

Synthetic hurl scores points with GAA players

THE "CLASH of the ash" may have a subtly different meaning following the development of a synthetic hurl by two Galway-based friends. John Grehan and Tom Wright, who both played and coached hurling, became interested in the manufacturing of hurls in 2002. They initially looked at producing ash hurls in China and Slovakia, before deciding to opt for a synthetic version.

The idea came out of a round of golf. While out on a course one day, the pair were discussing the changes in the equipment used for that sport. They decided there was room for a similar development in hurling.

"A friend of ours was manufacturing synthetic snooker cues, so we knew the material was there. We made some moulds and spent the next two years building a working model," he said.

They launched the product in 2006 and formed a company, Cúltec, based in Ferbane. Shortly after the initial launch they decided to tweak the design. "We lost over a year, but we came back with a much better hurl."

Grehan and Wright worked with Athlone IT to validate the product, including testing strike distance and strength.

"We have engineered in a break point for safety reasons, although the Cúltec is about 20 per cent stronger than the average hurl," he says, adding that the Cúltec did not splinter when broken. Cúltec used innovation vouchers from Enterprise Ireland to pay for the tests, while the local enterprise board helped them to set up a website. Approximately 20 per cent of their sales are from outside the State.

Grehan and Wright had been in constant contact with the GAA and, once the validation

process was completed in 2008, their product was approved for use by the GAA.

According to Grehan, the main difference between the ash hurl and their product is the "larger sweet spot" with the Cúltec and the absence of metal parts which, he said, made it safer. Unlike the so-called "Wavin hurls", the Cúltec has a hollow core so there is no vibration.

Grehan said members of the Offaly senior hurling team, among others, were using the Cúltec. The synthetic hurl costs approximately €40, compared to €25 for a standard ash hurl. The product is manufactured in China by a Taiwanese company and is a composite synthetic epoxy, nylon and some graphite.

The GAA estimates the market at between 360,000 and 400,000 hurls annually. A shortage of native ash means three-quarters of the wood required is imported from Hungary, Denmark and Wales. Although Irish ash seems to be best suited for hurls, Irish stocks are not expected to recover for a decade. Grehan hopes to use this period to establish a foothold in the market.

The company has a sales target of approximately 10,000 units this year.

