

Handball fans purring as greatest Cat Carey returns to the court

Paul Fitzpatrick spoke to DJ Carey ahead of the Kilkenny legend's return to the handball alley this weekend.



There had never been a Gaelic games superstar like him. Maybe it was the name, maybe it was the goals, maybe it was the fact that he grabbed hurling by the lapels and shook it until it changed irrevocably.

We're here to talk about DJ the handballer but DJ the hurling prodigy can be summed up by a tale related by Denis Walsh of The Sunday Times some years ago.

It was the 1991 All-Ireland final, five minutes in, the Cats were playing Tipp. "Christy Heffernan broke behind the Tipperary half-back line and headed for goal. Space beckoned and soon the target was only 30 yards away, dead straight ahead. The situation demanded that he shoot for a point but he didn't.

From the corner of his eye, Heffernan spotted Carey running in parallel, 15 yards to his right. Heffernan was captain of the team, playing in his fourth All-Ireland final but over-riding the imperative to take responsibility and shoot was the instinct to feed Carey.

"The hand pass was over hit, the chance was lost."

But it proved one thing, according to Walsh.

"At just 20 years of age, Carey had already been anointed a match-winner."

From that point on, DJ would win nine All-Star awards and five senior All-Irelands and arguably, at his peak, enjoyed a higher profile than any other GAA star in history.

As for handball? He was one of the best – the very best.

Carey is not one to boast about his achievements – the opposite is the case, in fact – but ahead of his return to action this weekend alongside Ducksy Walsh, he took some time this week to reflect on an era when he and Walsh were the doubles kings of Ireland.

“It's great [to be back playing with Ducksy] because we came up and beat some good teams, the likes of Walter O'Connor and Tom Sheridan, Tom and James McGovern, Walter and Egin Jensen, they were phenomenal doubles pairings,” recalled DJ.

“Not that we beat them every year but when you look at those names back in our heyday, there were massive achievements there.”

Carey may have taken hurling into a new stratosphere but he always remained loyal to handball, helping out with launches when he wasn't competing, plugging the benefits of the game in the media and introducing his own kids to the sport.

Supporters of handball were thrilled when he came back to the alley some years ago. Ahead of this weekend's All-Ireland Masters A Doubles final against Antrim's Sean Devine and Seamus O Tuama, he hasn't had much time to practise but he says he's feeling good.

“Have I played much? Very little! I played twice before the semi-final and I played once since and that will be it before Saturday.

“I wouldn't be too bad fitness-wise. Obviously I had an illness for the last three years and it curtails me but in terms of weight and things like that, I'd still be in good shape. I'd still be able to serve the ball anyway!” he joked.

His love for the game runs deep and he has long pushed the benefits of handball as a complement to other games, especially hurling.

“I would say that in my opinion, it's the only two-sided sport that's out there. You can look at tennis, you can look at squash and hurling but you're using backhand and forehands in those sports so you're still basically playing with your strong hand. Whereas handball you have to be as good on your left side as on your right, whether that's on your feet or with your hands.

“And you have to think very, very quickly. In an hour on a football, hurling or rugby pitch, you might be on the ball for a minute in the course of the whole game and have a great game.

"If you're in a handball court and a game lasts an hour and a half, you're on that ball 50 per cent of the time."

By way of an example of the extraordinary conditioning needed to compete on the handball court, Carey tells a story against himself.

"I remember I had given up handball for 10 or 11 years because I couldn't continue both sports but I played a game when I was 32 or 33, maybe a year or two older, against Paul Brady, just an exhibition game.

"I was very fit, I was hurling at the highest level, and after about half a game I was ready to calve purely because it's different game completely, you're on the floor, in the air, backwards, sideways, everything is moving and it's very fast."

Handball followers of a certain vintage remember Carey as a gifted practitioner of the code, with great hands, fitness and the temperament of a born athlete. More than that, though, ask one of his contemporaries about Carey and they'll tell you he was a gentleman first, champion second.

True to form, his best memory in the game is not from his world or All-Ireland wins but from a match he actually lost on a night where he went toe-to-toe with the best player in the country and was only edged out on the line.

"I have a lot, I travelled to the States on many occasions. Obviously I won senior All-Irelands with Ducksy, I won juveniles and colleges. One of the memories for me was actually a loss. I remember Walter O'Connor won the 40x20 All-Ireland but he beat me in a Leinster final or semi-final and it was something like 21-20 or 21-19 in the third game.

"It was a very, very close game and it looked like I was going to win it. Obviously he was at the height of his powers, Peter McAuley, Ducksy and Walter were at their best that time and that was one of those two and a half, three-hour games.

"Look, I had ability but I was more of a 'frustrater' rather than a brilliant handballer per se. I'd pick and I'd pick and I'd pick and I'd stay going all day.

"My game was picking it and that's I suppose why I would have given the best players a really good game and players that wouldn't be so good would probably beat me."

Is it true that he ran Ducksy to close third games in county finals during that period? "We had great games," is all he will say.

"Again, I was fit, he was fit and we knew each other's game down to a T. Ducksy would keep the ball on the roof all day and so would I and it was a matter of who got the back wall shot, who flinched. Normally I flinched first but we would have had super games."

A precocious bunch of players arrived at the same time on Noreside and, as a child, DJ quickly became hooked.

“At that time handball was very, very strong at my age in Kilkenny. Lads like Mark Hayes, Eamon Law, lads like that were very, very good handballers.

“I won an U12 All-Ireland 60x30 All-Ireland in 1981 or 1982 and I remember we would have been pulling three or four All-Irelands in both courts at juvenile level each year.

“In the last couple of years the likes of Tyrone, Wexford, Clare have become very strong but at that time, Leinster was hugely strong and if you got out of Leinster, you had a great chance.”

Handball, like hurling, has moved on in recent years. The game has changed, although the old-timers can now 'hang with the kids' for longer than ever, a trend DJ has noticed.

“We'll be very much looking to win, absolutely. I honestly think – and I mean no disrespect to anybody from the past – that Masters players nowadays are very, very fit guys. Ducksy is 50 next week and I think if you were to go back 20 years, it was a different story because a guy coming to the end of his senior career, not many of them played on at a high level.

“It was often newer, fit guys that never really won much that came into Masters and started winning. Whereas now, you see fellas like Joe Hennesy and Johnny Brennan winning a lot, they're so fit for Over 55s. I think fellas are keeping themselves in much better shape than they did back years ago and that's not disrespecting anyone.

“Ducksy is still competing at the highest level in 60x30 and even in 40x20 he would be pretty much there even at Over 35 level. I would safely say there would be very few at U21 level and down that would beat him, which is testament to how well he looks after himself.”

Saturday will be about enjoying the game again, he insists, but for a natural competitor, the suspicion is there will be no quarter asked or given once the match serves off.

“I haven't seen the two Antrim boys but according to Ducksy they are a very good pair. At the end of the day, I'm at a stage in sport that, well, obviously we go out to try to win but we go out to try and enjoy it as much as possible as well.

“If I was the two boys I'd be pumping Duxie anyway because I think his left is weak, I'd be throwing no ball into me!” he joked.

“While it's very serious, I'm not at a level of fitness because of a lack of training but certainly we'll be giving it a good go. I'm looking forward to it.”

The feeling's mutual – welcome back, DJ.