

## Handball links to boxing, Hollywood and even NASA!

*By Paul Fitzpatrick*

**The summer of 1969 must have been a quiet one on the handball scene. On August 1 that year, the Irish Press reported that “the most interesting news for handballers in recent times” was the news that US astronauts heading for the moon were keen handballers.**

And – and bear in mind this was written on the first of August, not the first of April – readers were informed that “when the Americans decide to introduce sport to the moon, there is no reason to believe that it will not be handball.”

Jumping the gun a little bit, maybe. By the way, the killer line as the writer moved back into the general run of rounding up the results was quality: “Back in our own earthy courts this week-end there is a comparative lull...”

The full text of the article was as follows...

“The most interesting news for handballers in recent times has been the confirmation that many of the men involved in recent moon-shots have a dedicated interest in handball.

“Thomas Stafford and John Young of Apollo 10 fame are quite accomplished players and would rank in the top flight of the Big City competitors.

“Michael Collins of the Apollo n historic flight is perhaps the best of the three.

“He is the champion handballer at the Houston Base and makes no secret of the fact that handball is his favourite game.

“His last recreational exercise prior to blast-off was a rigid handballing work-out in the court. As a result of the handball prowess shown by the spacemen those with a serious interest in the game, are not beyond pointing out that when the American’s decide to introduce sport to the moon, there is no reason to believe that it will not be handball.”

Then again, handball has always been sprinkled with a little stardust. There's a Hollywood link that isn't often explored.



**Figure 1: John Young and Gene Cernan play Handball**

Handball has featured in tons of huge movies including – just from memory – Saturday Night Fever, Sleepers, Robocop, almost every prison movie (including the Birdman of Alcatraz) and many more.

In Flawless, Robert De Niro stars alongside Philip Seymour Hoffman and plays a retired hero cop who spends his days on the court. And Knockaround Guys was as close as we've come to an actual handball movie, with much of it filmed on location at the Coney Island courts in New York and a number of well-known American one-wallers coaching actors Dennis Hopper, John Malkovich and Barry Pepper.

Back in the 1920s, Harol Lloyd – a superstar comic actor who ranked alongside the likes of Charlie Chaplin – was a handball nut and built a court in his mansion in Hollywood.

Boxers, who also rub shoulders with A-listers by times, have embraced the sport, too.

Countless pugilists have tried out handball as part of their training, as any player who has visited the New York Athletic Club, where the walls are lined with photos of champs such as Rocky Marciano and Jack Dempsey playing handball, will know.

New footage has recently surfaced of fight legend Harry Greb playing handball, also (here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNE6V\\_RyBwg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNE6V_RyBwg)). And, in possibly the most famous handball publicity shot of all, Mike Tyson played the game in Las Vegas back in the 1980s.

Steve Lott, a personal friend of Tyson's who worked for Tyson's manager (and handball legend) Jim Jacobs, related the story a couple of years back of how Tyson, preparing to fight Tony Tucker in July, 1987, tried handball.