

Joey Maher: 'A moment in his time was a moment to savour'

By Paul Fitzpatrick

You've seen them around, these crumbling old theatres of concrete and stone. The countryside is dotted with them.



Joey Maher in action in his heyday. He brought back what he learned on his travels and changed the game.

We call them ball alleys and if walls could talk, they'd have some stories to tell about handball's golden age, when big tournaments could attract 1,200 players and the superstars truly were household names. And in that glorious period, for a couple of decades on from the 1950s, no star burned as brightly as Joseph Patrick 'Joey' Maher.

Born in Drogheda in 1934, Maher – who passed away suddenly a fortnight ago – was a man who could turn his hand to anything.

He was a painter, a handballer, a musician, a publican, a champion greyhound trainer and, in Canada, a cop.

As a young man, he would travel down the coast to places like Taghmon, Co Wexford to play. On the way home, he'd stop in Arklow, Gorey, Delvin or Kells; wherever he spotted a game going on, he'd join in and bedazzle the locals.

That was where he learned his trade, and he became a master. In 1964, he won his way to the play at the World Championships in the New York Athletic Club, a gleaming, world-class athletic facility overlooking leafy Central Park.

At home, the game was played in the old outdoor alleys; in the States, the courts were smaller, enclosed, air-conditioned and an alien world to the Irish players.

They were innocent times. Before he set off, his mother had read in **The Irish Press** that the handball courts were located on the 26th floor. As her son jumped

in a taxi for the airport, Mrs Maher, imagining a similar outdoor court to the one in Millmount where he learned to play, passed on a warning: “Don’t fall out of the handball alley, Joey.”

Maher excelled in the new code and, on his return, was contacted by Inspector Ed Chalmers of the Canadian Metropolitan Police Force. The Canadians would be hosting the 1967 Worlds and Chalmers liked what he saw. Would Joey, a married man and father of three at this stage, like to pack his gloves and move to Toronto, become a Mountie and try to win the Worlds for his adopted country?



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Sure, he said – but he promised his wife if he won it, they’d come back. And that’s how the Louth man ended up practising his overhand swing while directing traffic in Toronto.

Maher threw himself into this alien form of the game and excelled. He would win those 1967 World Championships, defeating top New Yorker Carl Obert in

straight games in the final, and, his mission accomplished, the following Spring, returned home.

Pat Masterson of Offaly, another top player of the era who regularly sparred with Maher, remembers how momentous it was for an Irish player to be the best in the world.

"It was a massive deal at the time because 40x20 was barely established in Ireland, there was a court in Oldtown in north Dublin and that was about it," recalls Pat.

"I remember reading the handball column in the paper the day he came back, the headline was 'Maher back for clean sweep!'" he said.

And he was.

And Joey brought back what he learned on his travels and changed the game.

"He was a great character but he was utterly determined. He brought a lot of those shots into 60x30 when he came home which made him even more difficult to play against. He was my hero at the time."

By then, Maher was 35. He would win senior All-Irelands from 1968-70 but the cavalry were coming. Maher, though, wouldn't go gently.

His final senior victory came in 1973 when, nearing 40, he tore up the script to defeat Mayo's Brian Colleran in the final, **The Irish Independent**

reporting that "the all- conquering Maher made a mockery of age".

That autumn, he was part of an Irish team which travelled to San Francisco for a challenge series. Knowing Maher and Clare's Pat Kirby were coming, the locals drafted in the best they could muster from all over the States, including their best player, Paul Haber.

"The inclusion of Haber would in terms of, say, golf, be akin to an American club inviting Jack Nicklaus to play with their team because a visiting Irish side included Christy O'Connor," noted The Cork Examiner in the build-up.

That was Maher's standing in the game.

His grit and determination were legendary and in stark contrast to his relaxed demeanour outside the court.

"Dad was never nervous, he was always confident and he never gave up," remembers his son Michael.

"He played Des Dillon in a Leinster final in the old alley at the back of Hill 16. At the time, hardball was the best of seven games and he lost the first three.

"But Dad dug in and ended up winning the next four. After the game, Dillon had to be carried out of the alley. Dublin were playing a football match there the same day and the stewards, who knew Dad, were directing cars and they had to help prop Des up against a wall, he was that tired. And they were joking with him, saying 'Jesus, Joey, what did you do to Dillon?'"

When his time in senior handball was up, he began to coach the next generation with great success and to enter the overage divisions, where he dominated here and abroad. Into his 50s, he was still, incredibly, a match for the best players.

Michael Finnegan, who would himself become established as a senior star, remembers playing Maher in training in 1991, with Finnegan preparing for the U15 Singles at the World Championships in Arizona.

“Joey was in his late 50s at the time but he could still play. He had the craft, he could spin the ball – he could make you look foolish,” recalls the Cavan star who would go on to win that world title. “He was a great player and a lovely man who gave an awful lot back to the game.” By then, though, while still involved in his first love, Maher had branched out to other interests.

He had always sang and, in Canada, learned to play rhythm guitar (“he was no Jimi Hendrix!” laughs Michael) and soon, the Maher Family Band were playing to sell-out crowds.

In 1976, they travelled to the UK and won Opportunity Knocks, the X Factor of its time. A few years later, Maher would appear on the Late Late Show, talking about his career. His was truly a life less ordinary.

Such was his popularity in his home town that, in 2008, Maher was honoured with a life-sized sculpture at Scotch Hall, overlooking the Boyne. It was his proudest moment.

And the local Drogheda Independent cleared their front page for him in the week of his death.

“Never has Drogheda produced such a man, such an inspiration as Joey Maher,” wrote Hubert Murphy.

“A moment in his time was a moment to savour, stories would abound of past glories, of Millmount playing days, of great matches and clashes, of Irish and world titles, the Mountie, the policeman, the decorator, the sportsman, the king.”