

Handball used to be widely played in South Africa

By Paul Fitzpatrick

It may come as a surprise to younger readers - or maybe even older readers - to learn that, a few decades ago, South Africa was a handball hotbed and was regarded as one of the strongest handballing nations in the world.

At one stage there were seven handball clubs in South Africa, where the game had been introduced by Irish priests and Christian Brothers and a GAA-crazy Irish family.

According to a report in *The Irish Press* on July 16, 1971, the game was first introduced to the country in the early 1930s. A prominent Irish family in Johannesburg, the Muldoons, sent their son Brendan to be educated at Knockbeg College in Carlow where, astonishingly, he was reputed to have introduced hurling.

When Brendan returned to South Africa, he brought handball with him, and a tradition was born and in 1935 an alley was built at the Village Main Native Mission.

The Oblate Fathers, who co-operated in the construction of the alley, showed an intense interest in the game and competed in the championships, the final of which were played on St Patrick's Day.

From 1935 to 1950, the ball-court at Village-Main was the happy meeting place for Irish immigrants and was the scene of some terrific duels.

Clubs were formed in Johannesburg, Germiston, Boksburg, Benons, Brakpar and Florida and leagues and championships were soon flourishing.

Writing, again in the *Irish Press*, in 1964, Sean Clerkin reported that the best South African juveniles were on a par with those in Ireland.

"Youth," he said, "has also taken to the handball code in a big way and indeed some of them would do themselves justice in our championships here at home.

Ray Wedon, for instance, can scotch-toss or butt a ball with the best, while P Canton and H Shedani, who is of Lebanese extraction, are also up to the same high standard.

"The reigning champions are R McInerney, B Kelleher, B Muldoon Jnr, V Pale, L Burns, B Solan, B Moore and G Coucoukarkis, who is of Greek origin.

Brendan Muldoon was honoured with an award that year by the Irish Handball Council in recognition of his services to the sport. The legendary journalist Pdraig Puirseal, in his column *All In A Day's Sport*, mentioned on January 25, 1964 how he had enjoyed a chance encounter with then-IHC president Joe Lynch

on the street. Lynch had informed him about the presentation to Muldoon and about further plans.

“Indeed,” wrote Puirseal, “it is hoped to send a couple of our own Irish handballers out there on a tour if present plans materialise.”

That was backed up in another contemporary newspaper report, which stated:

“South Africa will not compete in the World Series in New York this year [1964] but Mr Muldoon is hopeful that in a year or two, a couple of our top players will make the long journey to the country of his adoption to demonstrate their handballing skills.”

Handball, wrote Puirseal, was “flourishing” in South Africa at the time. So how is it now?