

Curragh Regatta Churns Traditional Waters

By John F. O'Brien, Jr.

"We're friendly enemies in the water. This is not a pretty sport – it's hardcore, hand blisters, butt blisters ... It's the competition and tradition." — Chrissy Mulkerrin, Pittsburgh Curragh Team, one of 11 Mulkerrins active in curragh racing in Pittsburgh, making up one of the oldest clubs in the U.S.

According to ancient legend, and his own writings, called *The Navigation*, Brendan the Navigator took his curragh, 10 explorers and provisions for 40 days and eventually found America. First landing at Newfoundland, which is almost directly due west of his homeland in Kerry, St. Brendan then allegedly journeyed south to Florida, the Bahamas and then around the southern tip of the U.S. into the Gulf of Mexico.

This was approximately 500 A.D., almost 900 years before Christopher Columbus left Spain to do the same. There are references to curragh boats as far back as 100 B.C.

The curragh (sometimes spelled currach) is a hardy but light boat frame of wood, usually oak or ash, covered with canvas, often painted with a black oil paint. Originally, animal skins were used instead of the canvas. With length of 25 feet and weight of only around 250 pounds, it moves under guidance of long oars of about nine feet in length, but taper to only about one inch at the water end.

This lack of a blade is to prevent catching on rough Atlantic waves. Sails are also be used on a curragh, but not in these races. The light weight of the curragh allows them to ride on top of the waves, rather than fighting through it. Yet it is so strong that it can, and has, crossed an ocean.

Mostly used as a fishing vessel on the west coast of Ireland, curragh racing became a sport when speed became a necessity for the fisherman - first one in each day got the best price for his catch. Naturally, the competitive spirit led to boasts on who was the fastest and curragh racing was born. The boats, in various modifications depending on locations and use, are still used for fishing, transportation, rescue and, of course, racing. NACA uses a boat modeled after the Naomhog curragh, noted for its sleek lines and outstanding seaworthiness.

Ten U.S. teams are part of the North American Curragh (*Kureuh*) Association (NACA). Teams from Pittsburgh, Boston (two teams) and Albany joined the Milwaukee team this year to compete in the Irish Curragh Club of Milwaukee Regatta, held annually at the Milwaukee Irish Fest at the Henry Maier Festival Grounds on gorgeous Lake Michigan. Other clubs include Annapolis, Columbus, New Orleans and Philadelphia and new clubs are being researched for South Bend and Cleveland, among others.

Each club hosts an annual regatta, with team points awarded for finishing in the top four. Six to 10 races are held at each regatta. Total points for the team are then used to determine NACA Cup



Pittsburgh Curragh Team
Margie Mulkerrin, Beth Carroll,
Carolyn Mulkerrin, Chrissy
Mulkerrin

Champion at the end of the racing year. Any ties are broken by whichever team placed higher at the other clubs' regatta.

Race length ranges from one to two miles, about 12 to 15 minutes each and are held in multiple categories; four men, four women, three men and one woman, two of each and then combinations of two and one rowers. On the full load (four person) boat, the two at the ends do the steering while the two in the middle are called *jrs* or *juniors* (for "just row, Stupid"). All four steering would get the boat in a great speed – going in circles.

The reality of curragh racing, the reason so many get involved and stay involved, is the competition and the camaraderie. Practices are usually three times per week, when the weather allows, often early Sunday mornings and two evenings. Family and friends follow the teams and as soon as the race is over, all adrenaline is gone and the friendships grow.

"We've had a lot of adventures," recounted Margie Mulkerrin, of the Pittsburgh club. "We raced in Hurricane Bertha in Albany (on Saratoga Lake) about six years ago."

Her cousin, Chrissy, is endlessly teased about driving a curragh into a bridge abutment when she tried, too late, to correct her course for a larger opening under a narrow bridge. The race finished, *then* others came back to rescue her. Priorities, you know.



The Race

Originally hailing from Connemara, Chrissy and Carolyn, father, and Margie's uncle, Pete Mulkerrin, used the curragh in daily life and also played Gaelic football before coming to the U.S. in 1968. He continued to play football in the US for many years after with the Pittsburgh Roger Casement's Gaelic Football Club.

The Mulkerrin (pronounced *Mul Kern*) family is very typical of all the racing teams, in their following of Irish traditions, in sport, active involvement and passing on those traditions to the rest of the family as well as the next generation. They do it for the love of their heritage and the love of curragh racing.

2005 NACA Schedule:
June 4th – Philadelphia
July 9th – Pittsburgh
July 30th – Columbus
August 20th – Milwaukee
August 27th – Boston
September 17th – Albany
October 1st – Annapolis

Writer John O'Brien, Jr., can be reached at John@clevelandirish.org.