

## 'Ducksy' Walsh Reaped a Golden Harvest

By Lorcan O'Rourke

The sad news we were expecting during the first week of August, but hoped would never come, eventually came when 'Ducksy' went to his eternal reward on Thursday 4 August.

His passing is a tremendous loss, firstly to his wife, Sheena, their children, Dylan, Megan and Niamh, and his siblings, to Irish handball, the international handball fraternity, his friends, neighbours and the GAA in general, especially in Kilkenny where he was so highly regarded, honoured and respected.

His achievements on the handball court will never be equalled. He amassed an amazing 108 All-Ireland titles, four World titles, a Texaco Award and innumerable National and Provincial medals as well as a host of tournament trophies. And he deserved every accolade, title, medal and honour which came his way. He earned them all and worked so hard to achieve the ultimate in perfection to reach the top of the sport. He was a genius, an artist, a complete master of his craft who gave of his best, who wanted to be the best and who achieved that.



His astonishing cache of 38 All-Ireland senior medals is equalled by the combined total of All-Ireland senior hurling medals won *on the field of play* in Croke Park by Henry Shefflin (10), J J Delaney (8), Jackie Tyrrell (7), Tommy Walsh (7), and Noel Skehan (6). What an amazing feat between 1985 and 2001!

We can name any number of well-known sportspersons – for example, Jack O’Shea, Henry Shefflin, Angela Downey, Brian O’Driscoll, Sonia O’Sullivan, Roy Keane, Bernard Dunne, Pádraig Harrington –and ‘Ducksy’ was their equal in his own sport: he was meticulous in preparation for every match, respected every opponent, had fierce determination to win and always did everything necessary to make it happen.

Anyone who was fortunate enough to have watched ‘Ducksy’ play will know that he was never boastful, always gracious, in victory. And in the odd defeat he respected his opponent/s and moved on quickly to his next challenge. He was extremely fair on the court: he would make a call against himself even if it meant a loss of a point; if he thought the referee made an error, a furtive look in his direction would be enough to get his message across – there was no point in arguing and he concentrated on the next serve or return.

One challenge, which he successfully tackled, was a very personal one when he went through the process required to achieve another goal in his life. As a result, he undertook a major fundraising programme in aid of the Aislinn Treatment Centre in Ballyraggett to help others overcome similar difficulties.

Illnesses come to us in many ways, but nobody would have marked down ‘Ducksy’ as a candidate for a very serious illness, and such an outcome after only a few days in hospital.

Shakespeare, who died 400 years ago, wrote in *As You Like It*:

*‘All the world’s a stage.  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts.*

For one man, ‘Ducksy’ certainly played many parts. He was the first Irish player to win a United States Underage title and he graced the international handball stage for 35 years. He was revered in clubs all over Ireland – from St Mary’s in Wexford to Newport in Mayo and from St Paul’s in Belfast to Ballymacelligott in Kerry. It was inspiring to see so many club and county jerseys at his reposal and funeral: young children, youths, boys and girls, middle-aged players and officials, champions from the past and people who came from clubs like Loughamcrory, Ballaghaderreen, Tuamgraney, Kells, Culohill, Coolboy, Ballyporeen, Kingscourt and many, many more where ‘Ducksy’ had displayed his unique talents and passed on his vast knowledge in numerous coaching sessions.

Due to his love of handball and his infectious way of encouraging young players, he has left an inestimable legacy for which future generations of players and handball enthusiasts will be forever grateful.

He won his last title in his own home court, Talbot's Inch, on Sunday 24 July where keen critics of the sport said he 'played his best handball ever, the game of his life'. Very fittingly, Con Moore from the O'Loughlins Club and current President of the World Handball Council had the honour of presenting him with the winner's trophy.

I am reminded of the many handball players who have gone to their eternal reward, none more so than his playing partner of several years, Eamon Law, who was taken from us so suddenly while playing handball. We also remember 'Ducksy's coach, mentor and friend, Tommy O'Brien, who guided him over many years and whose understanding of handball, and of 'Ducksy's personality, helped him achieve his potential.

One of my great memories of 'Ducksy' is how he could squeeze so many All-Ireland hurling and football final tickets out of the Handball office - and from so many people all over Ireland as well! If tickets are 'gold dust' then 'Ducksy' was an excellent miner!

Was it fitting that 'Ducksy' was laid to rest on the first full day of the Summer Olympics? If GAA Handball were an Olympic sport, he would surely have been in Rio searching for more gold. We trust he has now achieved gold standard in his new life far beyond our earthly vision. Was it fitting, too, that his passing happened when the fields of golden barley were being harvested? 'Ducksy' reaped a rich harvest but it seemed incongruous that The Harvester pub on the way from the N9 to Bennetsbridge had a 'For Sale' sign over the door.

'Ducksy' has played his final game and been called home to God. May he rest in peace with all his family, his friends and handballers who have gone before him. May they always have a wall and a ball where they can assemble, as in years past, where they can enjoy the camaraderie and friendship associated with the Perfect Game.