

## Profiled: John Fleming, Ballyanne

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**They say if you're good at handball you're good at everything and there is probably more than a grain of truth in those words. They also say you should never 'poke' a tiger and if you do, then you need to be ready for the response.**

Those two sayings could have been created with John Fleming in mind, as the young Ballyanne player showed tremendous early promise as a young handballer, before going on to represent Wexford in senior handball and senior hurling. He was very proficient at gaelic football and soccer too, in a lengthy career that spanned almost four decades. He was also known to have a 'spiky' side, which, depending on your allegiance I suppose, could be seen as either a plus or a minus. John Fleming himself would definitely have seen it as a positive and indeed without it he might well have been a lesser player!

He began his career at nearby Ballyanne in 1973 at 13 years of age, by which time the great Dick Lyng had already won three All Ireland senior titles, two singles and one doubles, as well as the Gael Linn Cup on three occasions. Ballyanne was a very big club in those days, with a large membership and a huge amount of in-house activity and right from the start the ambitious youngster benefited from the feel-good factor that permeated every fibre of this historic New Ross district club.

Big name players and big club teams were regular visitors to the local court and top-class handball was a stable, practically on his doorstep. A budding young player with talent and ability was bound to be interested in what was going on, but he would also need ambition and attitude to follow in the footsteps of those he watched. John Fleming had both of those in spades. He was 'lucky' too that around the same time, Pat Cleary, son of club chairman Simmy Cleary, had also begun playing and together they took the first steps that would see them go on to become one of the most formidable partnerships the game had ever seen.



Success came their way quite quickly, inside two years to be exact, when in 1975 they captured the Willwood Tailteann (All Ireland Championships) under 16 doubles title.

Coincidentally, it was the same year that Dick Lyng and Pat Murphy won the All Ireland senior doubles championship and the joint success heightened interest even further and sent the new kids on their way in the very best Ballyanne tradition. From that point on the names being mentioned locally, in addition to Lyng and Buggy or Lyng and Murphy, were Fleming and Cleary and while that raised profile did up the ante each time they took the court, the youngsters simply revelled in the limelight and set their sights even higher.

As their careers progressed in the following years, county championship battles between the pair became more intense as the rivalry between them grew, but they never lost sight of their destiny and never took their eyes from the bigger national picture.

After competing strongly without national success at minor level, mainly due to the presence of the great Tony Ryan, Tipperary, persistence paid off when it came to the under 21 grade, with Fleming and Cleary winning three All Ireland under 21 doubles titles, 1978 and '80 in softball and '80 in 40x20. The partnership was a steadily growing force, but the best was still to come.

1981 was a big year for John Fleming and the first in which he really established himself as a serious singles player. He had been close on a number of occasions previously but this time he nailed it with a double success in the very competitive All Ireland 40x20 junior championship. The smaller court was beginning to gain some real traction and status, having only seen championship action since 1975, but Fleming was rapidly developing a liking for this type of game. He had the ability to play 40x20 shots that many of his opponents didn't have; he could hit the roof with right or left and he possessed a brilliantly disguised, side wall sidearm kill with his left. He could also rely on a fiery personality to get him through when things got tough, a quality so necessary for a player born into the wide open spaces of the 60x30 court and now operating in the 'cramped surrounds' of a much smaller arena.

The Ballyanne man swept through the junior singles field with considerable authority and then slammed (as they say nowadays) by adding the junior doubles title with Pat Cleary. The doubles victory in particular had huge significance as it brought both players up to senior at the same time and led directly to what happened afterwards

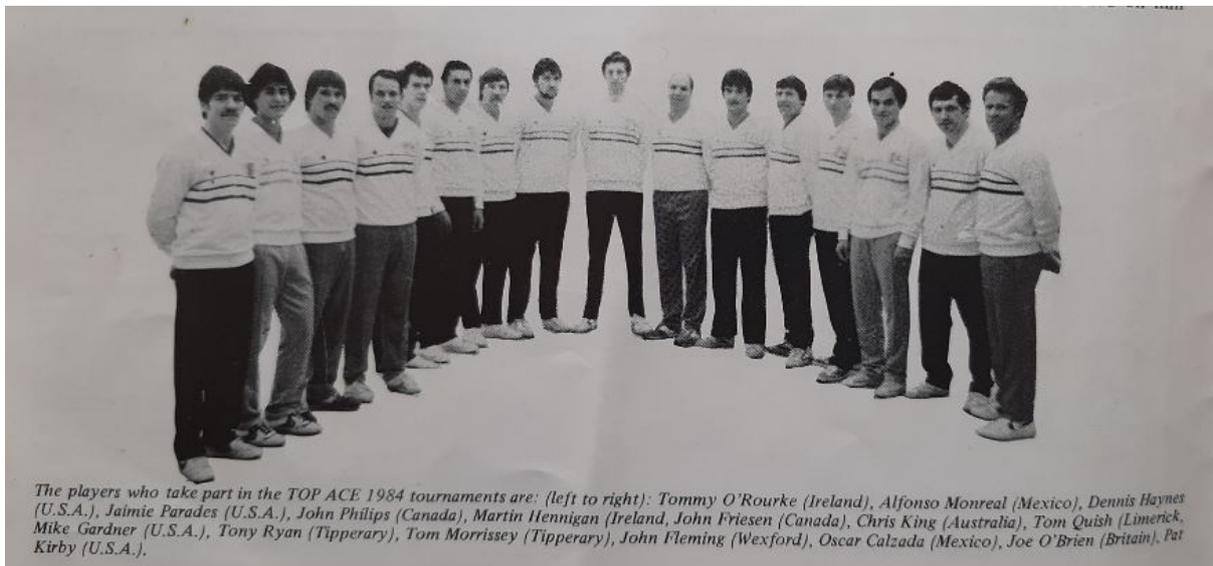


What did happen was truly historic, as not only did Fleming and Cleary continue their winning run in 1982 by winning the All Ireland senior doubles title, in doing so they became the first and only partnership to have won the senior doubles 4 wall (40x20) title in their very first year in the grade. It's been 37 years since they did it and only Eddie Corbett and John O'Donoghue, Tipperary in 1991, have matched that achievement in the meantime. How difficult it is to make that step up is even

better illustrated when softball is added to the equation, as only one other partnership, McGarry and Mullins from Limerick, managed it in 1958, in a sport going all the way back to 1925. Today that fact alone highlights the magnitude of their achievement, but back then it also placed them squarely in the crosshairs of all the top pairings in the country.

Fleming and Cleary were ready for that challenge.

By the time they reached the 1983 All Ireland senior doubles final against brilliant Tipperary brothers Tony and Noel Ryan at Croke Park, everything was in place for a spectacular performance. Tony Ryan was the reigning three-time senior singles champion at that time and now at the height of his powers, he posed a huge threat to Wexford's title ambitions. But this was Fleming and Cleary and if part of being considered great is being able to produce your best when the challenge facing you is also great, then the reigning champions ticked that box in no uncertain terms at Croke Park on that day in '83. In what was later described in the media as a "devastating display", the Wexford boys ran Tipp ragged throughout and even though the brothers changed sides at one stage, they were powerless to prevent the holders retaining the title on a score line of 21-15, 21-11.



*The players who take part in the TOP ACE 1984 tournaments are: (left to right): Tommy O'Rourke (Ireland), Alfonso Monreal (Mexico), Dennis Haynes (U.S.A.), Jaimie Parades (U.S.A.), John Philips (Canada), Martin Hennigan (Ireland), John Friesen (Canada), Chris King (Australia), Tom Quish (Limerick), Mike Gardner (U.S.A.), Tony Ryan (Tipperary), Tom Morrissey (Tipperary), John Fleming (Wexford), Oscar Calzada (Mexico), Joe O'Brien (Britain), Pat Kirby (U.S.A.).*

1984 turned out to be a very special year for John Fleming. All Ireland titles in 40×20 senior doubles, 60×30 junior singles and doubles as well as the centenary doubles, and the county senior singles and doubles saw him enjoy success at every level of the sport. In any other year his runner-up spot in the All Ireland 40×20 senior singles would be worthy of much more than a footnote, but such was his dominance everywhere else, it hardly seemed to matter at all.

The three in a row All Ireland senior doubles title alongside Pat Cleary duly arrived at Kilcoleman, Tipperary in June, when they defeated Mick Ahearne & Tom Fitzgerald, Kerry 21-14, 21-19 in a match where they had to come from 14-19 down in the second to win. It was to be their last title together (until they surfaced again to win the masters A doubles in 2000), but the magnitude of what they achieved can best be measured 36 years on, as only one other pairing, Paul Brady and Michael Finnegan, Cavan (2010-14) have managed to better that in the meantime. They also remain the only Wexford pairing to have won the senior doubles in the 45 years of the 40×20 code.



*Pictured with GAA President Paddy Buggy at the Gaelic Star National Awards*

John Fleming's achievements during that golden period saw him pick up several richly deserved awards. These included the GAA Gaelic Star Handballer of the Year in '83 and '84, the Sea Link GAA Personality of the Month in both '83 and '84 and the Powers Gold Label Award in '80 and '84.

After the 5-year unbeaten run ended with defeat to Kilkenny in 1985, John Fleming was less visible on the intercounty scene as hurling took centre stage, but it was far from the end of the story for one of Wexford's best. The international aspect of the smaller court had always appealed to him and when the opportunity to represent Ireland at the World Championships in Melbourne, Australia in 1988 came along, the spark within was ignited once more. Fleming had already worn the green of Ireland in Dublin and Toronto but this would be different. This was the Open Doubles event alongside regular partner Pat Cleary, the highest grade in world handball, and the trip of a lifetime.

First though the trials lay ahead and it was time to find out if they could do it again, more than three years after their last All Ireland triumph.

The task was daunting with the reigning All Ireland senior doubles champions Tom Sheridan and James McGovern, Meath in the field and players from other counties joining forces in an effort to create a winning partnership. The royals were top seeds and clear favourites to win out but John Fleming and Pat Cleary, seeded four, had other ideas. They clashed at the semi final stage and in a match described by both John and Pat as the toughest they ever played in, the Wexford boys prevailed 11-10 in the tiebreak of a monumental encounter.

With that huge obstacle removed, the final against Pat Hall, Dublin and Michael Reade, Kilkenny, played in December '87 was a less hectic affair and was won by a rather comfortable 21-13, 21-8. It was made so by a performance described in newspaper reports as 'scintillating' and it showed they were already at full pitch for the challenge that lay ahead.



*John Fleming and John Rossiter are with Caimin Jones following their World championship win in 1994*

The world games took place at the King Village Club in Melbourne from March 14-19 and the brilliant Ballyanne duo defeated Mexico (21-16, 21-13), Canada (21-17, 21-18) and Australia (21-11, 21-15), before going down 21-12, 21-18 to the defending champions Joe Kendler and Poncho Monreal from America in the final. By any standards it was a satisfying outcome, as the top American players were a fair bit ahead of the Irish in those days and it was to take another 15 years and 5 world championships for an Irish winner to emerge in this doubles grade.

John Fleming was not to end his career without a world title though and in Clare in 1994 he partnered John Rossiter, Carlow to win the senior (over 35) doubles championship. It was fitting that a player of his stature ticked this box on his cv before calling it a day on the world stage.

Little had been heard of John Fleming on the handball scene during 1990-91 as he spent time in the USA and on the hurling fields and during those two years it was Ned Buggy who replaced him as the top man in Wexford. Then as the 1992 Wexford 40x20 senior singles championship got underway, a rejuvenated Fleming was back with only one thing on his mind. To reclaim his number one spot!

There had always been a strong rivalry at senior level between Wexford and Ballyanne, as players from each area fought for and shared titles in previous decades. At various times claims were made as to who was the best and this added greatly to the atmosphere when certain players went head to head. This was one such occasion and Fleming clearly felt his legacy was being questioned.

He was being poked and the tiger within began to grow!

His game had been steadily coming together as the championship progressed, but pride and determination would also be needed to backbone and sustain everything else. After his time away from the game however, were these qualities sufficiently intact for him to topple a good champion?

When he took on Ned Buggy in the county final at Horeswood on Wednesday, February 27<sup>th</sup> 1992, that question was answered as emphatically as it ever could be.

The crowd started to gather at least an hour before the match was due to start and by 8.30pm, a sardine would have found it hard to slip into the packed gallery. What happened will remain long in the memory of those who were present, as Fleming played like a man possessed to win the opening game 21-0. From about 15-0 onwards it was clear to everyone present that he was determined to hold Buggy scoreless in that first game, as he ran down almost impossible shots to win point after point. A shell-shocked Buggy left the court at the break as the crowd buzzed with disbelief at what had just unfolded.

The tension felt throughout that first game had been added to at one point, when a clearly frustrated Buggy uttered an expletive and every head in the place turned to look up at the back row in the gallery where the local priest was standing. Being amongst the last in, he was positioned on the top step with his head close to the ceiling, but clearly understanding the significance of the occasion, he produced a smile and everyone relaxed a little. A sign of the times we lived in I suppose!

Unbelievably the second game was a repetition of the first almost to the half way point, as Fleming again dominated the early exchanges on his way to building a 9-0 lead. Buggy did break his duck at that point but thereafter Fleming comfortably held him at bay on his way to a 21-9 win. It was a devastating performance by the winner in an extraordinary match and it settled for all time the debate over who was Wexford's best 40x20 player of that era.

John Fleming's career was inextricably linked to Pat Cleary's and while both enjoyed considerable success in their own right, it was what they shared together that set apart from their peers. Will we see their like again in Wexford?

John Fleming's advice to young players to "use your weaker hand more often" is not surprising considering how ambidextrous he was himself and his "always carry a ball – any ball any wall" slogan is surely something taken from his youth, when he first learned to hit a ball against a wall in a small room at his uncle Tom's farmhouse back in the 1970s!

From such humble beginnings dreams do sometimes come true!