

## Five memorable games in Croker

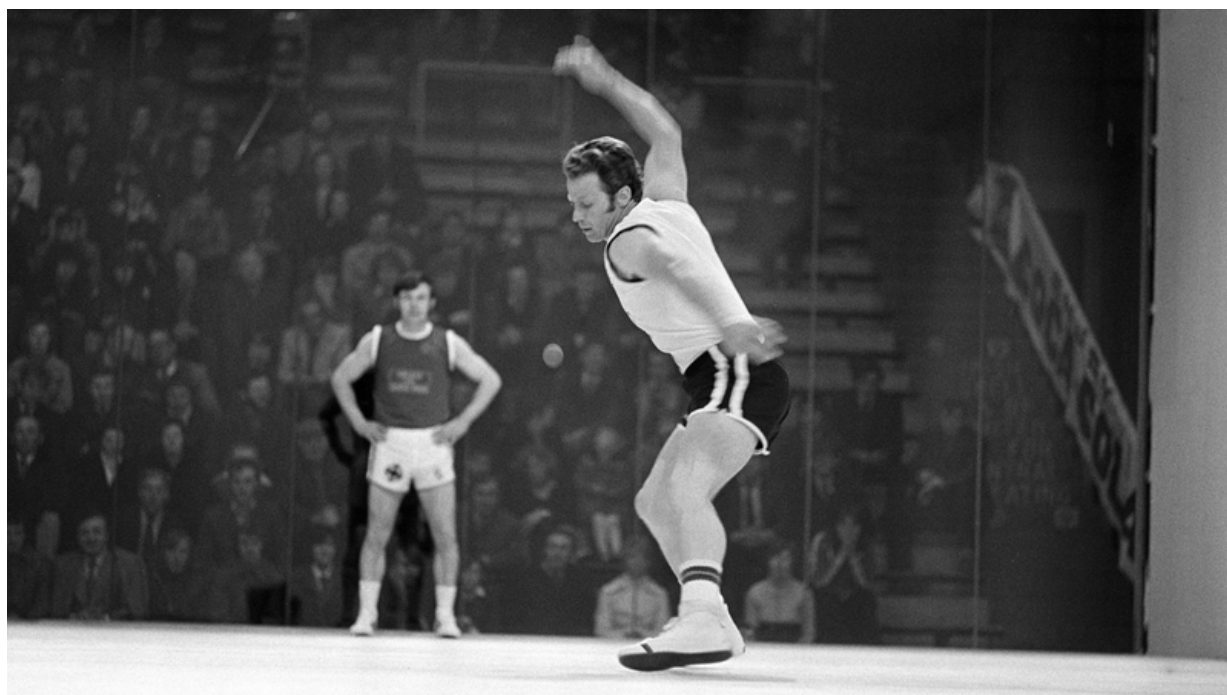
*By Paul Fitzpatrick*

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There have been countless thrilling senior matches played in the famous complex at Croke Park since it was officially opened 50 years ago. To recount them all would be impossible so we have taken a small representative sample of some of just five the best games for the ages for this trip down memory lane.

- **August 18, 1974 - All-Ireland Senior Softball Singles SF:**

Pat Kirby (Clare) dft Dick Lyng (Wexford) 20-21, 21-10, 21-11



Tuamgraney's Pat Kirby had won the World Championships, representing the United States, in 1970 and returned to Ireland permanently in 1972, when he was expected to soon win the Senior Softball Singles.

However, Kirby suffered a surprise defeat to the great Limerick player Pat McGarry in the Munster Championship in 1973; McGarry subsequently lost narrowly to the legendary Joey Maher and the Drogheda maestro, nearing 40, saw off Mayo's Brian Colleran to win his sixth and final Senior Singles. By the following year, when the provincial system was done away with for the first time, Kirby was

determined to land the one major title that had eluded him and when he was drawn to meet the brilliant Dick Lyng in the semi-final, handball fans expected an epic.

It was, noted the Irish Independent, “an event which has caught the imagination of handball supporters”. Lyng was equally determined to win as he would have a chance to win his third title and take on his county colleague Pat Murphy, conqueror of McGarry in the semis, in what would have been a unique all-Wexford final.

“This is the game the handball world has awaited with baited breath and which will bring a capacity crowd to headquarters,” reckoned the Irish Press.

“Kirby, world champion and multi-decked prizewinner from coast to coast in America, has one yearning ambition unfulfilled – to win an Irish senior title.”

In the end, despite dropping a classic first game 21-20, Kirby found a way past Lyng. In the final, he beat Murphy 21-9, 21-18 and a new era had begun. Kirby won four-in-a-row in the big court, dominating on famous nights at Croke Park, while turning the 40x20 Senior Singles into his personal fiefdom.

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- **August 31, 1985 - All-Ireland Senior Softball Singles final:**

Michael 'Ducksy' Walsh (Kilkenny) dft Tony Ryan (Tipperary) 21-14, 21-18



The late 1970s and early 1980s were something of a golden era for softball singles. After Pat Kirby won his fourth successive Senior Singles title in 1977, no player managed to retain it for another eight seasons.

In that period, Dick Lyng (Wexford), Tommy O'Rourke (Kildare), Pat Ryan (Dublin), Paddy Reilly (Kilkenny), Ollie Harold (Kilkenny) and Tony Ryan (Tipperary) all won the title before O'Rourke won it for the second time in 1984. And then, all changed utterly. Enter, stage left, Michael 'Ducksy' Walsh, the greatest proponent of softball the sport has ever seen. In '84, Walsh won the All-Ireland Minor and Junior Singles titles and reached the semi-final of the Senior Singles.

A year later, the precocious Kilkenny man was ready. In the quarter-finals, he ousted defending champion O'Rourke, leading Roddy Hyland to ask in the Irish Independent "Who can stop the Boy Wonder?".

Ducksy's cousin, Billy Bourke (himself a three-time Minor Singles winner), was unable to do so in the semi-final. On the undercard, Westmeath's Frank Kavanagh won the Minor Singles against Dave Malone of Mayo, with Cavan's Patsy Hand and Pat Donagh winning the Junior Doubles 21-19 in the third game against James McGovern and Anthony McConnell of Meath. The big house was jammed; the raucous Kilkenny support expected a coronation while the Tipp people were adamant that Ryan, who had beaten Walsh in their three previous meetings, would not be stopped.

Serving down the right to the surprise of the packed crowd, Walsh went 3-0 up in game one before conceding eight points in a row. He recovered, though, to win the first 21-14. In the second, the Kilkenny man was well in charge but grew nervy on the home stretch and managed to hold off the fast-finishing Ballyporeen star 21-18 on his third trip to the service box at game ball.

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- **October 24, 2003 - World Championships Open Singles Final:**

Paul Brady (Cavan) dft Tony Healy (Cork) 21-14, 3-21, 11-7



The battle between Cork's Tony Healy – already a three-time Irish senior champion by that stage – and Cavan's Paul Brady, who had won his first senior All-Ireland that April and who had been making a big splash on the USHA Pro Tour, will never be forgotten. The gallery at Croke Park was packed to the rafters for an eagerly-awaited showdown. Brady won the opening game but began to suffer from cramp midway through game two.

Referee Norm Dunne, the Californian who was highly-ranked on the American tour at the time, indicated that Brady would have to withdraw as the rulebook states that injury time-outs are not permitted in the case of cramp. Healy, though, sportingly insisted that he would use up his own time-outs to allow the Cavanman time to recover.

“Brady, who shot to number five in the rankings this year, an all-time high for an Irishman, collapsed with cramp midway through the second set, having taken the opener 21-14,” reported The Irish Independent.

Healy won the second game 21-3 and looked the odds-on favourite to close it out in the tiebreaker. Brady, though clearly hampered, managed to eke out a 9-3 lead before the Ballydesmond star clawed it back to 9-7.

However, Brady was not to be denied and took the title on an 11-7 scoreline, adding the doubles with Michael Finnegan the following day against Meath's Tom Sheridan and Walter O'Connor.

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- **September 21, 2002 - All-Ireland Senior Softball Doubles Final:**

Walter O'Connor/Tom Sheridan (Meath) dft Tommy Hynes/Colin Keeling (Wexford) 17-21, 21-20, 21-11



This final was played on the night before Armagh saw off Kerry in the All-Ireland SFC final and, like the football the following day, was also a most memorable clash which featured a triumphant comeback.

The Royals sealed their fourth Senior Softball Doubles crown in five years on the night but they did it the hard way. Having lost the final to the hard-hitting, talented and aggressive Hynes and Keeling in 2000, the Meath pair were determined to gain revenge but Wexford dictated the terms in game one and ran out 21-17 winners.

The Slaneysiders led 7-4, 9-7 and 11-9 in the second and held the advantage most of the way but a tremendous diving re-kill by Sheridan from a Hynes attempt denied them at game-ball and Meath snatched it.

In the third, they rode their momentum to a 9-1 lead and while Wexford cut the gap to 14-11, there was no denying the Royals.

Doubles specialist Sheridan got his hands on the Irish Independent Cup 14 times in his career – six wins with O'Connor, one with James McGovern and seven with Brian Carroll.

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- **September 29, 2018 - All-Ireland Ladies Senior Softball Singles Final:**

Martina McMahon (Limerick) dft Catriona Casey (Cork) 14-21, 21-20, 21-20



These two players, by common consent, have forged the most intense and high-quality rivalry in the history of female handball. They have driven each other on and each of their epic encounters seems to write a new chapter in what is a storied era for both. Incredibly, McMahon had beaten Casey by an equally wafer-thin 21-20 third game margin in the corresponding 40x20 final and she managed to repeat that feat here in a final for the ages.

The Broadford woman – a former underage and intermediate camogie player with Limerick who hung up her camán to concentrate on handball – just about edged it in this mesmerising spectacle. In the third game, the duo were level an astonishing nine times, with both playing aggressively and the crowd on their feet.

McMahon went 20-17 up with an unreturned serve but 2017 champ Casey wasn't going away and drew level at 20-all.

She had two chances to win it but eventually McMahon closed it out with a right-corner kill. The players were awarded a rare standing ovation from the attendance after another astonishingly close battle.

"When things don't go your way you have to dig deep and that's what I did.," said McMahon afterwards.

"For a rivalry, you need two players so it's not all me and it's not all Catriona. We are pushing each other on and you can see over the past two years how both our games have improved."

Without a doubt, this was the best-standard and most exciting ladies softball final ever played in the most famous ball alley of them all.