Rules

It is often said, not least by the players, that in Uppies and Downies there are no rules. It is an obvious way of underlining their distinctiveness and impressing outsiders. However, this has never been quite the case. It is true that there are very few written rules (other than at Alnwick). But no mass encounter could ever have survived without a verbally agreed set of conventions.

Thus players know when and where games are due to start. They are made aware that play should not stop into certain areas. They understand the aims of the game, and most of all they are made repeatedly aware, by older and more experienced players, of what actions are permitted within the spirit of the game. When a player goes down, for example, or is injured and cannot get clear unaided, play is generally halted.

Meanwhile, in most Scottich games and in Workington the art of ‘smuggling’ the ball – that is, hiding it on one’s person or in a secret place – and of making decoy runs without the ball, is not only tolerated but admired. Yet just so in Ashbourne.

At Ashbourne and Kirkwall, there are game committees, to organise pre-match events and to help raise funds for the balls and for charities. But these committees do not run the games per se. The players do that themselves.

Still, Uppies and Downies have had to adapt to the modern world. So, in most locations it has been agreed that players must not convey the ball in motor vehicles (after numerous incidents in which exactly such a play was tried). Time limits have also been tightened. Ashbourne’s game used to stop at midnight. Now it ends at 10.00pm, to make it easier for both the players and the local police.

Increasingly, games are influenced by the use of mobile telephones, which allow players to communicate over long distances and even call up reinforcements. And yet while issues such as this do have to be taken into account, and occasionally collective decisions do have to be made, the overall lack of a controlling authority adds to the special appeal of these games.

Indeed compared with the multiple clauses and amendments that litter the rulebooks of modern coddled sports, where increasingly arcane interpretations of the rules confuse even professional players and coaches (let alone the spectators), the simplicity of Uppies and Downies remains one of its greatest assets. It takes just minutes to grasp the basics.