



■ **ATHLETE:** The 1902 Penn State American football squad, which featured Belfast-born Henry Cooke McIlveen, circled. McIlveen, above, excelled in a number of sports at the university after his family moved from Belfast to Pittsburgh in the late 1800s



Pictures: Pennsylvania State University

# Belfast student helped the Penn State lion roar

**F**ANS of US college football are more fanatical than most and they take particular pride in their school's bizarre mascots and implausible nicknames.

Every weekend, tens of thousands cheer on the Demon Deacons, Golden Gophers, Horned Frogs, Ragin' Cajuns, Buckeyes, Boilermakers and Fighting Irish.

Among the most illustrious and recognised names is that of the Nittany Lions of Penn State, whose supporters will descend on Dublin this Saturday for the Croke Park Classic.

The staging of the game against the University of Central Florida has caused controversy because it means this weekend's All-Ireland semi-final replay between Mayo and Kerry must instead be played at Limerick's Gaelic Grounds.

Mayo manager James Horan described the decision to hold a showpiece semi-final outside Croke Park for the first time since Cork and Dublin replayed in Pairc Uí Chaoimh in 1983 as "bizarre".

However, those dismissing the notion of the gridiron game at the home of the GAA may not be aware of an unusual Irish link to one of the teams.

Penn State's 'Nittany Lion' name is now used by all its sporting teams, and it is a little-known fact that a Belfast-born student played a major role in the moniker's adoption.

The family of Henry Cooke McIlveen left south Belfast in the late 1800s and emigrated to the US, where they settled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The young Harry, also known as 'Lefty' and 'Irish', would go on to play baseball at the highest level,

Did you hear about the Belfast university student's role in the creation of one of US sport's most famous nicknames? As college football fans prepare to descend on the home of the GAA, **Simon Doyle** reports



■ **RUSH:** American footballers, from left, Simon Greene, Alan McDonagh, Neil Lynch, Eoin Hallissey and Chris Kane cross Ha'penny Bridge in Dublin to publicise the Croke Park Classic which takes place in the city on Saturday between Penn State and University of Central Florida **PICTURE:** Sportsfile

becoming the first, and to date only, Belfast native to play in the major leagues.

As a student at the famous Pennsylvania State University he excelled in multiple sports – baseball, basketball and 'football'. This was in an era when American football players took to the field in wool sweaters and leather skull caps.

Before 1904 no-one had ever heard of a Nittany Lion, inspired by the mountain lions that roamed central Pennsylvania and

Mount Nittany until the 1880s.

It was McIlveen's friend and team-mate Joe Mason who only coined the nickname in response to taunts from opposition players ahead of a baseball game against the fearsome Tigers of Princeton in 1904.

Penn State defeated Princeton that day, a phenomenal pitching performance by McIlveen keeping the opposition bats quiet.

The nickname was formally adopted four years later, "Such was the boast, you might

never have heard the Nittany Lion nickname uttered again had Penn State lost," said Neil Boyd, general manager of the Belfast Northstars baseball club.

"McIlveen's role was important. Under pressure, his excellent pitching performance lay the platform for victory. The mountain lion defeated the tiger and the name stuck."

Steven Herb, director of the Pennsylvania Center for the Book at Penn State, has devoted hundreds of hours of research to uncover the history behind the college's beloved icon.

His book *The Nittany Lion* talks of the friendship between McIlveen and Mason, how Harry encouraged Joe to follow him to Penn State, and their roles that day in Princeton.

"Penn State beat Princeton three years in a row after Joe Mason's boast about having a more powerful feline on top of Mount Nittany than Princeton did in their gymnasium," Mr Herb said.

"McIlveen had a hand in all three victories as pitcher, batter, or manager.

"Would Mason have called for the Nittany Lion to be Penn State's mascot had we not defeated Princeton, especially that first year of 1904?"

"I think he would have made the same call, but perhaps the student body would not have responded with as much enthusiasm if McIlveen and Mason had not kicked Princeton's ass those three years running.

"Bless Mr McIlveen for persuading Mr Mason to matriculate in the fall of 1903 and bless his magnificent left arm."

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