

Christmas 1981, when Ducksy made Handball History

By Paul Fitzpatrick

Christmas of 1981 was a very special one for Irish handball. That week, Michael 'Ducksy' Walsh made history when he became the first Irish player ever to win a title at the USHA Junior Nationals.

Walsh had already marked himself out as a prodigy with a succession of provincial and All-Ireland championships to his name but his victory in the 15 and Under Singles in Tucson, Arizona was the springboard as he went on to attain legendary status and break almost every record in the game in Ireland.

MICHAEL WALSH

— BEST IN THE WORLD



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MICHAEL WALSH, diminutive handballer from St. Joseph's Road, is just back from his glamorous trip to Chicago and Tucson, Arizona, where he contested the U.S.H.A. open under-15 championship with the best players in the world.

The only conclusion one can come to after his performances there is that he is the best handballer in the world at his age group.

Billy Bourke, from Connolly street, also made a bold bid for the under-19 title and came in a very creditable third.

Chicago was a stop-off for the Irish team in an effort to acclimatize to the warmer, faster courts. The players had been warned about the effect of these conditions on their games but the

Michael Walsh

Michael Walsh was seeded 12th, an unbelievably low seeding for a national champion. There were 27 entries in his age group and he was first of the Irish in action when he faced local State player, Tress Tinkler from Phoenix. This game lasted just over 12 minutes as Walsh began

victory which had the capacity crowd stunned.

Final

His final opponent at Court No. 1 on Tuesday morning was a local boy, Billy Dopez, of Mexican father and Brazilian mother. He had improved under the coaching of Pat Kirby, Fred Lewis, and 1982 Top Ace player, Bo Blinski.

He was a ciotog with a strong right but from the start, Walsh was clearly out-manoeuvring him. After 11 minutes, Lopez took a time-out to see could he work out what was going wrong as Walsh was leading 10-4.

Although Pat Kirby had given him help in preparing for these games, the former Irish cham-

player, Richard Lopez from a Mexican contingent playing out of Commerce Club, California.

A win would put Bourke into the final with an excellent chance of success but these hopes were dashed when Lopez made Bourke look an very ordinary player by winning the first game 21-4. How does one make Billy Bourke look ordinary? Every shot to either hand was a kill. A nice amount of spin on each shot to set Bourke off-balance and anticipation of every shot Bourke played.

Bourke's pride was stung and he made a brilliant comeback in the second game. He led right through this game and it looked odds-on to go to the tie breaker when Bourke was 20-14 ahead.

Lopez came back, however,

The Irish squad consisted of Walsh, his cousin Billy Bourke and Clare duo Ger Coughlan and John Duggan along with team manager Tommy O'Brien. Having trained hard in Ennis CBS and Croke Park, they departed prior to Christmas and spent a number of days in a freezing cold Chicago, where O'Brien had arranged numerous challenge games against top local players at the La Grange YMCA in order for the Irishmen to acclimatise to the American courts.

Action began in a much sunnier Tucson on Monday, December 28th. Incredibly seeded just 12th in a field of 27, Walsh disposed of Phoenix's Tress Tinkler in just 12 minutes (21-1, 21-0) in his first round and saw off Miguel Valdez from California (7, 10) to set up a quarter-final against Canadian champion Martin Simard.

The Quebec native, "who possessed little English and got his first commands in French", proved the young Kilkenny man's toughest foe, with Ducksy winning 17-21, 21-15, 11-4 in the morning before beating Texan Sam Edgell 21-2, 21-7 later that day in the semi-final.

"The young Kilkenny stylist rose to the occasion in magnificent style," reported the Irish Independent. "Today he meets Billy Lopez (Tucson) in the final and he is reckoned to have a 50-50 chance of victory."

The final took place on Wednesday, December 30th. Left-hander Lopez, coached by Fred Lewis and Tucson resident Pat Kirby, was fancied to take the title and was roared on by a large home crowd. However, he had no answer to Walsh's brilliance. So enamoured were the organisers with the Irishman's display in winning 21-4, 21-10 that they arranged for him to be interviewed by a local TV crew, with the segment airing twice that evening.

"Walsh stamped American handball with an Irish imprint when he won the U15 section of the USHA Championships. Walsh won with such conviction that it could well be argued that his full potential was not exploited," reported the Independent, suggesting presciently that there was more to come from the Talbot's Inch lad.

"Walsh put his opponent on the defensive from the opening toss and thereafter contrived to produce all the techniques and skills applicable to the 40x20 game.

"Victory for the Kilkenny youngster puts the cream on a highly successful trip. Billy Bourke and John Duggan did extremely well and are returning home with third place prizes too."

The Cork Examiner also carried a report on the team's return home to Shannon airport.

"The Irish party received marvellous hospitality, from nobody more than the great Clare handballer Pat Kirby, who has been living Tucson for the last 18 months," it read.

Meanwhile, the Kilkenny People were lavish in their praise for the young Cat.

"The final was Michael Walsh's finest hour. His ceiling play was fabulous; his variety of serves he had Tucson opponent completely at sea. His skill shots with the right hand had the spectators gasping and he finished the game on 20 as a real champion should, rolling the ball flat out in the corner. What a player!"

Ducksy, of course, went on to even bigger and better things. By March, he had won Leinster titles in U16 and Minor Singles (defeating Egin Jensen in the Leinster final) and even U21 Doubles. He added the U16 Singles All-Ireland title, beating Eamon O'Neill (Limerick) in the semi-final and Kenny McAuley, the first Antrim player to reach a juvenile final, in the decider.

And that was just the start...