

My Handball Life: Eddie Corbett

6th May 2020

Paul Fitzpatrick spoke to two-time All-Ireland 4-Wall Senior Singles champion Eddie Corbett from Tipperary to look back on his long association with the game.



Q: Can you tell me about your introduction to the game and your first major breakthrough?

A: When I was playing, there was no intermediate so you just went from minor to junior, or novice although we weren't in novice ourselves.

The funny thing was the step-up from junior to senior wasn't that big back then. I remember Walter O'Connor and John Grant beating myself and Billy McCarthy in a junior doubles semi-final... Sure Walter was as good as most seniors, the following year he was probably in the senior final. The standard was ferocious.

John O'Donoghue and myself won the junior and the following year then jumped up and won the senior, which was kind of... you'd find it very hard now to believe you could do it. There wasn't much difference in standard between top seniors and top juniors at the time. I remember O'Donoghue and myself playing a junior doubles final against Robbie McCarthy and Jim Gilfoyle, it went to three games and we were absolutely flat out, we were lucky actually to win it.

And then the following year we went on and won the senior. Now we did have a bit of luck in winning that senior. I think Tom Sheridan got injured and we ended up playing O'Connor and McGovern in the semi-final. Of course, O'Connor wasn't a bad replacement but it was enough that McGovern had lost Sheridan. We actually were very lucky to beat them that night.

You could win all the minors or juniors but the Holy Grail was to win the senior. After that, winning in America became a big thing but we didn't have the American outlet as much as the players who came after. We were focused on the All-Ireland.

In the '90s and late '80s, international travel wasn't that prominent for handball. The World Championships were gone at that stage, there was nothing really going on. I remember there was a big push for the Worlds in 1994, Caimin Jones was heavily involved, they held the Masters grades in Clare and they made a massive job of it. The Worlds were very limited up to that, it was for the elite players and then that time they opened it up a bit.

I remember trying to qualify for the Worlds in Australia in '88. I was way off the radar per winning the top grade coming up along. I won an U15 with Michael Keneally but I had no hope of winning an U16, I got to an U16 All-Ireland final in the small alley, doubles, but we were well beaten and we were hammered in the Munster final in the big alley in U16 doubles by Eamon O'Neill and Niall O'Brien. Hammered us.

I never won an U14, U16 or minor. When you look back at the roll of honour, anyone who can win an U14 or U16, if he can come on and improve and keep playing, he is your possible senior champ. It was like the story that Tony Breen did on Brian Gilhooley, how he was the first player to win an U17 and come through to win a minor. For me, it would have been a very strange thing not to win an U14, U16 or minor singles or doubles in softball or 40x20 and go on then to win a Senior Singles.

Q: So you didn't have a stellar underage career?

A: When I look at it, I was a late developer. Even though I was playing handball at 11 or 12 but we only had handball or football and it was football I was at all the time.

I lived in a village, now there are so many different sports, we only had football, hurling and handball. I was living very, within 50 yards, of the ball alley and there would have been a good handball club there but juvenile activity was limited.

They ran a tournament every year for juveniles, that was it. A few of us started to play and then the tournament came up and we were asked to play. But sure we used to go down to play the likes of Cashel in the county semi-final, or the South final we'll call it. And Cashel, under the auspices of Pat O'Donoghue and Albert Carrie, they were so strong.

If you beat Cashel, you could nearly win the All-Ireland. They were so far ahead of us with juveniles. That would have been John's father Pat and Mikey Carrie's father. They were phenomenal and if you could beat Cashel you could nearly win the All-Ireland. In my club growing up, the likes of Dermot Wall, Paddy Macken would have been great helps to us. They were in their 50s that time, we would be going down playing games.

Myself and my mate, we won the county U14 and then the following year there was an U15 in the big alley and we got a run in Munster, every game was an All-Ireland final. That's what kind of started it. Going up to Tuamgraney and these places, we thought it was the end of the world. We actually ended up playing in Croke Park and it was a frightening experience. I was playing the right wall and we ended up playing the U15 doubles against Kilkenny.

I was going to secondary school then in Mitchelstown and Brother Gill had built two new 40x20 courts and we used to go up there every day at lunchtimes and that drive us on more. But I still wasn't at any great level, I wasn't a Tony Healy or a Brady or Eoin Kennedy, Walter O'Connor, Ducksy...

But it followed on then. Tipperary was wicked strong with juveniles with the likes of Cashel and Fethard. When I was 16 there was a trial in the county. The county minor singles champion needed a partner for the doubles so there was a trial. I had been well beaten in the U16 but I was allowed into the minor trial and I just said I'd go for it, to see who would partner John O'Donoghue.

John Woodlock was there, he had beaten Egin Jensen in an U16 final, but he wasn't playing much, he was starting to go off the boil. There was John, Willie Dwyer, and myself, and I won that trial and got me playing with John O'Donoghue. That changed things a bit for me because I started going to Cashel a lot more, playing more games and the training was more formal. We won the minor hardball doubles around then and after that we were left together because we started to shoot up.

I was never playing singles, I wasn't at that level I suppose, so I used to concentrate on the doubles. We jumped up to U21 and we won a lot at that age group and then we went on and won the junior. But I was never able to win the singles. In '89 we won the junior softball doubles against Willie Pratt and Pearse O'Keeffe above in Croke Park and the following year then we won the junior 40x20 and we won that and got to senior.

But around that time then, handball was enticing me more to get better and I wanted to play more singles and get better. I'll tell you where I was ranked in singles now... Gavin Buggy had a programme up the other day from the Pat Devanney tournament and in the very first round I met Peter McAuley. He was ranked two or three and I think there were 24 in it so I was ranked about 20th. And that's where I was ranked.

Q: But you began to climb up the rankings around then.

A: The following year then, we were training away and we had that epic semi-final against O'Connor and McGovern. In the Munster final we beat Kerry in another three-gamer and in the semi-final we met Meath. McGovern was a phenomenal right-wall player. To me, Sheridan was the best doubles player I ever played against but they were still excellent. I remember we won the first game in Ballyporeen and then the court got wet and we moved to Cashel.

We won the first game handy but we lost the second game and they were about 16-7 or 16-8 up in the third. I was digging at O'Connor trying to unnerve him, I always felt you could but for raw talent, O'Connor was exceptional. He was unbelievably talented. We won that game then 21-19 and that put us into the senior doubles final against Silcock and Maguire. Now, even though it was our first senior final, we were confident and we did beat them after.

But again, I know we always look back at great players and talk about the likes of Ducksy, McAuley and O'Connor but I would always have admired the likes of Silcock or Francie McCann, these guys. They mightn't have won seniors but they were rally good players. Silcock had an unbelievable game, to me he was the best player inside the short line in the small alley that I have seen. Outside, he wasn't as good so you had to keep him back. For a runner and determination, Francie McCann was an unbelievable man to drain everything out of his body. They didn't get their rewards but they had pure love and the joy of wanting to win.

That was the same for me, it was the wanting to be the best I could be. For me, that started to kick in when we got into the '90s, it was itching at me all the time to be the best I could. Could I get better, could I improve, get up to be as good as the top players, the likes of Tony Ryan, Tommy O'Rourke, Tom Morrissey. I used to play a few games with Morrissey and Ryan, especially big alley, and it was itching at me, how far could I get.

In '92 then, we got beaten in the final. O'Donoghue got a very bad back injury at work and I was snookered then. I was at a stage where I was playing a bit of singles but my main avenue had been to do as well as possible in doubles but I was down the field in the singles.

Next thing he was gone and I was left with singles. I started playing a bit more singles. I remember I played Ducksy at the opening of a court in Ballinahinch and Ducksy destroyed me. Destroyed me now, I didn't make it past 10 in either game.

I remember thinking, where could I go from here. And there was a guy in Ballyporeen at the time, a guard. I had met him a few times and let's just say he was way ahead of his time. His name was Liam O'Reilly. And he said 'can't you go training with us?' – he had a few lads he would go training with. I asked a few lads what they thought and I was told to keep away from him, he'd ruin me.

But these guys were club players whereas he thought you should train professionally even if you were trying to win a junior county football championship. Anyway, he had a few lads he would train with and I said I would give it a go. And it all started to come together. John was gone so I really had no doubles partner and I was left on my own. I ended up starting to train with O'Reilly around I suppose the late 91 season, around November. I had played Ducksy that time and was well beaten. I started training with your man a couple of weeks after losing that game.



We went out for a four-mile run in 30 minutes and I came back in and I fell down on the ground. I fell down on the footpath and I couldn't get up. I looked at him and said 'Liam, I'm wrecked, I just can't do it'... That was the level of fitness we were at.

When I look at my diaries and look back, the improvement was phenomenal. He said to me 'now you know what it's like to train, either you come back the next night or forget about it'. I was iffy enough but I said I'd come back anyway, I wasn't going to give in. So I came back the next night and we trained and trained and trained. That was November. By Christmas, I was doing four miles no bother, bringing it down to about 26 minutes.

Q: This was the start of you training extremely hard then.

A: Yeah, things were changing, this was becoming almost professional style training. I was a blocklayer at that time and what I did was, get up in the morning, go to work, come home, eat my dinner, train and go to bed. That was it, there was no other thing happening. We would have been doing road running, circuits, sprints, handball. Now, he totally left the handball side of things up to me.

So the '92 season started, I had no doubles partner and I ended up playing singles. The gas thing about it was, Ducksy was after being beaten in the Leinster Championship, McAuley wasn't there – O'Connor was there in the final. And I always talk to Walter about this and he smiles about it. It was the only year O'Connor won the senior singles in the 40x20 and it was the only year, in my mind, that he trained properly for it.

O'Connor had a personal trainer that year and I always say to him, 'you fecker you, if you didn't train as hard that year I'd have beaten you'. We often smile about it. But O'Connor was in fabulous shape that year. I saw a picture of him getting his medal from Sean McEntee recently and if you look at him, he was in great shape, phenomenal shape.

We met in Roscommon, it went probably two and a half hours. O'Connor won the first one 21-17, I was a bit naïve because he had a lot more experience than me. In the second game, I drove on and won about 21-15 but O'Connor beat me well in the third. But when I look back at it, I still hadn't the programme right. We had too much fitness but we needed more handball. Even after that final, I remember saying I got caught because I hadn't enough handball done. We were so caught up with training on all physical aspects that handball was pushed back to two nights a week.

That was '92, I can't remember did I play big alley that year to tell you the truth. I used to love the big alley as much as the small alley but the small alley was a long season. It started with the Golden Gloves in October and you'd finish in May. For the good years that I was there, I used to go to America and the issue was I'd be playing small alley until June and then going into the big alley and I used to find it very difficult to cross over.

The '93 season then, I was all out to win it. I would never play much of O'Connor, McAuley or Ducksy. Ducksy used to ring me looking for training games and I'd say no way. Ducksy would be too cute, he'd be trying to figure out my plan, how I played, how fast I was after getting or things like that. O'Connor at tournaments would be all drama, all family, but I enjoyed him. And McAuley was brilliant, an educated player. Serve and kill. I found it so difficult to play him. I rate him as one of the best I've seen. There were great players there and they were very difficult to beat.

So the '93 season started and I lost my job after Christmas. But I didn't go looking for a job. What I decided to do was sit back and suffer it out and give a period of time to see how far I could go in the senior. I held out and trained and trained and trained and put more emphasis on the handball, more emphasis on the skill. I knew that I was weak on aspects of the game and I worked on them, I played and played and trained.

I would have played in the morning and went training in the evening, or I'd go to the pool in the morning. Remember, this was back in the '90s, we didn't even have mobile phones. If you look at it, McAuley and Ducksy might have been at it, O'Connor was after falling out with personal trainer and he dropped a level of fitness from the '92 season. But he was still there with raw talent.

I had the easier side of the draw they would always say but I had dodgy fellas, fellas that I should have beaten by then but they'd be out to get you. I used to play John Herlihy from Cork and Niall Breen, John Donlon, Brendan O'Brien from Kerry. Pure dicey fellas to be meeting, they'd be out to get you if they could. I met Ducksy in the semi-final. You were always hoping you wouldn't be playing Ducksy in Ballymore Eustace or Garryhill or Talbot's Inch. You might say, what difference is that going to make? To us, it made a massive difference. Ducksy would have trained in those courts a lot.

In the '93 semi-final, it ended up a home and away system and Ducksy had to play me at a Munster venue and the venue was Cashel. There was a phenomenal crowd there, for an All-Ireland semi-final, it was jam-packed. David Maloney played Martin Lalor in the junior singles semi-final and the court got wet. Ducksy says to me 'we'll have to play it, we'll have to play it, I'm going to America Tuesday'.

I can picture it now, exactly the way it panned out. I had returned to work at this stage, I had to go back, I had no money, it was as simple as that. I was working that day and I remember it was raining. I said to Ducksy 'I don't mind, whatever you want to do' but in the back of my mind I was mad to beat him. I'd say when he said we have to play it, where will we play it. I was relaxed out because I thought it wasn't going to be played, I thought it would be called off. Next thing Ducksy started saying it had to be played and I said 'grand' and we ended up going out to the Horse and Jockey to play it. On the night I played extremely well and I beat Ducksy in two straight.

I remember speaking to Walter after and he said when they heard the news, they couldn't believe it. There was no social media and they got a phone call and they thought some fella was only acting the fool. At the time, though, I would have felt I was up there, I was close. So I had to play Francie McCann in the final and I always had this thing in my head, I would have taken issue with each player. If I was playing Paul Fitzpatrick, I'd have said to myself 'hold on a minute now, that Paul Fitzpatrick, he's f**king Cavan, I have to beat him'...

I'd have looked at what you would have said and I'd be determined to nail you. I'd want to knock the smirk off their faces. And I remember Francie doing an interview with the Irish Press and he said the best chance he had of winning a senior was this year because Ducksy was out. Well, that drove me mad. Drove me mad!

So we played the final above in Roscommon and I beat him under 10 in both. So that was my senior singles won, that was the Holy Grail for me. If you look back at all the senior champions, there's only so many, you're only talking about 20 champions I'd say since the inception of it, since Pat Kirby's time.

Q: You began to play in America then.

A: That was '93. I was talking to Tony Ryan about going to America and I got a grant off the sports council. I decided to go to the US Nationals in Baltimore and I played the Pro Singles and the Open Singles which I won, that was a step below the Pro.



Seosamh Ó Loinsigh (former Riarthóir) pictured with Eddie Corbett (left), U.S. Open Singles Champion and Pearse O'Keeffe, U.S. 'B' Singles Champion.

The one thing I found about America was that the field was very strong. For me to make the round of 16 would have been a great achievement, to make the last eight... If you look at the likes of Ducksy and McAuley, they weren't even going very much that time because the field was so strong, it was so hard to make the last eight.

The top 12 or 13 were phenomenal players. Chapman was coming, you had Bike, Alavarado, Munoz, Morones, Silveyra, Armijo, Bell, John Robles. I remember playing Robles in 93, his right hand was quite poor but his left hand – the ball was coming like a rocket! Today's fields in America are so, so low and it's a pity. Handball needs to have the Americans strong again so that we can have that competition, that we don't have Ireland versus Ireland in everything because that doesn't add up to me.

It's nice to have a world or US final that's US versus Ireland or Canada. If it's Ireland versus Ireland, to me it takes away from it a bit.

Q: Can you tell me then how the rest of your senior career played out?

In '94, I won the Senior Singles again and I was Handballer of the Year that year and then in the '95 final, McAuley beat me 21-19 in the third game in the final in Nenagh, I was going for three-in-a-row. We had a clinker of a game, two and a half to three hours. McAuley deserved to win it I think.

Liam O'Reilly had moved on, he was stationed in Cork but and I was still training away very, very hard. I was unlucky, I could have sneaked it in the end, I came from about 19-12 down in the third to level it at 19-all and I had a couple of chances but in fairness to McAuley, he was just starting to come really good.

He had always been in Ducksy's shadow but he seemed to have got that extra confidence because he had got the better of Ducksy. He always had a fear of O'Connor, O'Connor always had that upper hand on him but O'Connor was focusing more on the 60x30 to see could he knock Ducksy off his perch. McAuley got tough draws, he used to be drawn to play O'Connor in a Leinster semi-final and then he'd have to meet Ducksy in the final. He had to beat the two of them just to get out of Leinster which was very hard.

Ducksy beat me well in the '96 final. I was still training very well but I played Ducksy in Ballymore Eustace and he had the upper hand that day. The '97 season, I started to train again, I did a month's training and I said 'no more of this'. My interest had dwindled and I just said I'm not going to play the '97 season... And the county board never said a word to me, no-one ever asked me a question. That was probably the beginning of the end. I suppose when I look back, the '91 senior doubles final with O'Donoghue was amazing, it was amazing to win that up in Croke Park. The '93 and '94 senior singles were phenomenal, that was what I wanted to achieve.

Going to the US and taking part in the US Nationals was a highlight. A few of us went in '93 and there had been no Irish player at the US Nationals in years. Four or five of us went out that year, paid our way out. The following year then we went to the University of Minneapolis, another fabulous centre.

In '95, we won the senior hardball doubles. I still had an ongoing problem of having no partner and I remember the county board asking me would I play with Noel Ryan.

Noel was a brother of Tony Ryan, a great player, really hard hitter. And I said 'yeah, sure I will'. He was playing the left hand side and some people would have told me not to bother because I wouldn't be able to dominate as much from the right.

At the time, the hardball was still quite competitive. We beat Tom Sheridan and Egin Jensen in the final in the Garda Depot and I have to say it was a very enjoyable win.

Noel Ryan stepped out of the shadows of Tony a bit that night, Tony was always the top man but that night Noel played extremely well.

I remember walking over to him, it was a game each, and I said to him 'you f**kin' better keep going, you better hit that ball so hard that you're going to blow down that front wall' and he said 'I will, I will, I won't leave you down'.

I remember we were constantly playing Jensen and he was coming into the game and causing us wicked trouble by then. I remember my brother John was with me and he came over. John would have always followed me and always played.

John said to me 'how are ye going?' 'Jesus, John,' I said, 'we're in right bother. Jensen is coming into it.'

And he just said 'why don't ye play Sheridan? He's bound to be cold now. He got nom play whatsoever.'

I said 'maybe you're right John' and we went in and started playing the ball to Sheridan and we beat them in the third. I'd say it unnerved the Meath lads a little bit and probably was the winning of that final.

For me, it was an enjoyable game to win. It was the lesser of the three All-Irelands but it was a different partner and to beat Sheridan and Jensen was a mammoth achievement and it was great for Noel to win it. The way his health deteriorated after, I always think back to that win... We always had an affinity after.

We came back the following year and tried to win it again but we didn't win it. That year, Noel Ryan was probably the driving force. He trained so hard to win it.

I know the hardball has dwindled now. I would say hardball then was like softball now, it's starting to fade a bit. It's still being played by a good lot of people but it's the lesser of all the codes of handball.

And that's how I look at it. When I was coming up in minor, hardball would have a few entries in Munster and then you'd have the All-Ireland series. To win the senior hardball with Noel, and it was my last senior medal, I appreciate it.

To win the four seniors was nice. My family had a lot to do with it, my grandfather always encouraged me to keep up the handball and my mother and father were such a driving force.

In my local club, Dermot Wall was a great influence.

I used to train a good bit with Paddy Hickey, he won a lot of seniors, and Tom Brady. Hickey won five seniors and he was a great influence on me, he had pure raw talent. He was one of the great players of the 60s, he was only four miles down the road and had given up handball but he ended up coming back when we were playing and playing a bit of Masters.

Those four wins were the highlight. To see how far I could get, how much better I could get.

Caimin Jones used to say I was the worst U15 he ever saw! And he would be smiling at me.

Jones came to the 94 US Nationals, he was promoting the Worlds that time and came with us and gave us great encouragement, we had a great laugh. He would have seen me playing as an U15 in Tuamgraney, I was nervous as bedamned, and he used to say to me, you were the worst U15 I ever saw – you didn't turn out too bad after! We had a great laugh.

I'll tell you another funny story. After the '92 final, O'Connor turned to me. He was delighted after winning the final and I was like a devil of course after losing it. I hadn't the experience or the work done to win it and Walter deserved to win it.

He turned and asked me would we swap jerseys. At that time, we had to buy our own jerseys. But we swapped the jerseys anyway and I still have the Meath jersey at home in my house.

A few months after O'Connor came on to me and he said 'Christ, Corbett, I was a fair man to beat you. I went training one night down to Kells with Sheridan and them and when I went to put on the old

Tipperary jersey, I couldn't get it over my head, it wouldn't fit me!' And he said he had to play with no jersey. We had to laugh.

Q: What the scene like in the county that time and what sort of players did you like to watch?

A: Tipperary would have been strong anyway. Mick Tyrell would have been very much involved and he would have been very kind to us, very good to us, even though we weren't from his club or anything but he was a really loyal handball man and he ended up as President after. Really kind and considerate, a real handball man.

Tipperary was wicked strong that time. Tipperary town was very strong with Willie Fitzgibbon, Tom O'Mara, Sean Callaghan. You'd be talking about the likes of Clonmel with Tom Morrissey, the Mullins's, then you'd have Noel Ryan and Tony Ryan...

I would have looked up to all them and as it went on I was looking at international players. I was at a final in 1994 with Silveyra and Chapman, it was one of the best games I've ever seen.

Silveyra was down 6-0 in the tiebreaker against Chapman after losing the second and came back and beat him 11-6, he rolled ball after ball. It was just unbelievable. Chapman was in bits after losing it.

I rate Brady very, very highly, one of the best 40x20 players. I loved the style of Alvarado, the cuteness of Chapman. The speed of Munoz, the trickery of Morones, these kind of guys. The power of Bike – I remember playing him in 95, we went to the US with the Irish juvenile team and Bike was there working for the USHA and we played a few games. The power of him was awesome.

Poncho Monreal and Jon Kendler, they were great players and they all intrigued me. I was intrigued first by the Tipperary players and then growing up the likes of Tommy O'Rourke. I used to go into Clonmel to watch senior games and the Kirbys would be there, Dan and John Kirby playing doubles. They would fall out with each but it was pure trickery, they'd be edging each other on – the other pair would think they had the upper hand but the Kirbys would come on stronger then.

I see the current crop now, the likes of Brady, Healy, Kennedy. They were all phenomenal players and Kennedy has proved it at 40 years of age when winning again.

Fitness has improved. In our time, when I was playing senior at the top of my game, I would never look at a Masters player as a worry. But now, the likes of Brady and Kennedy are technically Masters players and they are still at the top of the game.

Brady has done it all. I like his style and Alvarado's style, I enjoyed watching them and playing most of them which was great.

I often played Ducksy and the thing was his presence on the court. He was like a giant, he was like the Incredible Hulk for all the world. On a good day, you'd feel you couldn't put the ball away from him. He was always where the ball would go.

McAuley had unbelievable skill, he would serve and kill and was unbelievably brilliant on fly shots. I can still see him serving the ball out and you poking it up and him taking it on the sidearm on the fly and flattening it.

I saw O'Connor rolling the ball in the left corner from 37 feet with his left hand. Raw talent.

And then Silcock, he was like a little cat. He would throw himself around inside, he would touch the ball into the corner. I admire all those players.

When I was there, the field of players was very strong from an American point of view. In Ireland, when it came down to it, you had half a dozen players who might win a senior including Billy Bourke. He would have won a lot of seniors if Ducksy hadn't been there, Ducksy was a killer for him to beat. It was a mind thing but Billy was a great player.

I remember playing him in an Irish Open quarter-final and he had me beat up a stick but all that happened was he ran out of steam. But against Ducksy, he found it very difficult.

Q: When you stopped competing then, you began to get heavily involved in coaching, including assisting Tony Healy...

When I finished up then, I still had a deep love of the game and was interested in methods of how to improve yourself and how to get better. I was training juveniles with the club and we would have won a good few All-Irelands.

Br Spring in Dungarvan then asked me to give him a hand. A phenomenal man. I have such admiration for the man, he has been a guiding light for me as a person by the way he has held his kindness and his sense of soul and the way he has promoted the game of handball in Dungarvan and in St Augustine's College. I admire him so much.

To this day, even at 80 years of age he is bringing out teams to the US Nationals. He has exposed so many Waterford kids to the game of handball and in such a good way. It's such a good story and you just hope it will be continued on because he has done such work.

When I was playing the senior, Ger Healy, Tony's father, used to ask me if I would play him a few games. I would be wicked sticky about who I would play, I would want to give away no secrets, give nothing away! I had only certain players I would train against.

I would start in October and train hard and I'd meet some senior player, say O'Connor, and he'd say 'are you playing much, Eddie?' and I'd say 'Jesus, Walter, I didn't play a bit. I can't get time at all. I'd love if I could get back doing a bit.'

You'd always be worried about a threat. Ducksy was the opposite, he'd play all these fellas to eliminate the threat and pick up what he could. I was the other way. If Ducksy asked me for a game I'd say 'I'm playing nothing'. But I'd be in the heat of training.

Ger used to ask me and I was nearly at the end at that stage and Healy was only 15 or 16 coming on and we ended up then doing a good bit together, Tony and myself.

Tony was really interested and he was one of the fellas who you would have looked at because he would have won at U14, U16, he was one of the golden era of Brady, Kennedy, Kane, Goff, they were all coming through, really cute and really into training whereas in our period coming up you went down and played your few games of handball and kept yourself kind of right. A lot of our methods

were improved on, the level of training Ducksy, McAuley and so on was doing would have been extremely high but the new players improved on that.

Healy and Brady and those fellas stepped it up, they started going to America and going as a team. I often spoke to Mick Dunne about how we needed to break the American dominance but actually what broke the Americans was they didn't keep producing the players.

The field dropped and the Irish field probably improved a bit. The level in America dropped off and in Ireland it improved, Brady and Healy got in and won over there. We weren't winning there.

The problem we had was we would go to America in ones and twos, we needed the likes of McAuley, Ducksy, O'Connor, three or four guys to go together. When one would go, you wouldn't get a fair draw... And if you were bringing the likes of an American here, you'd always give him a tricky quarter-final or first round, a fella who would be dicey, who could cause you right bother.

Healy did so much great work on his own and he had so much great knowledge of the game. He had a fierce passion. From day one, he was always there to win the senior, from when he won at underage level. I was different, I was trying to win the minor, the U21 and then on to junior.

We used to meet up periodically but he was always an individual, he did his own thing and he had his own mind on things.

I remember seeing him playing Ducksy. When I walked in the door in Cappagh, Healy was in his first senior final and Ducksy was in his last and when I looked at Ducksy, I knew Healy was going to win. Ducksy wasn't as fit looking, as hungry looking, he wasn't the same man.

Some players were gone off the radar and these young guys were coming, although Brady was still a good bit off that level. I remember seeing him playing in Belfast around '97 and saying he was some young fella to kill the ball – but that's all he could do at the time. He could kill the ball from anywhere but he hadn't anything else.

But he improved all that, he got everything right. Brady and Healy then started to take over. Tony used to ring me an odd time and we used to talk.

We had that mentality, it was kill or be killed. Sheridan the same way, fierce determination and killer instinct.

In 2004, Brady and Healy met in America in some tournament, around January or February. I hadn't been in much contact with Healy at that stage.

Brady started to dominate after the Worlds in 2003. So Brady hammered Healy in early 2004, the court was rocket fast and it suited Brady.

So Healy rang me when he came home and he told me he had played and didn't do great and so on. I said Tony, I'm down in Dungarvan with Br Spring, if you want to, come down with the Dungarvan lads. And he said 'yeah, I'll come down'.

I remember the first night he came down he was playing and I gave out to him. I told him to go in there and kill the ball. He said 'do you want me to kill it sidearm or what way?' I said 'I want you to kill the effin' ball.'

It opened his eyes a bit I think. We knew then that Brady was going to be in the final and it was really a buzz for me because I knew Healy at that point was a bit behind because Brady had really jumped ahead of him.

I think he played Finnegan in the quarter-final in O'Loughlin's and I remember a lad there watching it and Finnegan was running Healy close. But as the game wore on, Healy was getting into the plan which was attack, attack, attack. Go early.

As the game went on, after Healy winning about 15 and 14, the lad came over to me and said Healy wouldn't go too far. But we went away and Tony was totally professional, it was just about tweaking it a bit.

He'd listen to every word and he put in a phenomenal effort. He beat Kennedy in that semi-final and that put him into the final against Brady in O'Loughlin's. Healy won it 21-20 in the third game but he was after being well beaten by Brady in America under 10 and was beating him fairly consistently.

Healy arrived very tentative and edgy in the first game and the next thing was Brady was winning the first game. By the mid point, Brady was up a good bit, maybe 15-10. From that point on, Healy was getting better and for 37 points from about mid-point in the first game, Healy out-scored Brady 33-4. You must remember, in the second game, Healy demolished him.

He had a very good serve that night, he cracked a load of balls off the sidewall and he went very early, he went for the kill and I think it kind of upset Brady, he hadn't seen him play that way. If you got to shot 10 with Brady in a rally, by shot 11, Brady was still strong but Healy would be dwindling a little bit because Brady had that enormous power.

In the third game, Healy was well up but Brady started to come at him. But to me, even if Brady had won, I would have been thrilled the way Brady had played. But Healy hung on and he won it and it justified everything he had done, going to the kill, the power serve.

Afterwards, I wasn't with him as much. Healy was his own man and he didn't need me to be getting on to him. He had his own way of doing things.

But in 2004, he used to ring me every night at 10 o'clock and I'd have a list of things that I would say to him about opponents and we'd talk for 15 or 20 minutes. Healy would go away and digest it. The following night I'd have something else, maybe something about preparation.

I remember telling him to call a double time-out and to walk out of the alley and say nothing and walk into the dressing-room. And as he was going back in, call another time-out and don't let Brady see and go back into the dressing-room again. It was to unnerve Brady.

And he did it in the middle of the first game and the ref didn't say to Healy that he couldn't leave the court. Healy would also strip off and change his gear.

That was a technique I'd have. I used to have two pairs of runners and I'd start the game with one pair but I never finished with them. I'd change my socks, gloves, jersey. I'd go back in then feeling a fresher man.

Brady was still in the court hitting the ball around and then he came out to ask what was going on. It was a very small thing but I would always have been looking at little ways like that to get an advantage.

Tony had lost his way a little bit, Brady had jumped ahead so I was so happy for him to win that night. Brady had won the Ultimate Handball Showdown by then as well.

That was one of the highlights for me, the way Healy came back from that setback. I think Brady was well behind in the third game but he had that killer instinct and he was still fighting all the way, he was so hard to beat but Healy held on.

I often look at games in blocks. From one to 12, 12 to 15 and then the finish line from 15 to 21. One to 12, you need to get away and try to be ahead at 12 and if not, have your opponent exhausted at that point. The mid-point then was to see could you break away, get to 15 quickly.

And then try to finish it then. But Healy just held on that night and I think that was a very satisfying win for him.

He had great knowledge of the game, he was the university student of handball. He would break down the game. Some players NEEDED to beat their opponent, they were the enemy. I was the same, Tony wasn't like that.

Q: What sort of involvement do you have in the game now and what are your thoughts on how the sport is progressing?

A: I enjoyed coaching, at the moment I'm on a break. My health hasn't been as good as it was and I took a break completely but the lads in the club here are still doing a bit in Ballyporeen.

It's tough in a small village of 300 people to keep two ball alleys going, we boxed above our weight a bit, we have had a lot of All-Ireland winners.

I would have a great affinity with Ballyporeen and Cashel as well. I had so much closeness with the lads in Cashel, John O'Donoghue.

I still follow handball a lot, I followed the likes of David Maloney, Noel Murphy, all those guys. I still follow my mate, he's trying to win a Masters B in the small alley, Willie Cahill, and that keeps me in tune with it.

I still follow GAA Handball but at the moment I'm on a break from it. I will re-energise then and I often come back but I still have a fierce love of the game of handball. There's a lot of wrongs in handball, things that are not right. The way the Clár is, it's not ideal.

Caimin Jones was a great forward thinker and in 1994 he said the way to go was more weekend structures for 40x20 and I said no way, not a hope. But as the years went on, I totally agree with him.

I think we need to play our provincial finals over one weekend at central venues. The revitalisation of Croke Park I hope will be the driving force to get us back.

I think we need to get rid of a lot of events, we can't have 40 world champions coming back. The Holy Grail is the World Open Singles or the All-Ireland senior singles in 40x20 and 60x30. We must increase that status.

I was thinking about a format. On the years we don't have a World Championships, why don't we have something like a competition in Ireland, in Croke Park, an event that we would only invite in four or six top players and only maybe two or three Irish.

We would invite in the top two or three one-wallers here and the top four or five from Europe and America. But we would invite in for the 60x30 a good number of Irish players so that it would be easier to get in on the 60x30 side of things than 40x20.

For the 60x30, you could allow in eight Irish. You'd be encouraging players, maybe with a points system, to win their way into the 60x30. The idea would be to encourage people to play the 60x30.

The one thing I find with current crop is that they don't seem to be able to do a Brady on it and stamp their authority on the field for month after month, year after year. If you look at it, it's a grand period because we have had a number of champions but we haven't an outstansing champion who is able to dominate the field.

I think we need to encourage the 60x30 back some way. Maybe a Top Ace style, play it over one full weekend, get a massive crowd there, stream it, try to get a few sponsors and you would be encouraging 60x30 as well. And they would be on the same level as the 40x20 but the only thing would be it would be harder to get into the 40x20.

So some of the seniors might say that if they wanted to get in on this event, they needed to play more 60x30.

Most players if you look at it like to play the Workd Championships but there should be another major event in the opposite years that they'd want to be involved in. It's like the European Championships in running and then you have the World Championships and then the Olympics in different years.

Ricky McCann spoke about the Casey-Lawlor Cup, a team event maybe.

We need to tidy up the Clár. Why do we need to have Masters players taking the limelight from minors, U21s, our top up and coming players?

What good is playing a Silver Masters A Singles when say you have eight entries in Ireland? You get through Munster and you have no game. You might have no game even in an All-Ireland semi-final. But Leinster might have had three or four players.

Why not let that be an open draw and play it above in Kingscourt one weekend, a whole weekend of Masters, and maybe call it a national singles win rather than an All-Ireland?

Let the All-Ireland championship be there for minor, U21, senior... Let them be the premier codes. When we started handball we had minor, junior and senior only and we still had a lot of people playing handball.

Thinking back on the standard in junior when I was playing in that grade, it would make you ask, are there actually too many grades there now? It's a difficult one to call. I'm very despondent about all these grades.

I remember Tony Healy telling me a story about Paul Brady getting off the plane after winning the Worlds and he looked around and there were about 25 or 30 world champions. Really, at the end of the day, when we won the senior, that was the Holy Grail. That was the one.

As it stands, I don't one night in Croke Park is encouraging 60x30, I don't think a Nationals in Wexford is encouraging it enough either. We need to encourage the top players to play in it. Even if it's only a secondary competition for them.

I played 60x30 as my secondary competition but I was still always trying to win it.

I had five or six really top years, Brady would have had 20 years at the top. Ducksy, Brady, Kennedy and Sheridan break that but most players have about 10 years playing senior. I had '91 to '97 so I had seven or eight good years out of it where I felt that I gave it everything.

I'm not saying it is the answer, it's very hard but if we don't do something more with 60x30, it's in trouble. One wall is kicking in and squeezing the 60x30 season.

We have to encourage it some way. Do we need to tidy up our competitions? I think we need to do something.