

Michael 'Ducksie' Walsh was a champion to his fingertips

By Paul Fitzpatrick



If you're a handball nut, you'll know the drill well. Taxi drivers, blowhards, wannabes and never-weres – they all sound the same, familiar chorus. They hear 'handball' and two comments follow. "Great game, that, pity there's not more coverage" and then, sure as a flat roll-out from 50 feet, "yer man Ducksie Walsh was the best, wasn't he?"

That he was. There will never be another like Ducksie, the sport's greatest icon, a household name whose life story reads like something from a Hollywood script.

And he railed against that perceived lack of media exposure when he got the chance, right up until the end. A fortnight before he took ill on the way home from a tournament in Cavan, he was on local radio in Kilkenny, hitting out at just that.

It was bitterly ironic, then, that, in death, Ducksie was celebrated and garnered the column inches his astonishing achievements on the court did not. In boxing, they say the greats never come back but Ducksie defied the norm, in every sense.

In 2000, still at the peak of his powers and with 14 All-Ireland 60x30 Senior Singles medals in his pocket, he told this newspaper he was hanging up his gloves.

"I have been retiring since last year, ended up coming back this year but this is definitely my last," he insisted. But the sport of the chase is hard to resist and there followed an extraordinary postscript to his career.

He would be crowned king of the big alley on two more occasions but, off the court, alcohol had him in its grip.

One morning in 2001, he awoke with fresh cuts and bruises on his face and no memory of how he received them. It was a moment of clarity; he checked in to

the Aiséirí Treatment Centre across the county boundary in Tipperary, became sober and rededicated himself to the sport he had come to define. In time, too, he would raise in excess of €100,000 for charities, including Aiséirí.

Michael Walsh was born in May, 1966, in 'The Butts' in Kilkenny City, in the shadow of St Canice's Church. His father, Sean, was a security guard; his mother, Vera, who died earlier this year, raising 'Ducksie' and his seven siblings. Inspired by his first cousin, Billy Bourke, he started playing handball on the old outdoor, corporation courts near his home as a nine-year-old rogue who had followed the familiar Noreside path to hurling, only he sent off in his first juvenile game and hang up the camán. Hurling's loss was handball's gain; soon, he had joined the famed Talbot's Inch club and, under the tutelage of local schoolteacher Tommy O'Brien, he began to Hoover up every title in the game.

O'Brien famously bought a little cup and his protégés would play off for it each week. The winner got the silverware for a few days and, more importantly, their name in the local paper.

Soon, then, whispers about Ducksie – the sobriquet, often misspelled, was inherited from his father and older brothers – spread, first around Kilkenny and then to the various handballing outposts around the country.

There had never been a talent as precocious. In 1984, he won the minor All-Ireland, won the junior to earn his passage to the Promised Land of senior ranks and, for good measure, reached the last four of the Senior Singles. The following year, he won his first senior title and he would go unbeaten for the next 13. When he was finally toppled in 1998, he came back and won three more in succession.

In doubles, usually with Eugene Downey or hurling star DJ Carey riding shotgun, he won every honour and he finished with 38 senior All-Ireland medals, countless American titles as well as a handful of world gongs.

And this alley Cat's claws were sharp. If he could beat you 21-0, he would. Not out of spite; that's just how he was programmed, a champion to his fingertips.

And while his conditioning was legendary ("he must have been the fittest 50-year-old in the country," remarked Paul Brady), he was a master craftsman on the court, a slave to the lonely hours, perfecting his touch.

"It's not about strength or how fast you get around, it's about technique," he once explained. "I write with my left hand and I brush my teeth with my left hand and hit a hammer with my left hand but I serve a ball with my right – I made sure my right was as good as my left." Having foregone the drink 15 years ago, he trained harder than ever with the result that, at 50, he could still hang with the big guns, and more.

In late July, at the inaugural Irish 60x30 Singles Nationals - a sort of warm-up for the championship - in his home court, he defeated number one-ranked Eoin Kennedy of Dublin in the final.

It was a result which stunned the close-knit handball world. When the official Irish 60x30 rankings were released just days before he passed, he was in at number two. It beggared belief.

“Ducksie was the ultimate combination of incredible skill and incredible determination and will to win,” Kennedy would say, shaking his head, in the hours after Walsh’s death – and that about summed it up.

This correspondent can vouch for it. Ducksie was always on the go, training, competing, coaching; owner of a thriving fitted kitchens business, he spent a lot of time on the road and would often train in Kingscourt, Co Cavan.

He usually sparred with local star Michael Finnegan but, on occasion, when he was very badly stuck, he’d call one of the lesser local players. The first day his number flashed up on the phone, (“Hello Paul, is it? Ducksie here...”), my immediate reaction was it had to be a prank.

But soon the word was made flesh and I was in the court with a handball God, who could make an opponent look and feel foolish, serving the ball with vicious spins and running the likes of me – a vastly inferior player – ragged. Within a few minutes, the legs were burning, lungs screaming for mercy. Ducksie, well into middle age, could do that to you at his ease. And then he’d grin and in his nasal twang, tell you where you went wrong.

He was a likeable rogue, always up to devilment, complaining, jesting, having the craic. His remarkable longevity (“It’s incredible to think that I had won three of my 16 titles by the time he was born,” he was quoted on these pages before a 2010 semi-final against Robbie McCarthy) was just one aspect of his enduring legend.

A enormous crowd, including hurling greats like Brian Cody, Eddie Keher, James McGarry et al, descended on Bennettsbridge for his funeral last Saturday.

Carey – who, grief-stricken, had posted online that he had just lost his “best friend” - delivered the eulogy.

He was laid out holding a handball between his fingers, gloves on his chest, surrounded by hundreds of trophies, medals and plaques.

That was just a fraction of what he won – in recent years, he had taken to giving them away to kids. His late mother held on to the rest.

“I don’t keep anything. I wouldn’t have any meas on them. They wouldn’t mean a whole lot to me. Only to win would be the thing,” he said in 2007.

A fitting epitaph for the greatest ball-alley magician of them all.