part-timers who make up the majority of those playing.

But Ryan is not worried at the prospect of Hong Kong dominating to the detriment of everyone else. Korea dominated the early years of the games, while Japan also won three years in a row. Things are always changing.

The Gaelic Football Sevens at the Polo Grounds at Jalan Sepoy Lines in Penang this year were a testament to the level of organisation that now goes into the games. The draw took place at Traders Hotel in this bustling seaside city, which features beautiful colonial-era architecture as well as a bar that has sold Guinness for more than 150 years. (The black stuff is brewed locally around here and is of good quality.)

Penang hosted 35 teams from China, Japan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Malaysia, with players from more than 20 countries. This cosmopolitan crowd battled it out in the tropical heat watched by huge numbers. The games have become a major social event for many of the estimated 7,000 Irish people living in Asia.

In attendance at the draw were GAA president Nicky Brennan, president-elect Seamus Howlin and the legendary commentator Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh. "One's love of one's native shore is never stronger than when one is far from home," Brennan told the attendees.

One of the highlights was the performance of the Pumas, a local team of Malaysians studying at Penang Medical College, a joint venture with the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. They were hammered initially but raised their game, and it was getting close by the time they closed the tournament with defeat at the hands of Taiwan.

"It was important that the Penang team played, even though they lost every game. We wanted to show that an all-Asian team can be done," says Ryan. Local people were also keen on the display of hurling, and hundreds turned out to watch.

Taiwan was one of the original drivers of GAA in Asia. In the mid-1990s Taiwan Celts Gaelic Football Club was founded by a group of Irish college graduates in the Taiwanese capital of Taipei. Irish communities in Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore were also playing, and the concept of a regional tournament began to be bandied about, culminating in the first Asian finals in Manila in 1996.

Veterans of the early years tell of players being sick on the sidelines, either from lack of fitness or from overindulging the night before the matches. These days teams are much more serious. They generally attend the draw on Friday night in their jerseys, then head off to bed early, after a short evening of soft drinks. There are some exceptions to this rule: Vietnam got a singsong going after the draw and were clearly enjoying the social

some exceptions to this rule. Vietnam got a sing-song going after the draw and were clearly enjoying the social aspect of the tournament.

Every year the mens' teams compete for the Derek Brady Cup. This replica of the Sam Maguire in Cavan Crystal commemorates Derek Brady, from Navan, in Co Meath, who was one of the founders of the Taipei Lions. He was killed in a hit-and-run in Taipei in 1996.

Angela Keane from Lispolie, in Co Kerry, has lived in Beijing for six years, working in business coaching and training; she is currently the Fás representative in China. "I had no involvement in GAA when I was younger, even in Kerry. And we had an All-Ireland medallist, Billy Casey, as our next-door neighbour," she says. Keane got involved in 2003 after recommendations from friends in the city. "I was tired of the gym, the isolation of it, and I wanted a team sport," she says. "It's a great networking and bonding structure. At the same time it provides lots of fun and fitness and opens up the Irish community to you. I know more Irish people as a result of the GAA after six years in China than I did after 25 years in London.

"It has also opened me up to the volunteer system. When you're young you take the organisation for granted, but there is a lot of volunteer work that goes on, and nothing would happen without the people here," she says. "It means all the best things to me."

Keane's next plan is to become a referee, something enthusiastically welcomed by the GAA, which is planning to offer a refereeing course when next year's Asian Games are held. The money is on Hong Kong to host the next games, although Penang has also made a strong bid along with other centres. The decision will be made by the Asian county board.

"This is about being Irish and celebrating what it is to be Irish. This is our festival in Asia," says Fergal Power from Beaumont, in Dublin, who is a chartered accountant with KPMG in Hong Kong and is very involved with the teams there.

The games have moved around every couple of years since they started in Manila, to venues such as Hong Kong, Singapore and, in 2002, Phuket, where they were watched by President Mary McAleese, who marvelled at the way the Irish community got behind the games. She quickly recognised that the events were about a lot more than Gaelic games, that they were a way to get the Irish community together. "That opened everyone's eyes to the potential of the thing. It's a fantastic network and resource," says Ryan.

The president was also impressed by the network that the games offer. In the past two years Asia-Pacific Ireland Business Forum has sought to harness that networking ability into something more concrete.

"This is a ready-made network, and you can tell people they're not doing things on their own any more. People are coming for the social side, the business side with the business forum is great and very exciting, too.

"The highlight for me was getting linked into the worldwide network of the GAA. We're represented at the GAA Congress, and we have the same status as GAA clubs in Australia and the US," says Ryan.

"The GAA is an integral part of people's lives here. It's gratifying that it keeps growing. This year we had an all-Malaysian team from Penang and a team from Indonesia. India and the Philippines are the next targets."

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