

New chapter unfolds in storied history of Croke Park Handball

By Paul Fitzpatrick

28th August 2019



Handball in Dublin obviously didn't begin in 1970 with the opening of the famous centre on St Joseph's Avenue but the game did now have a focal point. This was a point that was acknowledging that the sport had outgrown facilities around the capital, which had been there for decades previous - with some long-abandoned alleys stretching back to before the 1900s.

The game required a national centre to encourage a new wave of interest and on October 5, 1970, they got it. Just.

A story in the Irish Independent, dated October 6 and under the headline 'Alley Barely in Time', reported 'the great occasion when President de Valera and the Taoiseach Jack Lynch were there in the newly-erected ball alley, all concrete slabs and glass, for the opening of the world Handball Championships'.

The report adds that the tournament was a first for Ireland, 'and the new alley was finished just in time. Barely. The workmen were still engaged on smoothing the outer wall when the crowd of guests began to arrive'.

The programme for the opening Worlds was between players from Mexico, USA, Australia, Canada and obviously our good selves. The World Handball Council remembers the event thus:

“The Irish council members took their charge seriously, with significant fund-raising efforts in 1968 resulting in the construction of a glass showcase court in 1969 in Croke Park. The GAA was highly

instrumental in helping with the funding for this court... Pat Kirby of the US defeated all comers in singles, with Ireland's Joe Maher earning second place. Ireland's Richie Lyng and Seamus Buggy went undefeated in doubles to win that crown, with Bob Wilson and Mel Brown of Canada taking second place.

"This 1970 competition revealed that the showcase court's design helped make the game much more readily viewed and appreciated by courtside spectators, as well as a TV audience."

Dev, who was seen the week before inspecting the centre and 'knocking a few vigorous balls against the wall', had his audience. That de Valera was a fan of handball is true - and not only that, he was handy. While in Arbour Hill, imprisoned revolutionary Austin Stack wrote in his diary that on April 26, 1924, 'Dev beat me decisively a couple of times'.

If the notion of Dev handing out on-court punishment to Stack is a novel one today, back then the alleys were the backdrop of many the revolutionary.

It has been estimated that, in 1916, hundreds of thousands played nationwide. On Easter Monday of the Rising, alleys were places where whispers of trouble on O'Connell St were heard and heeded as a sign to make yourself invisible.

The game flourished, though, almost as a community within a community, ingrained by resistance to foreign rule - a most binding of ties. (To this day, medals with 'Kilmainham Prison Handball Tournament' - played in the yard where the leaders of 1916 were shot - still survive.)

Almost right on cue, just two months beforehand, in February of 1916, an association for the government of handball in Dublin was put together. At the first meeting, new clubs from the hot-beds of Drumcondra, Ballymun, Ashtown, Clondalkin, St James' and the central 'City of Dublin' all registered.

Dublin was a pocketed hive of handball activity and republicanism back then, and almost all the main movers in the Rising would have played to various standards. 1916 was a memorable year, of course, for both pursuits.

In February of that year, an "Association for the Government of Handball in Dublin City and the County" had been established. At the first meeting, new clubs from Ashtown, Drumcondra, Ballymun, Clondalkin, "City of Dublin" and St Catherine's (who were based around the James's St area) registered. Presiding over the meeting was one Francis Xavier, or 'FX', Coghlan, a 30-year-old handball champion and active and high-ranking Republican who was close to Michael Collins's inner circle. A

native of Sheep's Head in Cork, Coghlan was based by this time in Dublin, around the Ballyboden area, where he had close links to the Pearse brothers, who also encouraged handball in their school, St Enda's.

By 1924, the game was thriving in Dublin (there were "international matches" played in Ballymun that year) with Terenure, the 'Castle Court' in Clontarf and, later, the Garda Depot in the Phoenix Park among the famous venues in the capital.

And the GAA, recognising the surge in handball's popularity, began construction on a new court - an outdoor ball alley at the back of Hill 16 - at Croke Park in 1929 at a cost of £2,000.

Congress had agreed to go ahead with the new facility on foot of a motion from Cavan delegate BC Fay, a very well-known official in the Breffni County at the time.

However, it wasn't until 1941 at the 20th annual convention of the Dublin handball committee that it was announced that the association had given permission for Dublin county championship games to be staged at the alley at the stadium.

The court was later revamped and was officially re-opened by the GAA Vice-President, Dr JJ Stuart, in May, 1954.

By the late 1960s, the game was booming in the city and the work began on the new alley for the great and the good of the world to see.

And the world's Greatest? He soon saw it alright.



Dr. J. J. Stuart, Chairman, Leinster G.A.A. Council and Vice-President, G.A.A., re-opening the door to Croke Park handball alley, yesterday. Also in group, reading left to right, are: Dr. C. J. Harwood, P.C. (Delegate to Central G.A.A. Council); Sergt. P. Caulfield (Connacht H. Council); B. Hayden (Hon. Sec., Dublin Board); P. L. Rogan (Chairman, Leinster H. Council); T. J. McElligott (Gen. Sec., I.A.H.A.); P. D. Breen (ex-President, G.A.A.); G. Moran (Sec., Ulster H. Council); J. P. Lynch (Sec., Leinster H. Council); T. B. Kennedy (Sec., Munster Council); P. J. O'Keeffe (Gen. Sec., G.A.A.); J. Bergin (President, I.A.H.A.),

Ahead of his 1972 fight against Al 'Blue' Lewis in Croke Park, Muhammad Ali would hold an open training session at the alley for a packed crowd, working out to wow those behind the glass, only breaking to deliver the odd zinger to the delighted masses lucky enough to catch the champ in the flesh.

"It's hard to be humble when you're as good as I am" and "Everybody knows I'm beautiful... Look at me. Look at my nose, my eyes... I don't have a scratch on me. Look at how many girls come to watch me train. They know I'm the prettiest fighter!" are just two still recorded on film that, typical of the man, charmed even the back of stands into shyness.

Those present giddily lapped it up. It was all good fun and that spirit was to continue for generations, albeit on a more local level. The co-operation of the founding members, for example, is still remembered through the names on the plaque of the 'Cairde an Cuirte' that still hangs on the wall - and in the background of many a photo of a night out.

Continuing the trend, in 1979, further social facilities would be added as an important part of the centre, which was granted a sports club bar licence. Over the past 40 years, families have built up life-long friendships and, in a safe atmosphere, the elderly and those with special needs can also enjoy

events, birthdays, karaoke nights, quiz nights, or just the world-famous Dublin-style sing-song among friends.

The club has been championed by the local residents as being a vital and vibrant social outlet for an area of Dublin that has been hit as hard as any by the capital's inner city problems - former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, from down the road, is just one of many known admirers acknowledging the importance of the facilities that include martial arts, pool and darts in addition to the action of the 40x20 and 60x30 alleys.

Through the generations, many legends of Irish game have graced the centre, and from all over Ireland, too numerous to mention. Top players from overseas have also played there with success.



Fifty years after the opening of the official 'Irish Handball Council Sports Centre Club', it will soon be time to decamp to pastures new. After a long and arduous journey for all concerned, the club's new home is to be located at the plush new €12 million centre to the south of the Cusack Stand. While it is a stone's throw away from the corner of the Hill, it will be a new world for all concerned.

The community within the community might be moving into its new house but some things are, and will, remain timeless and unaffected by these mighty revolutions past or present, inside or out.