

## Kerry Legend Paddy Downey

By Paul Fitzpatrick

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**The passing of Kerry handball legend Paddy Downey severs a link with a golden era for the sport in the Kingdom.**

From 1951 to 1973, Kerry handballers won 23 All-Ireland senior titles, with Tralee man Downey – who passed away yesterday in his 90th year - accounting for 17 of those. Operating

in the same era as legends such as John Ryan, Joey Maher and Fintan Confrey, Downey established himself as one of the very best players in the country. Downey won the All-Ireland Senior Softball Singles in 1958 and 1961 and landed the Senior Hardball Singles in 1958, '59 and '60 and again in 1962.

He also won 11 senior doubles titles, 10 with Jimmy O'Brien (seven in softball) and one with former Tipperary player Joe Hassett in hardball, a native of Nenagh who was a key figure in the growth of the sport in Tralee.

Downey and O'Brien's five in a row of Senior Softball Doubles crowns equalled the record which had been set by Hassett and his brother Ned in the Premier colours back in the 1930s.

A member of the famous Jones-Fitzgerald club in Tralee, Downey was a compositor in the now defunct Kerry Champion newspaper as a young man. Some of his colleagues also played handball and would practise by striking the ball against the big typeface letters they used for printing posters. He started



playing against the gable wall of little cottages on the Strand Road in Tralee before the regulation alleys were constructed in The Green in the mid to late 1940s.

Downey's father was a native of Mitchelstown, Co Cork. Paddy started playing handball off O'Keeffe's Gate in Rock St in Tralee and Perry Connor's corner in his native Caherina in Strand Road. That was before the alleys were built by the local town council in the mid-1940s.

He developed his fitness running on Banna Strand and was a phenomenal competitor. One contemporary report refers to his "indomitable will".

"Many of the game's experts agree that Downey's greatest asset is his unwilting spirit and extraordinary powers of recovery," stated his local paper, The Kerryman. Downey's first breakthrough was when he won junior softball honours with clubmate Tim Comanne in 1951, the same year he won the junior handball singles in an unforgettably close final against Des Dillon.

Paddy remained involved in the sport after retiring from senior handball, teaming up with O'Brien to win the Masters All-Ireland in 1972 and later playing a key role in ensuring there would be handball facilities in the sports centre in Tralee.

In 2000, he deservedly was honoured with the Irish handball Hall of Fame award.

GAA Handball wishes to express their condolences to the friends and family of the late Paddy Downey, especially his children. Paddy was the beloved husband of the late Maureen and dear father of Miriam (Foley), Aeda (Sugrue) and the late Gerard.

He is sadly missed by his loving family, his grandchildren Garrett, Audrey, Eithne, Sorcha, Ian, Janna, Laura, Jane and Gary, great-grandchildren Chloe, Luke, Emily, Ava, Ryan, Críoa, Eliza & Alex, brother John, nephews, nieces, sons-in-law Frank & Nelius, sister-in-law Anne (Sayers), relatives, neighbours and friends.



**Photo Caption:**

From left: TB Kennedy, Paddy Downey, Rev Canon Carroll, Jimmy O'Brien and Jack Killackey.

Photograph was taken at Ballypatrick, Co Tipperary in 1956 at the All-Ireland final of the senior softball doubles when Downey and O'Brien beat John Ryan and John Doyle of Wexford.