

My Handball Life: Lydia Doolin

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Paul Fitzpatrick spoke to Roscommon's Lydia Doolin, who had a glittering juvenile career both nationally and internationally.



Can you tell me how you were first introduced to the game?

I started playing handball when I was eight years old under the guidance of Anne and Michael Naughton, my neighbours and parents to my best friend Aifric. I used to do a lot of athletics - I was pretty fast - and I was Connacht champion at seven and I went to my first Athletics All Ireland that year in Mosney.

I injured my foot at the age of eight and I was in hospital for three months and this is where Anne Naughton was a total angel and she made me gorgeous rock buns to eat and she would visit me with Aifric and when I got out of hospital I was pretty sad that I wasn't allowed to run for a long time and so Anne and Michael suggested that I play handball and this is where it all began...

I went to my first handball competition in Mosney when I was nine as a substitute and we came second in that event. I used to go round the country with Anne and Michael and overseas to watch fantastic handball matches being played, I would watch Berni Hennessey play, Ducksie Walsh, Walter O'Connor, Peter McAuley, Eoin Kennedy, Tom Sheridan, Fiona and Sibeal McKenna, the Wrynn's, Tony Healy, Paul Brady, Dessie Keegan, Michael Gregan, Julie Long, David Chapman, John Bike, Sean Lenning, Emmet Pexioto... So many amazing players and I learnt so much from watching these players play, they were phenomenal and they very much formed my style of play.

What was your first major breakthrough?

By the age of 11 I played my first U14 All-Ireland in Croke Park against Marguerite Gore and it was a very tough match, I don't remember the score but I remember being very nervous and overwhelmed. I was very small, I'm still small, and I remember Marguerite being this really tall, gorgeous blonde girl and she was so much more powerful than me so I think I was very lucky to win that All-Ireland, I think my stubbornness got me through in the end.

The next big win that I remember was the 15 and Under Waterford Crystal Irish Nationals in Kildare. I played the incredibly talented Julie Long from Dublin, she was the current world champion at the time and she is what I consider even to this day to be the most stylish handballer ever in ladies handball.

If there ever was a style to emulate it was hers, she made handball look attractive! I was very much an 11-year-old unknown from Roscommon, I was certainly not tipped to win this match, in fact a certain person who watched me play the semi-finals to get into the final with Julie told me outside of the court, "you do know that you are not going to win, you won't beat Julie Long".

This comment really disappointed me but I just nodded and agreed with them but in my stubborn mind I was like, 'I am going to give it my best shot and I am going to prove them wrong'.

Not a great comment to make to a very stubborn never-say-die girl from Roscommon where losing was not an option. So I was determined to train very hard for this match and I trained four to five days a week with the best coach and most selfless, humble man I have ever met, Michael Naughton.

I couldn't have asked for a better coach for me. My entire handball skill and talent is the result of years and years of practice from Michael. Michael asked his son Oisín Naughton at the time to train with me as well and I have to give thanks to Oisín for teaching me the back wall kill shots, he practised these with me tirelessly and I'm pretty sure he would have rather been somewhere else than teaching his little sister's best friend back wall kill shots, so thank you, Oisín, I never have forgotten your patience and time to help me be the best handballer I could be.

The match between Julie and myself was an epic final and the crowd was electric. There were so many people in the crowd that the walls in the court and outside the court were sweating, they had to be rubbed down between matches with towels on brooms.

There were phone calls being made to Croke Park about the epic finals that were being held in Kildare, myself vs Julie and Dessie Keegan won an epic tiebreaker against Michael Gregan straight after my match and a comment was made that there was better juvenile matches being played in Leixlip on that day than up at Croke Park.

This was the toughest match I have ever played in my career and one that I was prepared to fight to the death to win. I was not losing this match. The score - thank you Gavin Buggy for this - was 15-21, 21-18, 11-9. It was a spectacular showdown between the world champ Julie and a nobody from Roscommon but what an amazing show Julie and myself put on for the handball spectators that day.

It was incredible handball from both of us. Julie won the first game 21-15 but it was very tight, early on in the second game I got hit really hard in the ear and I took my first ever injury time-out, the pain was horrendous and I couldn't hear in that ear for days after at all but I somehow pulled myself together enough to take the second game 21-18.

With my ear still ringing and what seemed like an eternity at 9-all in the tiebreaker, I managed to get back into serve with a shot I shouldn't have been able to return and this turned the game around in my favour. I was then able to battle through two intense rallies to win this epic final and become Waterford Crystal Irish National Champion at the age of 11.

I couldn't believe it, I came out of the court and I was picked up in the air by my Dad. I was embarrassingly telling him to put me down and Anne came over to me and gave me the biggest hug. I know this loss was hard on Julie but I wanted this win and I was not giving up. After all, Anne Naughton promised me she would bring me ice-skating if I won this, so stakes were high for an 11-year-old!

I would like to add that after beating Julie, her coach Shay O'Reilly was one of the first people to come over and congratulate me on a fantastic win. He said 'I don't know how you got that shot, you're incredible' and I thought 'wow'. His prodigy has just been beaten and he came to me and congratulated me and he was so gracious in defeat. What a lovely kind person he was, a very friendly and generous person to have in our handball world. Both Shay and Julie are very sadly missed.

Key Achievements:

- 3 x All-Ireland Minor 4-Wall Singles titles (99, 00, 01)
- 6 x Irish 4-Wall Junior Nationals titles (96, 97, 98, 99, 00, 01)
- 2 x All-Ireland Minor Softball Singles titles (00, 01)
- GAA Handball Young Female POTY (1996, 1997, 1998 & 2000)
- GAA Handball Female POTY (2001)
- USHA Nationals titles - (1996 California, 1998 LA, 1998 Chicago, 2001 Arizona)
- World titles - (15&U in 1997 Winnipeg, 17&U in Illinois 2000)

The next big memorable win for my handball career came when I was 13 years old playing for the 15 and Under world title in Winnipeg, Canada. The Canadians were the most welcoming people and they set an amazing standard for what a World Championships could look like, it was an incredible, well-oiled tournament and it was made very special and a lot of effort was put in.

I have great memories for life from this tournament and the Canadians should be very proud of themselves for this. For a world event I was on the Irish team along with my bestie in handball Dessie Keegan AKA my bodyguard or handbag (laughs).

We were always together, we were great friends, and we always had each other's back. The training schedule was intense and I think at the time at 13 I was very close to being the best I ever was.

At this time, I was training with my coach Michael, going down to Ballaghadeeren and training with Dessie and even up to Sean McEntee in Belfast and training with the McKenna girls who hosted me and honestly the kindness and generosity I received from all of these people was phenomenal.

I remember Sean McEntee only allowing me one serve in training, he would say "right wee Lydia, you only get one serve".

I wasn't one bit impressed with this but it was a great lesson to ensure I always got my first serve in and not mess about. I remember at the Worlds, Peter McAuley showed me how to spin serve the ball and spent time with me teaching me this so I was always learning from top coaches and top players

and would observe and watch how they played, how they served, how they reacted mentally to other players' form or any rhetoric on the court and also their fitness levels and I was just generally being helped and encouraged and supported by such lovely people in the sport of handball and this of course enabled me to win world titles and be the best at that age.

At the same time, for the ladies in the sport, there was an additional challenge in the form of inappropriate behaviour and comments which added another dimension of difficulty in playing the sport of handball and on some occasions took the enjoyment out of competitions. I wouldn't be surprised if many ladies decided back then not to continue in handball as a result. Hopefully this has changed and is a lot more inclusive and there is more positive behaviour for ladies in our sport.

How did your career progress after that?

I won the 15 and Under World Championships with ease. I do want to reference a practice match I had with the World champ Lisa Fraser at this time because I do owe an apology to Sean McEntee for this. Sean set up the practice match for me and Lisa before the Worlds and I really didn't give it my all because for me it was just training, a bit of fun.

Anyways, I gave Lisa a bit of a tough match but she won it and I came out of the court jovial and not sweating or red faced like I normally was when I made an effort in the court and I came out to a very angry Sean McEntee who told me he was disappointed in me and that I could have beaten her if I wanted to and now in her mind she thinks she can beat me.

I felt so bad, like awful, and even to this day I wish I had played properly and who knows he may have been wrong but he set up the match and expected more from me and I let him down, so sorry for this Sean!

I wanted to mention this because I think it's important to demonstrate that I do feel this was my best handball year in my career and I felt at the age of 13 was my peak.

After the worlds in 1997, I won a few more All-Irelands and the next big memorable win for me was the Kilkenny Irish ladies Open in, I think 1998/1999, I just turned 15 the week before and I knew that a very tough opponent of mine, Suzanne Smyth from Belfast who was very strong and very talented, would be playing in it.

Up to this point, I had not been able to break through and beat her and she always won the tiebreakers so I was determined to change this course this time and I wanted to win this All-Ireland.

It was a very tough match and I won in the tiebreaker. I was absolutely delighted with this win and I was also very thankful to a total stranger in the crowd because I was asked to change my wet gloves going into the tie breaker and I didn't have any spare gloves and I didn't know what to do and this man who I still don't know to this day gave me a brand new pair of gloves and I thanked him at the time but I would love to know who he was and I hope he reads this story cos he was a life saver.

I went on to win more All-Irelands, another Kilkenny Irish Open, Waterford Crystal Irish Opens, Ulster Opens, Golden Gloves tournaments – I loved their Golden Gloves frame, my favourite winning piece for sure- and I won US Opens fairly easily too at that time.

I played the World 17 and Under championship when I was 16 and won that tournament with ease. Then I got sick, I got scarlet fever and pleurisy and was very sick for a whole year. I had lost a lot of condition and weight and I remember playing in the Irish Nationals against Joy Smith from Meath and

I remember hitting the ball with my fist to get some more power - anybody that knew my game knew that I only fist the ball to the ceiling, I never use my fist for anything else - up against the wall from the back of the court and it barely touched the front wall.

I had absolutely no power at all and I was totally spent, I couldn't breathe and I was very lucky to win that match because I was not in good form at all!.

I came out of the court and it was not my greatest play by any means but the ever so wonderful Michael Naughton said 'that was a brilliant win Lydia, well done and you're not feeling well, good girl'.

Michael was always so positive and encouraging, this is why he was the perfect match for me. There was only one time in my 10 years with Michael that he got cross with me and I can assure you I deserved it and more as I was messing about in a training session with him and all he said was "now come on now Lydia" in a low tone and that nearly broke my heart because I never wanted to disappoint him.

He was my rock and was such a calming and encouraging presence in my life, a man of few words but what he did say was always welcomed. He taught me everything in handball and he knew how to get the best out of me, he was always suggestive with his feedback and coaching style, so he would never tell me what to do because he knew that it wouldn't work on me.

He would always be suggestive, "you might try this Lydia, you might think about this... maybe this might work" ... it was this style which suited me down to the ground and the fact that he was so calm, so collected, unbelievably patient and had a total dedication and commitment to improving me and my game propelled me onto the world stage of handball.

I mean, who spends four to five days a week training somebody and then weekends bringing them to competitions all around the country for nothing in return, a saint does that and I am forever indebted to Anne and Michael Naughton for this and they deserve all the praise and awards.

Many of my favourite times in handball were my training sessions with Michael, I loved being in the court with him. If I never played another competition I did not care, I was just as happy training with Michael.

The last competition I ever played back then was the 2001 19 and Under US open in Phoenix, Arizona. I was 18 at the time and doing my Leaving Cert. I won this match easily. The standard of players at this time was pretty poor and I came out of the court and took my gloves and goggles off and I should have been delighted with a US win but I was bitterly disappointed with the standard of play and it was outside that court that I said to myself 'this is it, I'm taking a break, this isn't enjoyable anymore'. I just lost the love for it, I didn't want to play anymore.

So I went home to Ireland and I had a few training sessions with Michael, who I still loved training with.

Not long after this I plucked up the courage to ring my coaches Anne and Michael and thank god it went to voicemail on their phone and I basically lied to them and told them I did really badly in my mocks exams for my Leaving Cert - I didn't, I got all A and Bs - and that I needed to concentrate on my Leaving Cert. The truth was, I just wanted a break from handball.

So once I had told the important people in handball that I was taking a break as such I was excited about the future, about going to Uni, about travelling abroad and just enjoying lots of new experiences outside of the handball world.

Where did you go next?

I went to University, St, Angelas College, Sligo and then NUIG and got a 2.1 BA honours degree in Economics and Social Studies in 2005. That year, myself and my childhood sweetheart Sean emigrated to Manchester where he was originally from where I started my career and did my MSc. In the seven years of living in Manchester, I did not play any handball and totally removed myself from the game. We did lots of travelling at this time. Then we went travelling all around the world and in 2012, we emigrated to Melbourne, Australia.

We got married on a beach in Port Douglas, Australia and with the exception of a side trip, three months in Africa, we returned to Australia and had our first baby River in 2014. Until my cousin Chris Doolin told me that there were handball courts in Melbourne, I lived here for two years unknowingly living just 20 minutes from the courts.



What's the handball scene like in Melbourne?

So in 2015, when River was six months old, Chris asked me to come down to the courts and watch him and Ruairi Kelly play the Men's Australian Open doubles final against Vic Di Luzio and Luis Moreno and of course I jumped at the chance and was really excited to watch some handball and meet all the Aussie handballers.

It was here where I met Mappa, AKA Simon Fitzgerald, who was the Victorian Handball president. At the time River had really bad separation anxiety from me and it was really hard because we were out here in Australia as emigrants and I literally couldn't put her down and Simon told me that there was a crèche here at the handball courts and that I could put her into there and come play handball and train with Vic Di Luzio which I did.

So I got back playing handball because of Chris, Mappa and Vic. I loved the banter and fun on the court again and all of the Aussie handballers welcomed me with open arms and we are a handball family now.

In 2016, Chris and I played the men's doubles Australian Open together and we won. It was so tough but Chris is a phenomenal handballer and we won because of his amazing skills and talent and I was very impressed with how improved Chris was.

I have to say without him there was no way I was winning anything over here, the guys are just way too strong for me so Chris practically won this himself. Not to mention I was three months pregnant at the time, not that Chris or any of the Aussies knew because I didn't want them to have that information or play differently and throughout the match I was inhaling deep heat fumes from Chris and the lads and I thought I was going pass out with the smell! Thankfully I got through it and Chris delivered big time on that day.

Then in 2017 I had my second baby, Meadow, and I played the men's Australian Open that year too with an amazing Aussie talent, Eddy Sheruga, and we won it and again this win was absolutely down to Eddy's incredible performance, I have to admit I was merely the server and returner because they fired all their serves at me in these matches and I only had one job, get the ball on the wall, fairly simple instruction.

And again thank god Eddy performed exceptionally well because I just had a baby with my second caesarean a few months prior and my movements on the court were fairly limited.

Finally, Chris and I won the doubles again in 2019 but we were stopped in our tracks this year because of the corona virus. The Australian handballers are very good, they have the skill and talent but the game over here is sadly dwindling and numbers are very low. I am the only female handballer here, I would say there are no more than 50 players playing handball currently, and that is probably reaching.

The South Australians do not have a 4-wall court, they only have 3-wall courts and Victoria has only maybe two - wall courts, two 4-wall courts and I think two 1-wall courts and that is it. I am not sure about NSW; I think they have 1-wall and 3-wall but no 4-wall so it's dwindling a fair bit.

I hope that the 4-wall courts will still be here for my girls to play handball in the future, they are both ciotogs so I don't know how that doubles pairing will work out, I might have to ring Michael Naughton and get some advice but the future of handball here in Australia is still positive as we still have players playing, we still have people here who are willing to put their money with their mouth is and pay for an international tournament to be held here, they want to put prize money up, there is a willingness to build courts, to find ways to promote and improve the game here without a doubt.

The reality is that it's an Irish game being played here in Australia and whilst it was very popular in the Catholic schools, those Catholic schools are either rebuilding or demolishing the courts for other things and it's a constant strive to better the handball prospects here in Australia.

We are a small entity but we will do everything in our power to promote this beautiful game of ours and hopefully propel it for generations to come. It would be great if Irish and American people came to the Australian Opens over here, I am pretty sure you would enjoy the weather, the koalas and kangaroos, oh and a VB, which is Victorian Bitter, the Aussies love this drink but for me its yuck, I call it vomit bucket. I am going to be killed for saying this by my Aussie handball family (laughs).

All in all I still love the training part of handball albeit not with Michael now that I live on the other side of the world but with Vic Di-Luzio who is retiring from the sport every year apparently and at this rate is four million years old.

The banter is brilliant and my favourite saying of Vic's on the court to himself is "stop f**king around ya old chuck, and why are you going walkabout?" in a thick Aussie accent, it makes me laugh everytime and brings back amazing memories of all my handball observations of players throughout the years and the stuff that would come out of their mouths would be hilarious.

Do you have any regrets from your handball career?

My regret in handball has always been getting on the Irish team for the US Opens and World Championships because you are only allowed to play in one division so if I am on the Irish team for the Worlds 15 and Under for example, I am only allowed to play 15 and Under and that is it.

I wish when I was 13 that I was not on the Irish team and I went and played myself and entered the 13 and Under, 15 and Under, 17 and Under, 19 and Under and the Open because I genuinely believe I would have won nearly all of them.

Obviously the doubt would have been the Open but I am sure I would have definitely got to the final and if you remember I said earlier I feel that my peak was when I was 13, it should have been when I was 17 but I got sick and it just didn't happen and this is my biggest regret in handball.

I do want to say that so many people have both directly and indirectly influenced my young handball career and life. The amount of memories I have of all the wonderful people in our handball community that have inspired me, that I have learnt from, that have been kind and encouraging towards me is something I will never forget. I am who I am and I had the handball career that I had because of the many people who gave up their time and energy to support me.

I would like to thank Anne and Michael for being simply the best; I would like to thank the people of Roscommon and Mr Tom Foxe who always ensured that I got an amazing town celebration and homecoming, to all of the Roscommon people who sponsored me money to go to competitions even when money was tight. I am very proud to be from Roscommon and very proud of how the Roscommon people supported me in handball throughout the years.

To my parents who in all probability had no choice but to allow me to be stubborn, fiercely independent, have a total disregard for any sort of discipline and a very fearless child who would go off to competitions around Ireland and conveniently forget to tell them!

Who got grounded almost weekly but going to the handball court was seen as a necessity, whose father recognised when his child was nervous not for my own competitions but for the team competitions where I felt pressure to perform for the team and would have sleepless nights before these team events and would always say, "all you can do is your best and sure that is all that matters".

I always found comfort in his saying, “sure just throw in the ball and see how it bounces”. To a wonderful childhood sweetheart, now husband, who brought me round the country to training sessions, to handball competitions and always encouraged and supported me and told me I was an amazing handballer and gave me huge confidence and support throughout my life, thanks Sean my absolute rock of nearly 20 years.

To Walter O’Connor and Sean Nolan who would always make me laugh at competitions and literally entertain the crowds of handballers no end. To my good friend Dessie, who always looked out for me, who told old men in handball who had no manners where to go when they were rude to me, he will not like me saying this but he was like the brother I never had.

Can you describe your style of play?

I occasionally used an Irish whip, occasional and would do this to the Americans just for fun, it rarely featured in my game in Ireland, and mostly sidearm was used by me. My favourite court has always been the 40x20 court, I did not play much 1-wall at all and the first time I played three wall was here in Australia.

I find it very difficult to describe my style of handball or what kind of handballer I was because I was never one to sit down and dissect my game or strategise really. I just recognised my weaknesses and just practised and practised or I watched other players and learnt from them so I think it’s probably best to ask people that remember me if they can remember what kind of handballer I was.

What does your handball future hold?

My future hope is that we can build some 1-wall handball courts in schools and parks all over Australia and promote that game. To have the Irish handball community support handball in other countries and send delegates out to competitions abroad and Australia being one of those countries. I have two beautiful daughters who at the age of five and three are already very fierce competitors and have fantastic hand-eye co-ordination and I want them to have a court to play on and a game to play.

I want them to experience the amazing game we all love. As a handballer, some of my favourite shots were the ceiling shots, myself and Michael would practise these shots over and over again so that was a big part of my game, I loved sidearms kills and I was very happy and comfortable shooting from anywhere in the court both left and right hand and I was fond of a passing shot too and the usual kill shots off the back wall.

Anyways you asked me what my ambition in handball was and when I beat Julie Long the World Champ at 11, that was my goal, that was my ambition, I wanted to be the world champion and I was very determined, I was not afraid of hard work, I was a fast learner and I was a natural sportsperson so I learned the skill of handball. But the talent for sport, I was born with.



Antóin Ó hAodha, Uachtarán Tofa, presents the All-Ireland Ladies Minor Softball Singles winner's medal to Lydia Doolan,