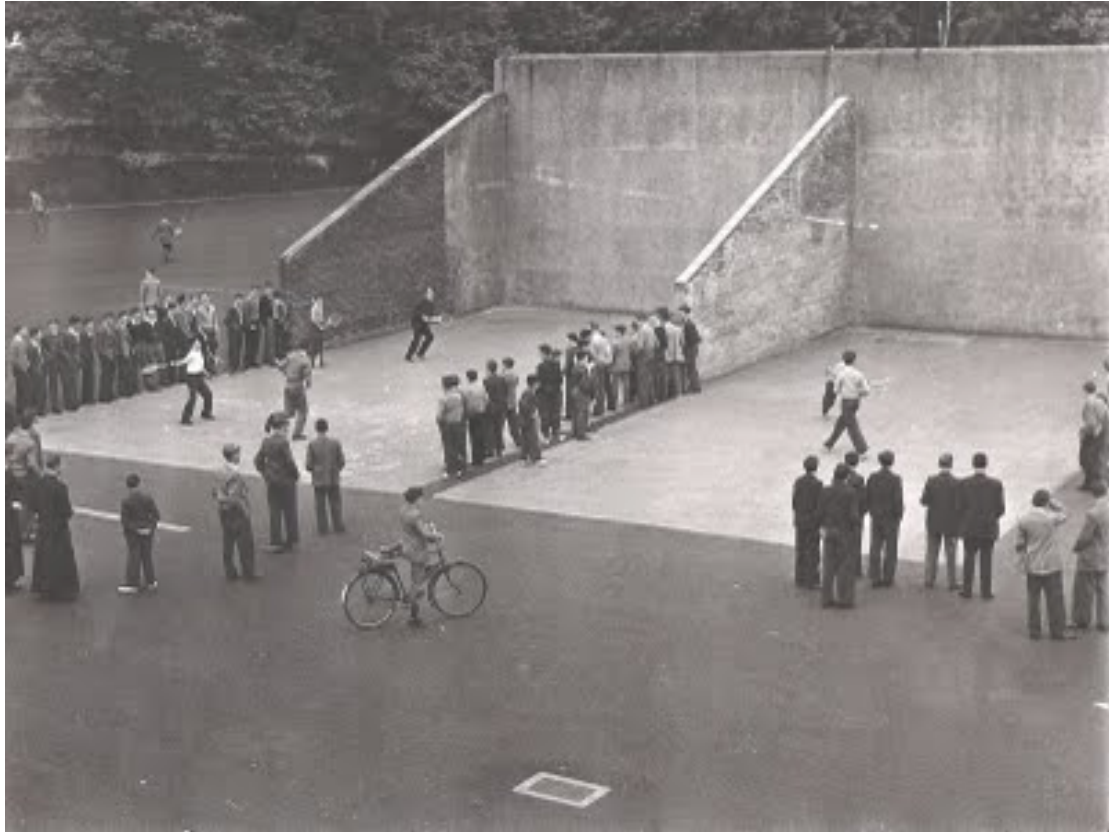


**Handball is primarily an indoors game now but its heyday was when it was played in the open air. Sometimes the past can provide clues for the future, writes Paul Fitzpatrick.**

From the outside, looking in, the following logic often applies to our sport: Handball shone briefly, brightly and brilliantly in the 1920s through to the '50s, and just as quickly faded away.



It's not strictly accurate, but like all clichés, there is a slight ring of truth. That was the golden age of the sport. How, then, did handball, relatively-speaking, slip off the radar?

Firstly, it must be noted that mass participation sport is a numbers game. Our sport was more popular in urban areas in the past than now but it has always been a game which thrived in the country, where there were little other sporting distractions other than football and hurling. That's where the tradition was strongest and that's also the area which was ravaged by emigration in the middle part of the 20th century.

Handball's decline in popularity from its accepted heyday coincided with rural Ireland haemorrhaging young people. And, as we have learned in recent times again, it is the best and brightest who often emigrate, those with the ambition and wherewithal to make a positive impact were they to remain at home.

Take Mayo – which is still a leading county in terms of handball membership – as an example. In 1926, the county had a population of approximately 172,000. By

1971, that figure, staggeringly, had dwindled to 109,000. It was a pattern replicated across the country.

That drop had a cataclysmic effect on the wellbeing of the Mayo region in general, as touched on by John Healy in his book *Nobody Shouted Stop*, which focused on his native Charlestown and even used the crumbling old ball alley as a metaphor.

It is no coincidence that Mayo footballers last won a senior All-Ireland in 1951, too – what proportion of the 63,000 fall-off were potentially top-class footballers is impossible to say, but we can presume many would have been. We can presume the same in regards to handball, too.

A scan through the archives of some of Ireland's local newspapers from the '20s through to the '50s makes for sombre reading for handball enthusiasts. At one point, barely a week went past without a note popping up somewhere regarding construction of new handball courts. There were dances to raise money, debates at local council meetings and pleas from concerned locals to get alleys up and running immediately.

Handball was, to quote Michael Cusack on the early years of the GAA itself, spreading across the country like a prairie fire.

In 1925, the now-defunct *Freeman's Journal*, for example, reported on the opening of a court at Clondalkin. "There are plenty of players in and around Dublin, and the more alleys there are, the better. They would all be kept going," read the article.

The following year, the *Longford Leader* reported on the opening of a new alley at Carrodoger, Newtowncashel. Two years later, one sprung up at Flood's Corner House in Terenure, then in 'county' Dublin. Soon there was a brand new court in Tuam, Co Galway, one at Kilgobnet in Cork and another in Bandon, where plans were afoot for a brand-new facility.

In 1930, the alley at Dunsoughlin was opened, too. Nine years later, a line in an *Anglo-Celt* report on the building of a court in Belcoo (on the Fermanagh-Cavan border) contained an eye-opening line which goes to show the prevalence of clubs at the time.

"A committee has been formed to collect funds to erect a ball alley in Belcoo — a long-felt want as there is no alley within a radius of 12 miles."

The tragedy is that not one of these areas is marked on the current handball map – every single one we have mentioned has dropped off the grid. The local interest that spurred committees to go to the trouble, in straitened times, to gather up the money to buy materials, find a site and construct an alley was very significant, but somewhere along the line, that light was dimmed.

In Ballymacarby, Co Waterford, for example, £250 was raised to build an alley in 1938, this at a time when unemployment in this country was hurtling towards 20

per cent. There was, then, huge interest at one point, so what – aside from the fall in population which negatively affected but did not decimate other sports – went wrong?

The only obvious answer is that the game went indoors. The late Tommy O'Brien told the tale on tape a couple of years ago of a group from Meath travelling to Kilkenny – or vice versa, I think – for a huge programme of games, only to spend the entire day sitting in their cars having been rained off.

That was the grain of sand that tipped the scales and a drive followed to move the sport indoors, which was a noble idea and essential given the vagaries of the Irish climate. Sadly, the price of progress was that handball didn't bring everyone with it.

After the explosion in popularity, came the slump. When the smoke cleared, handball had gone inside and with it went hundreds of living, breathing billboards. The clubs which hadn't the sufficient manpower or resources to upgrade were left behind – some caught up, others faded from sight.

The future of handball has to be inside, of course – that goes without saying. A push to re-establish some outdoor tournaments, though, could help provide some welcome publicity, providing there is room in an already-packed Clár.

I am not suggesting another All-Ireland but a competition between clubs to renovate existing outdoor alleys, many of which are not [open itals] that [close itals] far off being playable, could generate a significant buzz, and may even attract some funding from the various tourism or Tidy Towns authorities.



The golden age of handball is over – the game has changed and handball HQ is now rightly focusing on showcasing our elite players in order to capture the imagination of the next generation. It seems to be working, but it's important to remember the past. The outdoor game worked once and is thriving again in places like Inis Mor and Mount Talbot, which annually attract a few hundred players for weekend tournaments.

Imagine if just one venue per county were renovated and brought up to scratch – as PR goes, that would be the cheapest and most successful we could get, and would tick the 'hyper-local' box beloved of advertising gurus, too. Food for thought.