

# Gaelic Football finds its home away from home

## Expat Profile

by Rufus Richardson

**With the Benelux Gaelic football championships currently in full swing, *The Holland Times* caught up with Ronan O'Riordan and Andy Smith from Amsterdam's Gaelic Athletic Football Club to find out about this unique group of expats.**

### How was the Amsterdam G.A.C. founded?

The club was formed in 2005 by a pair of expats called John McCann (Irish) and Steve Dillon (Australian) talking in a pub. By that stage The Hague already had a club, and there was also several other clubs throughout Europe, so they thought it would be a good idea to start a club in Amsterdam. They put up posters, made phone calls, got a team together and joined the European League. It now has just over 50 members comprising both men's and women's teams.

### What backgrounds do your members come from?

They're predominantly Irish and English, but we also have Dutch people, Australians and Americans. We're also proud to say we can count an Argentine and a Surinamese person amongst our ranks. We have had in the past Hungarians, French, Spanish and Italians join the team.

the expat lifestyle of Irish people that there are now Gaelic football teams in places such as Copenhagen, Budapest, Kiev, Pamplona and even Montenegro.

### Does this stem from the Irish taking their traditions with them when they live abroad?

Undoubtedly. The team in Budapest for example came about because the University in Budapest has a strong connection with University College Dublin and as a result there are a large number of Irish students in Budapest. Big European cities like Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris have always had big Irish expat populations and as a result they also have Gaelic football clubs.

### Is Gaelic football popular in the Netherlands?

Benelux would probably be considered the hotbed of Gaelic football on the continent as it comprises five clubs (Amsterdam, The Hague, Brussels, Maastricht and Luxembourg). Here in the Netherlands there is of course a big rivalry between the Amsterdam and The Hague teams.

### Do people sometimes look at you strangely and wonder what on earth you're doing?

We get quite a few strange questions from people at work who may have never heard of Gaelic football before. We find most people have an idea of what Australian football is (which is of course a far inferior game) and we explain that Gae-

pick up playing Gaelic football again because it gives them a little taste of home. When you live abroad in a big city you are naturally a bit more isolated so re-discovering a traditional Irish sport such as Gaelic football is a very enjoyable and effective way for the Irish expat to not only ease any feelings of homesickness but to also embrace their new surrounds and meet new friends. The vast majority of our members actually tell us that they haven't played Gaelic football for years back home, but now that they're living abroad they rediscover it in a whole new way.

### Are people reluctant to embrace Gaelic football because of its traditions?

Some people are because of traditional connotation associations in Ireland such as County rivalries. In big hubs of Irish expats such as London and New York, Gaelic football holds onto a lot of those traditions, but here in Amsterdam it's all inclusive, all encompassing, there's no baggage from Irish traditions and that makes it really exciting and refreshing and it's a lot of fun teaching people from other countries about Gaelic Football.

### Why is joining a sporting club like the G.A.C. so appealing for an expat?

The great thing about being part of a Gaelic football club as an expat is it's a great way for people to become acclimatised to their new surroundings. Being away from home, it makes you feel part of a community. Plus the best way to find information on things like housing and transport is to ask other expats who have lived in that particular place for a period of time. So, when you become part of the club you gain instant access to a wide and varied network of localised expat knowledge. We have people from all walks of life in the club, so if you need some tax advice or an electrician or whatever you can always find a member within the club who knows a lot about that particular field.

### Is there a strong social aspect to the club?

Absolutely. The Amsterdam G.A.C. is part social club, part sporting club. Yes we go out and play sport together, but the thing people get the most out of being part of the club is meeting new people. Events like St Patrick's Day, Six Nations Rugby, our Summer tours for the European tournaments and other events are all very social occasions and we all love coming together to be a part of it. Plus, playing in the tournaments is a great way to see other parts of Europe, and because we quite often play the same teams every year we become friends with expats in other European cities as well; which, if it wasn't for Gaelic football, wouldn't happen.



### How do non-Irish people find out about Gaelic football in Amsterdam?

Well, we train at the ARC rugby ground in Amstelveen so Dutch people and other expats see us playing there and like what they see and join up. Others have joined up because they have an Irish boyfriend or girlfriend. Or else they find out about us through our website or see our posters.

### What history is there of Gaelic football in Europe?

Gaelic football has been played in Europe for over forty years. Wherever you can find the Irish (everywhere) you'll find a Gaelic football club.

### With the European League is it very popular today?

The current structure of the European League has been going for eight years, and is growing rapidly. It says a lot about

lic football is a wee bit like that. But also these days with the internet and YouTube it's very easy to show people what it is and explain the history of the sport.

### What do you think is the reason for there being so many Irish expats all over the world?

Historically Irish people left Ireland for economic reasons or for adventure. The stereotype of the Irish labourer in London has now changed dramatically. Nowadays the big difference is that Irish people who have left Ireland have chosen to leave for professional reasons rather than fleeing famines, political violence or economic pressure. Ireland has very much embraced the idea of an integrated Europe and you see a lot of Irish people making careers for themselves in cities such as Amsterdam and Brussels.

### Is joining a Gaelic football club part of being an Irish expat?

When Irish people move abroad they



### Interested in Gaelic Football?

Amsterdam G.A.C. are always looking for new members for their men's and women's teams. Anyone is welcome to come along to training (every Tuesday and Thursday evening) with games usually taking place on Saturday afternoons until the end of October. More detailed information can be found at [www.amsterdangac.nl](http://www.amsterdangac.nl)

### Benelux Tournament in The Hague

The second leg of the Benelux Regional Gaelic Football Tournament is taking place in The Hague on Saturday 2 May at Westlandse Rugby Club Haaglanden, Beresteinlaan 52a, The Hague.