



▲ Nowhere in *Uppies and Downies* will you see **team colours** being worn, nor kit that might easily identify a player's team. Some players may occasionally be seen in souvenir shirts, as at **Hallaton** (above), but these usually relate to the game as a whole rather than the individual's allegiance.

Rugby shirts appear to be the garment of choice, partly because they are strong enough to cope with the rigours of play, but also because many of the players are themselves members of rugby clubs.

At **Kirkwall** (top right), Uppies and Downies wear their determined 'game faces' before the start outside St. Magnus Cathedral, sizing each other up and preparing to hoist one of their number up into the air to grab the ball from the throw up, as in a rugby line-out.

Footwear is also important, and sometimes even indicative of a player's role. These players at Kirkwall (right) have donned tough boots, wrapped with gaffer, or duct tape, for added ankle and leg protection. They will no doubt be concentrating their efforts in the scrum, where a firm foothold is vital on a range of surfaces.

In contrast, younger and more lightweight players wear trainers, so that, if passed the ball, they can sprint away from the mass of bodies for a quick breakaway.



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 stray 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 Scottish 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 not 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 ploy 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 codified 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.

▲ Up-Streeters and Down-Streeters gather in **Chester-le-Street, County Durham**, as one of the Dalkin family throws out the ball for the start of the Shrove Tuesday game in 1913. Dalkin's, based on Front Street, were a firm of saddlers and harnessmakers who had been supplying balls for the game for over 60 years. The game was last played in the town in 1932.

The majority of games of *Uppies and Downies* start in this fashion, either from an upper storey window

(as at Atherstone) or from the market cross (Kirkwall), or in the case of St Columb Major, from the top of a stepladder.

Known as the 'throw-up', 'throw-out' or, in Ashbourne, as the 'turning-up', the honour is usually performed by a local dignitary, a former player or sponsor of the game, or by an invited celebrity.

When facing the ball before it is thrown up, players from both sides intermingle. They at least know who is on which side.