

My Handball Life: Ricky McCann

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Paul Fitzpatrick spoke to one of the greatest of this century and arguably the best ever Antrim player, Ricky McCann.



How did you first become aware of the sport and start playing?

I first became aware of handball when I was a youngster, growing up in my area there were side streets that consisted of gable walls of houses, although the majority of my time was playing soccer on these side streets, there were times when we would play handball off the gable walls, particularly in the summer.

A few of the older lads would be playing and we'd join in with them, to me it was just another game to play during the summer months when we weren't playing soccer. At the time I also had gone to Edmund Rice College (formerly known as CBS Hightown), and they'd a couple of outdoor three-wall courts, I'd play at lunchtimes, break times and sometimes after school.

Around the time I was also playing Gaelic for Pearses and it just so happened that they had a handball team, ironically consisting of the older lads we used to play against on the gable walls, Ricky Dundas, Shane McAllister and Martin Campbell. I decided to start playing indoor handball with Pearses and I'd also been playing schools handball against other Belfast-based players.

At the time Robbie Mc Mahon was a teacher in Hightown and he'd take the pupils to tournaments and organise some indoor court training. I'd started to really enjoy the game and was hooked on it, however as I had never really played indoors, I found it tough and very frustrating, the ball was harder and much bouncier than the tennis balls that I'd been used to playing with. My timing and rhythm was off and didn't know how to take the ball off the backwall. In those days if you won serve, you more or less won the game. At the time I would have played maybe once a week indoors and I wasn't getting as much practice/games as I wanted to and decided to join Gort Na Mona where Robbie would become my coach.

At that time there was a really strong league in Antrim, Gort na Mona had three or four teams in several divisions. Division 1 consisted of Paddy Crothers, John McGarry, Eddie Mallon and Jim Smith.

St Paul's had Stevie Madden and Joe McAllister, McDermotts had Billy Silcock and Thomas Maguire, Rossa with Donal Armstrong and Collie O'Hare. Dwyers had Joe and Larry Rainey who were really good players too. Tuesday nights were league nights in Beechmount Leisure Centre and there'd be at least 50 people watching from a small gallery if Paddy was playing Billy or Stevie. Just below those guys you had Sean Devine, Seamus Ó Tuama, Ciaran Curran and Paul Graham, the latter two were playing for Queens at the time. It was my goal to improve and challenge my way up through the leagues, to play for the Division 1 team.

Did you make progress quickly when you got into it?

It was around the age of 14-15 that I really started getting into the game, I wouldn't say I improved quickly. I just really enjoyed playing the game. That time I was playing other sports, Gaelic in school and soccer outside of school as well. But I was hooked on handball. They always talk about playing lots of sports when you're younger and then focus on one as you get older. I started handball relatively late and at the time Paddy Crothers took time out and trained the younger lads.

The whole Gort na mona team were brilliant with me, patient and encouraging, we'd train on Wednesdays and Sunday mornings. I started playing colleges handball for Hightown and I recall my first game was against some lad from Hilltown, I was really nervous and got beat when I was probably the better player.

The colleges games would be played in Eugene Quinn's in Armagh and I remember playing my game and then watching the doubles game that was played after my match. It was the first time seeing Paul Brady playing. He was thin with really baggy tracksuit bottoms, an oversized blue Cavan shirt and his gloves were about two sizes too big for him.

He was all underhand at the time, I remember thinking to myself “this kid is nuts” – he would try and kill the ball from anywhere on the court, even from head height with his massive wind up underhand shot. He had no fear, always going for the kill.

As I said, it was moderate progress for me, I’d moved to St Mary’s to do my A levels and that is where I got an extra day’s training in. Donal Armstrong, who was a very strong Intermediate player at the time, was teaching there so we’d arrange to play every Friday afternoon at Queens PEC. At the time Donal was a fit, strong, powerful player and also very competitive, so I was getting really good games with him. Those games coupled with club training helped me win the senior All-Ireland colleges (schools) around 1997.

It was around that time that I had modest success, winning Ulster U17 before getting in the All-Ireland semi-finals. As I progressed up to minor, I played Paul Brady two years in a row and beat him in the Ulster final both years. Once I got out of Ulster, I’d play Kenny Kane.

Kenny Kane was several levels above me at the time, I remember thinking to myself, how am I ever going to get close to him never mind beating him? His game was that advanced. Kenny Kane was in that group with Tony Healy, Barry Goff and Eoin Kennedy were all several steps ahead of me.

There was a real strong mix of young players and just above those guys were Ciaran Curran, Michael Finnegan, Gavin Buggy and Dominick Lynch as well. On top of those guys, you had Duxie, Walter, Peter McAuley and Eddie Corbett, Paddy Crothers, Stevie Madden, Billy Silcock who were the main senior players around that time.

My goal was to keep improving, keep training, to try and reach that next level. It got to the stage then where I almost didn’t really enjoy the game, I wanted to improve so much and to do so well that at times that at times there was no joy in it. I needed to learn to back off from time to time. I trained harder when I went to university because I had extra time from classes.

I had played in the Collegiates both at home and in the States where I got to know Paul, Tony, Barry Goff and Eoin better. It was also the first time I’d seen how the Americans played and in particular David Chapman. I remember being mesmerised by his style of play, his accuracy, game intelligence and reading of an opponent.

Based off these experiences, I worked on my two hands, my fitness, my power but I would say what would let me down most was the mental side of it, the tactical side. It took me much longer to develop that, I’d say I probably didn’t develop that until I was 22-26, that’s when I got the balance of game tactics with the physical side of it.



Who did you train with at the time?

In Antrim, I trained with my clubmates, Paddy Crothers, John McGarry, Eddie Mallon, and Jim Smith. I'd travel to all their matches, watching and absorbing their games against Duxie and DJ in the doubles, All-Ireland singles and doubles matches... it was a great education for me. We were a real close knit team led by Robbie. Championship time was fantastic, we'd drive to Tipp to watch Paddy and John play or to Dublin to watch the Irish Nationals.

I'd also spent time training with Ciaran Curran who was senior at the time. My attitude was to play at my absolute best in every session against him as I didn't want to waste his time. We had a lot of close games, however when it came to playing Ciaran in tournaments or championships, he'd up his game a few levels and beat me comfortably.

I had played Sean Devine a few times but felt I had sort of a missed rivalry with him. Sean went to Wales to practise law so we missed the best of him. Sean was a real good player, he got the most out of his talent. He was quick, had a strong left hand, mentally very strong. I always felt I was better than him technically and physically, but Sean would have the mental edge on me in the few competitive games that we did play that led to him winning close games.

That was something I learned when you're playing certain players, you need to be aware of the game within the game they are playing. I genuinely believe I lost more games from promising positions due to emotional/mental immaturity, bad shots or referee's decisions always used to distract me, mentally I could have been a lot better. That comes with maturity. I always felt going in playing handball at that level, my shoulders were so tight, I wanted so badly to do well that my anxiety levels would be through the roof!

Any time I played really well I was more relaxed, in a flow, swinging through the ball. You're still playing high intensity handball but you're just focused on playing, not worried about the ref or missing a shot. I knew if I could get into that zone, I might not always win but I'd always play well.

As the years progressed and my friendship with Paul and Tony grew, there was a common goal to try and get on the pro tour, do well at US Nationals, so we'd arrange training weekends to get a few games in. I'd also play Charly Shanks and Owen Mc Kenna who were really good up and coming players. So there was plenty of variety in training matches.

So you were making strides all the time. What was your first major breakthrough?

There were several times throughout my career where I felt my game had jumped up a level or two which reinforced to me that I could compete at the highest level. Winning the All-Ireland colleges gave me confidence as did winning the U21 All-Irelands, however these games weren't played against the top players at the time.

I remember getting invited to Saval for a training weekend, the Ireland team were preparing to play in the Worlds. We had to do circuit training and then play games. I remember playing Tony, it was only a training match but we were going hard at it, and I think the game was 21-19, 21-20, a real tough battle. And at that time, Tony was above us all, I remember playing well that day and chatting to Tony after the game and he couldn't believe how much I had improved. It gave me the belief that I could compete.

I had the physicality; I was able to extend rallies with my fitness but that was to my detriment at times. As the game changed, it became more of an offensive game and you had to finish rallies when you got the chance. I would have tended to hit a pass shot to make the opponent run a bit more but I learned you had to go for more kills. I knew I could compete physically and technically.

At that time I'd gone to my first US Nationals in Baltimore with Paul, Eoin, Dessie Keegan and Tony. I was playing Open singles and Pro doubles with Tony, I'd got beat by Eddie Chapa in the quarters, Eoin

had gone onto to win it, Paul and Tony were playing Pro singles and had tough matches against John Bike and Naty Alvarado respectively.

Tony and I had also played doubles that year, getting beat in the early rounds. It was a great trip and I learned so much just through chatting handball with the lads. I'd developed a close friendship with Tony and I remember him breaking down my game, a complete forensic analysis of how I played, strengths/weaknesses, pattern of play, favoured shots. It was an absolute eye opener for me, I'd always just gone in and played without really thinking tactically.

To be fair to Tony, he didn't have to but he broke my game down for me. He said 'this is this guy's weaknesses, this is what happens when I play you and this is what I do' and it just opened my eyes as to how to analyse opponents.

He recommended me a book called Winning Ugly by Andre Agassi's coach (Brad Gilbert) about getting the best out of yourself, how to analyse your opponents. I remember him telling me that if I was playing Kenneth Kane, after a time-out, make sure to increase the intensity of rallies for the next three or four minutes because he comes out of time-outs sluggish.

I played Kenny a few months later at the Kilkenny Open and beat him two straight and followed that strategy. It was probably to Tony's detriment because whenever I played Tony – although he always beat me – I was able to push him hard because I knew his game. For example, I wouldn't go for a kill while he was in front of me and I wouldn't pass him to the side, I'd try to drill the ball at his chest because he was so good with his soft hands either side or would look for soft dumps off a pass shot. I would power the shot it right at him and then I'd look to move in for the second shot, go for the kill then. The closest I got to beating him was an All-Ireland senior semi-final which went to a tiebreaker.

One of my favourite memories was winning the senior All-Ireland clubs, I had beat Dessie Keegan in our singles match, with Paddy, John and Eddie also winning, this was our first and only senior All-Ireland. I'd played really well in the singles against Dessie (who to be fair didn't play well that day), I think I won 21-5, 21-3 which set us on our way to the title and that performance also gave me great confidence.

Another game that reinforced that I could play at a higher level was winning the Golden Gloves final against Eoin Kennedy. Eoin had won the senior 40x20 and 60x30 All-Irelands and had a fantastic year. I had beaten him in a tie breaker and that was my first major senior tournament victory, it was another stepping stone to increasing my belief.



You broke through to senior ranks in 2001.

I won the U21s in 1998 beating Paul Flynn from Mayo and moved up to Intermediate where I'd won the title in 2001 beating Dessie in the final. That was me then into senior, I was playing provincial tournaments and going to play in the States. Going to America I found was another stepping stone to improving your game. We saw different styles of players and we changed our styles, we began to play more sidearm.

At that stage the Americans were dominating and that was the style they played and we adapted. Playing against top players over there brought us on. I won the Open (Men's A at that time) in Las Vegas and then myself and Tony got to the semi-finals of the Pro doubles and lost to Chapman and Munoz, it was something like 21-17, 21-16, and that provided more validation for me at the time.

Coming off the court, Chapman was saying 'who's he, he's a good player' and at that time Chapman was undisputed number one. That was a real compliment and added to the belief, as did winning the Open, beating Chris Tico after being beaten the year before in the final by Dessie Keegan. That gave me more belief that I was able to play at the top level.

My thing was, I always loved training. I never really took a break. I found if I did, my shoulders were sore, I was stiff... That's probably why I always played really well around October, November time. That was my peak. Some of the other lads were coming off big court season and were perhaps not as court sharp as I'd have been.

I used to go to New York in the summer and play one-wall and four-wall in the New York Athletic Club with the likes of Steve Lott, John Duggan and Ken Ginty, getting court time with these guys was a fantastic experience. Coming back from New York and going straight into training in August or September, I would be physically at my peak by the time the Golden Gloves would come round. I loved the Golden Gloves, when I was younger it was the first time that I got to see the top players in Ireland playing in Belfast. At a time when not many people wanted to travel to Belfast, St Paul's was packed the whole weekend and for me it always marked the start of the 40x20 season.

How would you describe your toughest opponents during your peak years?

Eoin Kennedy

For me Eoin was one of the most ruthless handballers to play and that's the highest compliment for me. He was very gracious after I beat him in the Golden Gloves - but I knew in my heart that he was only four weeks out of the big court and wasn't at his sharpest. We played a few times over the years, in the Collegiates final he beat me in a tie breaker as well as beating me in two Irish National' finals.

Kennedy's attitude was something else. He was a super player and the ultimate competitor, tough as nails. Aesthetically/style wise he may not have looked as good as Paul or Tony but he made up for it with tenaciousness, his game intelligence was superb, his roof play was excellent and at that time he was probably the deadliest player off the back wall with his right hand. If the ball was dropping on to his left hand, eight feet or 10 feet out, he would kill it – everything else was a wrap around, punch pass or a roofshot. Anything remotely coming off the back wall to his right, more often than not it was a flat kill.

He had a great right corner side arm kill shot and could cut a rally short with his fly kills. He maximised his talents combined with sheer guts and determination. I always found it hard to play him because he would never let up, such a great competitor. The scary thing is, he was an even better 60x30 player!

Tony Healy

Tony was the most intelligent player I had played around that time, his anticipation, reactions and game intelligence were on the same level as Chapman in his peak. Tony's most potent shot was the V-pass, he had it down to perfection, if you managed to retrieve it he would step in and fly kill in the front court.

His safety play and patience on court was unnerving, he was ice cool, emotionless and never seemed to get tired. His ability to rekill a power serve or a kill attempt by an opponent with a soft dump could break your heart. You could never relax on court when playing him, his retrieval skills were that good, even when he gave you a set-up, you felt under pressure to flatten the ball otherwise he'd pick it up, the extra pressure tended to make players shoot into the floor more than what they would normally have.

Tony and I had developed a great friendship over those years, playing doubles at the US Nationals and discussions with him about the game and how to prepare for games lifted my game several levels. I'd learned a great deal from Tony in regards to putting handball first, he would train 10-12 times a week, his preparations for tournaments was outstanding and he'd push the other players around him to match his standards.

Dessie Keegan

Around that time, Dessie Keegan and I would have been ranked 4 or 5 in Ireland, so inevitably we'd play each other at provincial tournaments or All-Irelands. These matches were very tough battles, we split matches at Intermediate level in the early years, I'd win a few matches and then he'd win a few against me, although he seemed to beat me in the finals! The US nationals and Golden gloves final spring to mind. I really enjoyed the battles against Dessie, he was the hardest hitter in the game at the time, any half set ups against him and he automatically put you under pressure.

He could score points in bunches really quickly, you could be 12-4 up, he'd hit a purple patch and within five minutes he'd be 15-12 up. Dessie was also pretty quick and had great soft kills in the front court. When we were at tournaments in the States I'd always go and watch Dessie play, I loved watching the Americans' reactions when they first saw him play, the sound of the ball hitting the front wall when he'd lined up a kill off the back wall was frightening.

Paul Brady

For me, Paul is the greatest ever 40x20 handball player ever. As I mentioned before, we had a rivalry through playing in the Ulster minor championships, I'd got the better of him during those finals, but they were very close matches. The funny thing is, Paul wouldn't have been considered a child prodigy like Michael Finnegan or Ciaran Curran in his early years.

The reason for this is that he always played a few years up, never really played in his own age group, however he made massive improvements and had gone on to dominate U19 handball in the States for a few years. During the college years, he had improved so much, he had a fierce determination to be the best.

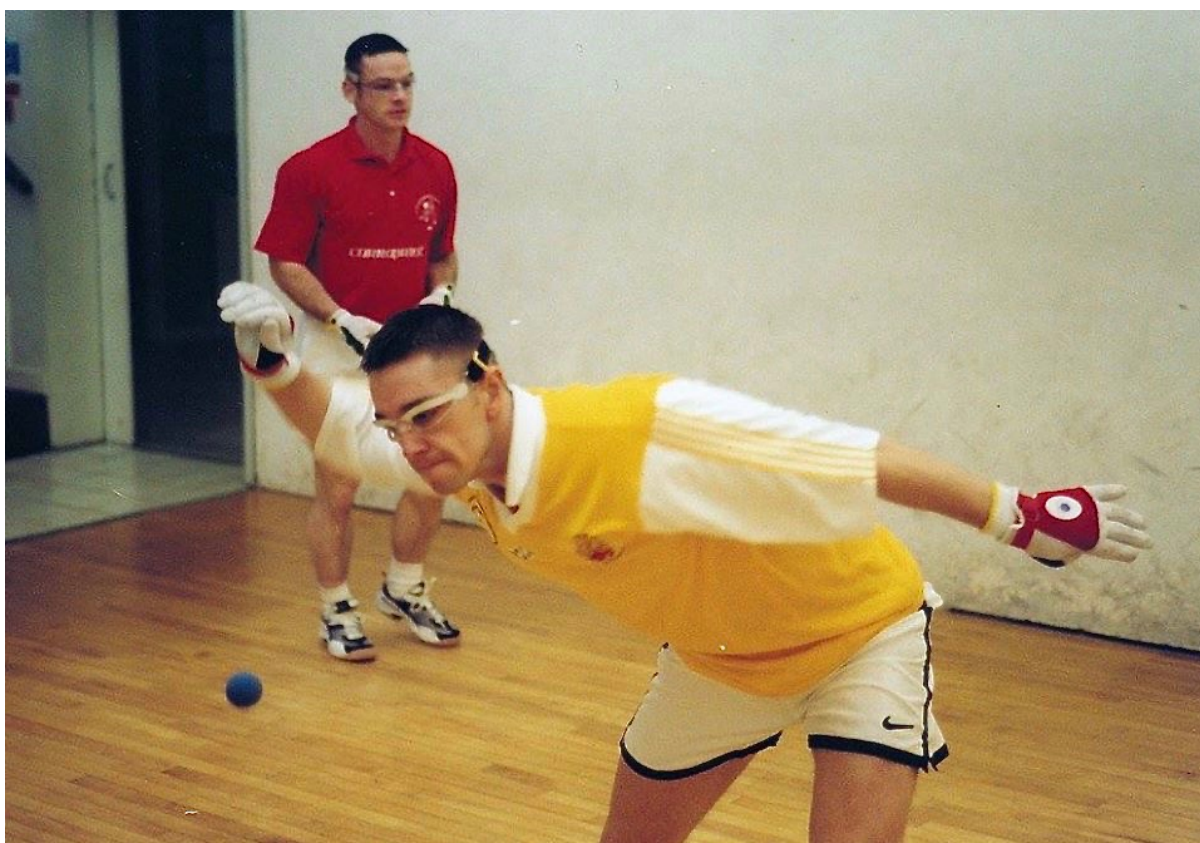
I'd develop a close friendship with Paul during the US trips and training weekends. He'd always be asking questions, about training, fitness, strength and conditioning but his main interest was in the psychology of the game. We'd have great banter, I used to love winding him up about beating him in two straight minor finals and I know he'd have used it as fuel for whenever we played. For me he changed the way the game is played in Ireland, his consistency with his serve, kill, and passing shots with both hands really changed the game.

His mental strength was frightening, he won matches, finals that he had no right to win but because of his mental strength and determination he found a way to win - winning games with a torn quad, muscle cramps and fractured fingers.

Can you describe how your career then progressed at senior level?

Around the period of 2001-2006/7 I would say I was at my best, I had got to number one in Ireland, I'd reach finals consistently in the provincial tournaments, although I never felt I deserved to be number one, Tony and Paul were playing in the States more often and missed home tournaments.

I had won Golden Gloves titles, the Boston Open and then got to the final of the Kilkenny Open, I beat Noel McHugh, Kenny Kane and Ciaran Curran and then played Paul in the final where he beat me in a tiebreaker. I was playing really well at the time.



I'd gone to the US Nationals in Michigan confident but performed poorly against Marcos Chavez. I came back home determined to be ready for the Worlds which were being held in Ireland. To get ready for the Worlds I'd done pre pre season soccer training to use it as a base for the Worlds and while playing in a pre-season friendly, I broke my leg so I had a nearly a year out.

I was on crutches for two months, I had a titanium rod in my leg. I was gutted but the positive was that it allowed me to focus on completing my PhD. I rehabbed like crazy and after six months, I started jogging and then throwing a ball about. The Nationals were held in Kingscourt and that's when Duxie Walsh made his comeback. I wasn't supposed to play, but I felt alright. I'd played Walter in the All-Ireland clubs a few weeks earlier and although he beat me, I was confident that I was fully healed.

I played Duxie in the first round and beat him and then I played Michael Finnegan and got through that match to play Kennedy in the final. He beat me well as I'd run out of steam due to not being tournament fit but I was delighted even though I got beat as I technically wasn't medically cleared to play.

It just reinforced my desire to go to the US Nationals in Portland, which turned out to be my best run in singles out there where I got to the semi-finals. I beat Ricardo Diaz, then I played John Bike. He beat me in the first game and it was close in the second but he pulled out with a shoulder injury so I got a break there.

I played Tommy Little as he had beaten Emmett Peixoto. I beat Tommy in a tie breaker and then I played Naty Alvarado. The first game was nip and tuck up to 14 each and then he just reeled off five or six points. And then he started serving brilliantly and beat me well in the second game.

Over the next few years, I had qualified for the second Ultimate Handball Showdown beating Dan Armijo in Kansas in one of the play-off spots, however the tournament never materialised. I'd been playing well domestically getting to the All-Ireland semis before running into Paul. Then in 2005, Paul won the US Nationals in Houston (where Allan Garner beat me in the quarters), Tony and I teamed up to win the doubles beating Marcos Chavez and Emmet Peixoto.

One of my favourite events was the Casey Lawlor cup in 2005 at the South End Rowing Club in San Francisco, a Ryder Cup style event pitting Ireland against America. It was me vs John Bike, Dessie vs Peixoto, Eoin vs Garner, Tony vs Munoz and Paul against Alvarado. The atmosphere was fantastic, raucous but respectful.

Bike beat me well in the first game and was 16-4 up in the second. When I watch the game back, I played really poorly, I was nervous, missed easy back wall shots and nowhere near as sharp as I normally was. I remember during the second just exhaling, relaxing my shoulders and to telling myself that there was nothing to lose, swing freely and play one point at a time.

I chipped away at him and eventually snuck the second game. The tiebreaker was a bit cagey, extending rallies. It was after a lung busting rally that I called a time out, it was the first and only time I had to call a time due to tiredness, and John Bike started doing star jumps on court which annoyed me.

I was thinking to myself, 'I'll f***ing show him', and went in and scored three or four straight points before sneaking out the win. Reflecting back I never should have won that game and I'm sure Bike is still thinking how did I steal it from him.

Around 2007, I travelled to Minnesota to play in the US Nationals, playing the local favourite Matt Hiber in the last 16, and I lost the first 21-19 after being 19-15 up, that totally flattened me and I was well beaten in the second game. I was furious with myself and wanted to make amends in the doubles. Tony and I had teamed up again where we won our second doubles title beating Sean Lenning and Luis Moreno in the final in two tight games.

By then I was working in Jordanstown as an Engineering Research Associate after I'd obtained my PhD and a job came up in the Sports Institute to manage the physiology lab and help with the athletes.

Obviously being involved at a high level in handball, a job in high performance sports was always something that appealed to me. I had been doing courses on the side and that was always the route that I wanted to go down. I remember I had the interview the same week as the Nationals in Kansas in 2008.

They wouldn't change it so I had to do the interview and miss the singles and just go out later and play the doubles with Tony, where we were beaten by Allan Garner and Tyler Hamel, it was unfortunate, Tony and Paul had just finished a blockbuster singles final in which Paul won in the tiebreaker, 30 minutes after the match Tony was back on court with me but he was exhausted. I was lucky though that I got the job.

Around that time, my shoulder was giving me a lot of hassle, and it turned out that I had three tears in my rotator cuff muscles. Playing side arm power shots was causing a shooting pain that became unbearable. It got to the stage where I wasn't playing as much, resting it and adapting my swing but it came to a head when I was playing Michael Gregan in a tournament, I was 16-5 up and went for a shot while off balance, and the pain in my shoulder was excruciating.

I could barely swing my arm and he came back and beat me, I ended up forfeiting the game, and didn't play for nearly a year. I'd decided to focus on my job at the institute and I went back and did a Masters in Applied Sport and Exercise Science. After around a year, plenty of shoulder rehab and a few injections, I started back playing but I no longer had that hunger and drive.

I was training and playing because I loved training and playing but I didn't have that feeling, not being able to wait to go to the next tournament. I had got married as well and again, my focus was on getting our house renovated and marriage, things like that. I still played and did alright, got to a couple of All-Ireland semi-finals, but I knew in my heart of hearts that I wasn't as dedicated as I used to be

And your career was taking over at that point.

Yeah. In the Institute then, part of my role was to look after sports and athletes. I was away with athletics, football and other sports a lot of the time so I was missing tournaments and championships and all that. Now, the priority was work. Any time I could play, I would but then I took a second job as a fitness coach for Cliftonville and that took up any spare time I had for training. The intensity of my training dropped right down another level.

By that stage Charly Shanks and Aisling Reilly were eligible to become institute athletes and I was assigned to look after them due to my experience in the game. Charly had been doing well and

qualified as an elite athlete whilst Aisling had been battling with Fiona Shannon at the time as the number one in Ireland.

Although I was still playing, I felt conflicted between my profession and my sport. I played Charly in the Ulster semi-final and it went to a tiebreaker and I remember one of the S&C coaches had come to watch. I had beaten him well in the first game and he beat me in the second and the tiebreaker was close but I didn't have that push to go for it.

Charly would have beaten me anyway but how would it have looked if a SINI athlete had been beaten by one of the practitioners looking after him? That was always in my head. I played Charly in training matches and really enjoyed them. I was a really good training player because I never really dropped too much from tournament play.

The funny thing was, I was playing pretty well because I was relaxed. It wasn't that I didn't care but I knew it wasn't the be-all and end-all and because of that, I just played the games for enjoyment. If I won, I won, if I didn't, I didn't. Charly, and I good games and he was getting stronger, he was benefitting from getting strength and conditioning, nutrition and sports science support, the same with Aisling. They would come in at six in the morning, work on S&C and then play handball in the evening. He put a massive effort in to those three to six years to get where he got.

There was a three or four-year period where Charly did really well. I was absolutely delighted when he won the All-Ireland because he deserved it. Aisling was also successful during that time, we'd play on Wednesday evenings and the games would be used as conditioners, she won a few Worlds and senior All-Irelands during that time and her dedication to training was phenomenal.

I'd also play Paul Brady once a week six or eight weeks before a tournament at that stage knowing I would give him a good game, he would use me as a training progression and I didn't mind that because I wasn't going out to tournaments at that stage and I was happy to help him train and we'd have a bit of craic afterwards.

At that stage I was 32-33 and I knew I was only playing for the craic of it. I went back and played over 35s and I played Gavin Buggy, it was a real tough game. I won the tiebreaker, it was a very enjoyable game, but I had knee problems at the time.

The game was on the Saturday or the Sunday and then on the Tuesday I was in for knee surgery. That was another year out of handball and then I came back playing for fun and two years later I needed more knee surgery, I thought I was 25 again! By then I moved from Cliftonville to Linfield and that was an extra night gone.

So you still play handball regularly but not competitively?

I try and play twice a week, a few bike sessions as well as work. When I look back, I'd probably say I stepped away from the game really competitively at 27-28 whereas before that, handball was everything. Absolutely, I still love playing. Because of the nature of my work, I can't go and play tournament handball but I'm always playing once or twice a week. I love the game.

The funny thing is, I've actually been playing well because there's a release and a relaxation there now. Rather than relying on fitness, my game is more measured, methodical and strategic. I still play on Wednesdays and Sundays with the likes of Sean Devine, Ciaran Crothers, Mark Rainey, Jordan O'Neill, Owen McKenna, Sean Clarke, Paul Graham and Charly. We have a handball group WhatsApp where we can arrange games.

Do you still keep in touch with what's going on at the top level and can we expect to see you back competing?

I have been watching a lot of handball at YouTube at night recently when the kids are in bed. I love watching Chapman play, to do what he did in his shape when he came back in 2009... I love watching Bike too. It's nostalgia, I watched Paul Brady and Chapman in Alaska and it brought me back to watching that wee kid in the colleges in Armagh.

I came across videos of me and Tony's doubles games, I didn't know they were on YouTube. I texted Tony, I said 'I always thought you were carrying me, I can see now it was me doing all the work!'

Watching the games back gives whets the appetite. But I have to be careful with my knee, it aches when I play, and I have a couple of tears in my right shoulder so I have to manage that. But I love playing.

I love watching Mulkerrins, Nash, McCarthy, Killian Carroll and the other younger ones coming up. It's great to see them dominating the Irish and American tournaments. These lads have all benefitted from the likes of Brady, Kennedy and Healy playing in America. The whole style of handball has changed since then.

Nash reminds me of me in that he loves to run although he's better than me in that he's better at killing the ball. A brilliant player. I enjoy watching Mulkerrins too, he hits the ball so hard, the effect it has on the ball reminds me of Tati Silveyra.

And McCarthy at the minute is still playing super handball. Within a step or half a step from the middle of the court he is in the front re-creating it, he was a child prodigy and it looked like he might dominate but was unfortunate due to Paul's brilliance and longevity as well as the progress of the likes of Nash, Carroll and Mulkerrins, but it looks like he's had a second wind.

To me, I wasn't at the highest level of senior players. I was a decent senior player and I got to experience some great moments, making lifelong friends, and travel all across America. My only regret is that I've never played in a world championships, I missed those through injury, illness or work. At some stage I will fulfil that goal, whether it be in the Over 40s or Over 45s.