

Profiled: Pat Cleary, Ballyanne

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The first player we profile is a man who, in a long and brilliant career, tasted success at just about every level of the sport. A man driven by ambition and by a burning desire to be the very best he could be.

Like everyone else Pat Cleary was not born a champion, but when he took up the game he was determined to become one. How well he succeeded is evident from what you are about to read.

Born into a famous handball house at Ballyanne and only a few good underhand strokes from the local court, Pat Cleary began his career, like everybody else playing in Ballyanne at that time, very much in the shadow of the great Dick Lyng.

It did not take long for Cleary to create his own profile however as he quickly forged a winning partnership with clubmate John Fleming, and the pairing were soon on the way to earning a name for themselves. In those early days it was pretty much all softball and the Willwood Tailteann (All Ireland) under 16 doubles title came their way in 1975, followed by under 21 doubles in both 1978 and 1980. Their rise to senior status in that particular code was confirmed when they won the junior doubles in 1984.

In the late 70s Cleary and Fleming had also begun to turn their attention to the 4-wall (40×20) court and attracted by the international aspect of this game they quickly established a fearsome reputation for themselves. They began by winning the under 21 doubles in 1980 and followed up with victory in the junior doubles in 1981. They made history the following year, 1982, when they captured the first of three senior doubles titles in succession, thus becoming the only pairing in the history of the game to win under 21, junior and senior in consecutive years. Those 3 senior doubles titles in '82, '83 and '84 established them as one of the all time great 4-wall partnerships and it speaks volumes that only two other pairings, Paul Brady/Michael Finnegan, Cavan and Pat Kirby/Michael Hogan, Clare have managed to better their achievement in 45 years. The pairing also won the special competition run to commemorate the centenary of the GAA in 1984.

During those five unbeaten years Pat Cleary commanded the right hand side of the court with absolute authority, mixing power and craft with a great ability to play the right shot at the right time. His overall reading of the game earned him the reputation of being one of the best right-sided players to have played in this, or any other era and forever secured his legacy in this ultra competitive sport.



At the peak of their powers!

In his profile Pat says the toughest match he ever played in took place in 1988, when he partnered Fleming to victory against Tom Sheridan and James McGovern, Meath in the final trial played to select the Irish representatives for the World Championships in Melbourne later that year. The Royals had won the All Ireland senior doubles in both '87 and '88 and were hot favourites to win this coveted trip of a lifetime, but just as they had done throughout their career, the Wexford boys rose to the challenge to pull off the type of victory that went down in the annals of handball history. Not surprisingly, Pat also describes this as the most enjoyable win of his career. In Australia later in the year the Ballyanne players went all the way to the final where they eventually gave best to reigning champions Poncho Monreal and Jon Kendler from the USA.

Apart from his earlier wins with regular partner John Fleming, another statistic that set Pat Cleary apart from his peers was that, later in his career he went on to win several doubles titles with different partners, including Benny Doyle, Johnny Goggins, Seamus McLoughlin and Seamus O'Connor. He also played on a number of successful Wexford teams throughout his career and finished his playing days with between 25 and 30 national titles to his credit. These included softball, 4 wall and hardball and bore testament to his versatility across the codes.

While Pat Cleary was acknowledged by all as a brilliant doubles player, it would be a mistake to think he was not a formidable singles player too. Although he tended to be more at home in doubles he did win All Ireland singles titles at over 40 and over 45. His greatest years in overage occurred in 2000 and 2001, when he proved well-nigh unbeatable in both singles and doubles competitions.

Arguably, his finest performance during that period came at Dublin City University in April 2000 when he defeated the almost invincible Micky Walsh, Roscommon in the Irish Nationals masters singles final. Walsh had won seven of the previous eight All Ireland championships and was justifiably considered the best over 40 player the sport had ever seen. In the presence of this writer on that day however, Cleary broke him down bit by bit, before eventually rolling over him like a train! It was an awesome performance and when put alongside another three titles that year, it rightly earned him the coveted GAA Handball Player of the Year award.



Pat receives the Waterford Crystal Player of the Year award. On right in picture is then President of GAA Handball Peter Carter.

Pat Cleary left nothing to chance when it came to handball and his words of advice to young players 'repetition, repetition, repetition' sums him up perfectly. Weaknesses were identified early and rectified quickly and mistakes thereafter were simply not tolerated. This constant demand for perfection drove him onwards and upwards and led to him being regarded as one of the toughest opponents to play the game. In a county notable for producing top players, he has to be ranked as one of the very best to have donned the Wexford jersey.

At county level Pat Cleary amassed an array of championships and medals and at one stage the powers that be decided that both he and John Fleming were too good to be allowed take part in the county championship. That happened after they had dominated for several years, but when they returned after this sabbatical they simply took up where they had left off!