

My Handball Life: Killian Carroll

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Paul Fitzpatrick caught up with current 4-Wall World Champion Killian Carroll, the Cork superstar who is now based in Boston.



How have you been coping in lockdown?

I've been coping in lockdown better than others. I haven't been going stir crazy because I've still been working most days of the week as a labourer. Also, it has given me time to work out a bit more now that all the handball is off and work on different parts of my life and even handball game without playing handball.

I haven't played in a four-wall court since the last WPH tournament in February but I played a bit of one-wall two weeks ago. So that was the only handball I've had since the shutdown.

How did you first get introduced to the game? Do you recall your first time playing and did you have a talent for the game immediately?

I was first introduced to the game when the local trainer by the name of Billy O'Connell was drinking in my grandparents' pub. He asked my father, who was working there at the time, if his kids had an interest in trying out handball. My brother said he would and I was dying to because, of course, whatever my brother did I wanted to do too, although I couldn't actually try out right away because I was only five and the starting age was six.

So as soon as I turned six I showed up and never looked back since.

What was it you liked about the sport?

I liked handball for many reasons. You get a lot more playing time than most sports. You are the only person who could make an impact and you couldn't blame anyone else if things went wrong. It's very challenging and at the same time it is very rewarding.

Did you have an immediate talent for the game?

I didn't have much talent for the game but a lot of my friends played and also made a lot of friends through handball so I did like going. I don't remember my first day playing but I do remember that it took two years for me to hit the ball off the backwall. I remember feeling extremely happy that I got it.

That happiness was soon replaced with jealousy straight after when my childhood best friend Pa Herlihy hit a backwall shot straight after me. I was upset because he was seven and only playing a year and I was eight and playing two years in.

Did you have any early breakthroughs? How much did you practise and with who?

I've had a lot of breakthroughs and setbacks in my career. My early breakthroughs were just getting picked for the county team in doubles. It's what really hooked me in and I just kept advancing from there.

Then being good enough to play singles and play with the best in my age group. Then came the big breakthrough, playing the trials for the Irish team to set out for the 2008 Junior Nationals in America. That's what really opened my eyes at what handball had to offer. Competing on that international stage and the huge deal and hype that surrounded it was nothing short of amazing. I believe everything snowballed from there.

I've had a lot of training partners over the years, each as important as the next. My first training partner was my childhood best friend Patrick Herlihy. The best training partner to start with, he was competitive, tenacious and I've never seen a better handballer in my life for the promise he showed.

I'm sad he didn't dedicate himself more but at the same time I'm very grateful for obvious reasons. In my later years it was always local players in Munster. My brother Tadgh Carroll, Brendan Fleming, Stephen Palmer, Tony Healy, Patrick Buckley, CJ Fitzpatrick, Diarmaid Nash, Dominick Lynch and Paul Hedderman. I was always extremely grateful how everyone in Munster would train with each other. It helped all our games move to another level.

What was your first overseas trip playing handball?

I first internationally travelled to Canada in 2006 for the World Championships in Alberta, Edmonton. It was definitely the most fun and best organised worlds I was ever at!

Did you play other sports growing up and, if so, to what level? Was there a point when you decided that you had to focus everything you had on handball?

I played every sport I was exposed to in my home town with the exception of rugby and golf. I was never really any good at sports. I had just one thing in common, I hated to lose and I would always try my best. I gave up all other sports when I was about 14 to focus everything on handball. I wish now that I didn't because I believe playing multiple sports is better for your body and also for your sport.

Who were the players you looked up to as a juvenile? Do you have memories of watching the top senior stars in action?

The players I looked up to were Paul Brady, Tony Healy and Eoin Kennedy, the unstoppable top three players in Ireland when I was growing up. I have great memories of Tony and Paul playing, more Paul than Tony because I never got to see Tony too much in his prime and not live anyway.

I remember the Nationals in 2009 held in Ulster. Paul Brady played Eoin Kennedy in the final and I never saw a more relentless show of dominance in the court by Paul, he killed anything he got set up for. I remember one shot; he killed it off the backwall while he was off balance, steamed the ball for a roll out while it spun towards the right wall and jumped a solid three inches. My jaw dropped to say the least.

A memory I have of Tony was Brendan Fleming playing him in the county final in Mallow. Tony didn't warm up and just talked and laughed before going into the match, this was a time when Brendan was playing very competitively at senior. Tony from the word go couldn't do anything wrong and won very convincingly over in about 30 minutes.

It was amazing to see Tony play because the style and methodical approach makes him seem like an incredible handball tactician and just the way he moves he transfers his body effortlessly and with such flow in a way it makes it seem he doesn't waste a thought or step. Like he moves like water.

When you broke through into senior handball, you quickly rose through the ranks and began to develop a rivalry with Paul Brady. Can you tell us about that?

Playing handball at senior level, I did rise through the ranks quickly. To me, I think I got very lucky because I came in when handball in Ireland was getting a lot weaker because the dominant trio was no more.

This left an opening for players that were good but not at the same level as Tony, Paul and Eoin. So I made a name by turning out good results, getting to the final in the Golden Gloves, then getting lucky in Mayo by getting to another final – but that was only luck going my way as I played Michael Gregan in the semis, who would have beaten me easy but had to forfeit due to injury, so I got to another final.

After that I was getting more capable and more confident playing senior players which is half the battle. In time came a rivalry with Paul. I don't know if you would call it a rivalry or just that we've had tense experiences in the past. The Nationals have a lot to do with I suppose.

When I was younger watching the seniors I always felt annoyed about the fact that everyone thought Paul was too good and it wasn't even worth trying to reach him. I even heard one time that people were waiting for him to retire so they could try and claim that number one spot.



For me, that sparked a vision that being the best wasn't good enough and the All-Ireland wasn't the title in my mind, Brady was, because of the player he is. The most dominant, feared, respected, best player handball has ever seen to date.

I was always chasing him, not titles, because he was the title in my mind. To me I saw him as an enemy because I had to but I have the utmost respect for him as a handballer as to me he is the only professional I have ever seen in my lifetime and one must admire the level he reached in his career.

I hope our rivalry isn't over and we see each other in the future. I know he's not as good as he was in his prime. I don't think I've ever played him at his best but still he's one hell of a player and brings something very exciting to the court.

You have mentioned in the past that you wrote down in a diary as a child that one day you would be world champion. I find that extraordinary and really impressive. What inspired you to write something like that?

I was inspired to write that some day I would like to be a world champion when I first wrote a question in a copy book the night before the Cumann na mBunscol doubles final I had with Colm Kearney from Ballydesmond. I simply wrote down the year and the name of the tournament with two boxes, one for a loss and one for a win.

The next day I was lucky to tick the box with a win and I thought 'that's it, I know what I want, I want to be the best' and shortly after that I wrote it down, never to forget what I wanted and where I wanted to go.

Scary to think I was 10 at the time and far from a prodigy. I was a man with a vision and a dream or an Aisling as I used to call it. Every year after that my vision got stronger and my goal got closer till the day I achieved it.

Then, winning the Worlds was an unbelievable experience. It really was a dream come true and a great day. I thought it would have felt better but the euphoria didn't last long as all of a sudden you think where to go from here.

That was a hard experience to cope with as everything you wanted came through and you're thinking 'what's next?'. Even though winning the Worlds was a great feeling, I'll say the journey there was

definitely more enjoyable but the fact that I have both is something I will never regret and cherish for the rest of my life.

Some day I will like to give back to the sport and hope that I can give kids the experiences I have got out of the sport and help them on their handball journey.

You have also excelled in One-wall handball. What do you like about that code and have you much experience in 60x30 and American three-wall handball?

One-wall I enjoy because it's fast and aggressive but I don't take it very seriously. I like it because it's easy to pick up and accuracy is extremely important. I don't have much experience playing 60x30 but I would love to play in the Junior championship some day.

As far as three wall here in America, I've only dabbled in the game but it is enjoyable and different. It seems to be more about getting together, enjoying time together outside and the good weather along with playing nothing but pinch ceiling shots and total offense.

I'm not very good; because of the four-wall, I'm always moving back, which is a bad move in one-wall and three-wall.

A few years ago, you were known as a retriever and the fastest player in the game. In my opinion, your breakthrough came when you elevated the attacking end of your game in particular. Would you agree with that statement and if so, when did you identify this and how did you go about addressing it?

My game before was a lot different. I was more a retriever and could move around the court at a good pace. As far as being called the fastest, that's a stretch as that would have to go to Brian Carroll in my opinion.

I knew I had to focus more on playing more fundamental handball when I wasn't really showing consistent results. I was getting far in competitions but every game was a struggle and by the time the end was near, I was just too exhausted and couldn't play my best and would always fall short or not be fit to move for the following two weeks.

America helped in this regard for many reasons. The biggest reason was having less time to train. I believe I was training too much. When I wasn't training as much, I realised I was getting better.

After this I realised less is more, especially when it comes to learning precise skills like specific handball shots. Also, the style of play here in America isn't defence and some players don't even know what that is. If I wanted to succeed here, I needed to become more of an offensive player and be more in control of the game and not being on the back foot by diving and retrieving.

What is life like in Boston? Is there a strong handball community there? And what is life like living in Trump's America in general for a young Irishman in 2020?

Life in Boston is great. It's got a bit of everything. It's got a lot of diversity like most cities, also a lot of Irish which is great to get on your feet in a new place.

I like Boston because it's lively, small, very historic and it's just a beautiful place to be especially with all the new development going on. I wouldn't pick another city other than Boston. I think it suits me and I'm really settled in here and will stay here if I can.

Where do you train and with who?

Here in the states I train at the Boston Athletic Club which is located in South Boston. It only has one court and is very expensive but the gym facilities are great. Also, I train at the New York Athletic Club when I'm in New York to train with Stephen Cooney as there are no regular handballers in Boston to have competitive matches with.

Before competitions, I stop all damaging training which means I train a lot less and when I train, it's not intense at all, just to make sure I'm sharpening my skills or learning something new and making sure my body is ready to tackle the tournament.

I also like to be as busy as I can at work to not think about the upcoming tournament so I can be less in my own head.

You mentioned before that an ambition of yours is to help grow the game in the United States. How do you envisage handball can grow over there and what are your thoughts on the health of the game in the US?

It's something that I would like to be a part of but I'm not sure being part of it nationally. Maybe I might like to do that when the time comes but I see myself just setting up a club, hopefully in the Boston area.

I'm not sure where handball will be in the future here in America. The future looks very bleak and could die out. For me, my vision for handball will never die because I plan to train kids when my pro career stops or slows down and I have more time on my hands to commit to it.

The dream goal would be to set up a handball club here in Boston associated with the GAA in Ireland. This would help because most handball courts here are in gyms and do not allow kids in. So I believe just having a court you can access at any time just like you can in Ireland is a huge benefit.

Hopefully I will have the funds and resources where I can make this happen, hopefully with the help of Stephen Cooney who also would like to set up a GAA handball club here on the east coast of America. You never know, maybe we can both set up or own one in New York and one in Massachusetts and get a good rivalry going but for now coaching kids anywhere in America will have to do for the time being.

Do you see yourself returning home to compete in the All-Ireland Senior Singles at some stage?

I will return home to play the All Ireland Championship once more just to experience Irish handball at its best and also try to achieve an All-Ireland at senior level but I will see in the coming months, as I will have a better idea with travel and when handball returns and the schedule as well!



Where do you think Killian Carroll will be in five and ten years' time?

I see myself five years from now stepped away from full-time handball, focusing more on my future and also more with training kids. Saying that, I believe I will be playing handball tournaments for as long as I can in every age division.

How do you view handball in Ireland today? Realistically, where do you believe the sport can go or should go?

Handball is great in Ireland and has maybe reached its apex when it comes to juvenile numbers. I don't see these numbers dwindling for the foreseeable future.

I will say that Ireland will encounter the same problem as America. People are becoming more attracted to living in cities and this will take handball players away as that is where handball has its least players. Also, as Ireland starts to develop into a better economy, I believe that community

activities in small towns and villages will decrease dramatically as kids are spending a lot more time indoors playing games or doing the next fad on social media, giving less time to sports.

Then trying to compete with sports that showcase on TV with large viewing bases like rugby, football and hurling will be difficult. So when it comes to picking a sport, handball will be low down on the list and wont reap in the players from word to mouth from friends or just even from being big in the local community.

If handball wants to improve or just survive it will have to infiltrate the big cities and commercialise the sport, making it more interesting like changing the format, which I'm actually not a big fan of but it seems it might be the only way.