

# Profiled: Brian Gilhooly, Castlebridge

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**This is a story of a sportsman (in every sense of the word) who was never happy being second, if he could be first. A young player who recognized early on that he needed to master the multiple elements of the game if he was to maximize the potential that those around him kept telling him he had. A young man who was a good listener, who learned from just about everybody, but was swayed by nobody. Those named in his profile as having influenced him were merely bit players in his career, for this was a success story of his own making.**

Brian Gilhooly identified space in the alley as important from an early age; space for him to get into and to keep others out of. Space to hit into and to be able to hit out of. These words in his profile are very telling *“my weakness was in the back left hand corner”* he said *“so I started living down in that corner, with overhand left hand and the low back wall, on my own in the alley, hour after hour, and then it was my strong point”*.

That shows the process was already underway and the end product was a player who could hit underarm, sidearm or overhand, equally well with both hands. Don't be fooled by his *“if this was about today, I would win nothing with the talent that is available”* comment, for this was a man who had the intelligence to identify what would be needed in any situation, and the skill and ability to adapt accordingly.

Although he only took up handball at 13 years of age, the evidence was there right from the beginning that Brian Gilhooly might just be a bit different. He began his career with the St. Mary's club in Wexford town and almost immediately opened his account with victory in the county under 14 doubles championship. Nothing special about that you might say, but there was soon evidence that while he may have started playing a few years later than many of his peers, he was certainly catching up very quickly.

In those early years his wins came at club and county level, but when he rolled up to St. Peters College in Wexford town things began to change.



Plenty of brains on show at St. Peters College – and oh yes, some fine handballers too!

Brian found the 3 courts at the college to be places of welcome and he spent as much time there as he possibly could. He developed a particular affinity with the centre alley and in his profile described it as his all time favourite court *"the centre alley was my favourite court"* he said *"it was literally my front room and my bedroom – I owned it"*. It was to be the beginning of a lifelong love affair with handball and while he ceased to play competitively around 1996, his love of the game has endured to this day. Now a purely recreational handballer Brian Gilhooly can look back with great pride on a stellar career that, while short, illuminated those around him and those lucky enough to have seen him play.

The time he spent at St. Peters made a valuable contribution to this story.

His intercounty career stepped up a notch in 1991 when, in the colours of Castlebridge, he won the county under 17 singles championship and was then selected to represent Wexford in the upcoming Leinster and All Ireland championship. Earlier that year the under 17 age category had been introduced for the first time, confined to players who had yet to win a provincial title in any age group. As such it was a 'development grade', intended to encourage those who had been unsuccessful thus far at this level. It was tailor-made for Brian Gilhooly and it was time to see if his dedication and commitment would be rewarded, and time also for those long hours spent in that centre alley at St. Peters College to be stress tested for purpose.

It would and they were, because Gilhooly was ready. Remember those words from his profile and you just know he was ready!

*"My weakness was in the back left hand corner"* he said *"so I started living down in that corner, with overhand left hand and the low back wall, on my own in the alley, hour after hour, and then it was my strong point"*.

Those would be incredibly motivating words to anyone, but to have been the one doing the work and to know what those words represented, must have sent this young man into action brimming with confidence. And so it proved to be.

Gilhooly coasted through the field to qualify for the Leinster final where he defeated Michael Blake, Offaly 15-12, 15-5 and then it was on to the All Ireland semi final at St. Comans where he proved far superior to Francis O'Brien, Roscommon, on a scoreline of 15-3, 15-0. The Wexford youngster now stood on the threshold of a famous achievement but how would he cope with the biggest occasion he had ever faced?



Brian receives his Player of the Year award from Simmy Cleary, County Chairman at the 1991 annual dinner dance.

We need not have worried because after the days and hours spent in that corner and in that court, his moment had come and he was not about to let it pass. The media report on the final afterwards described his 15-6, 15-4 win over Garry O'Dwyer, Tipperary as confident and skillful and it summed up a flawless display on the biggest day of his life thus far. *"I lived in that corner"* he said but now he could step out of that corner and into the limelight as an All Ireland champion.

Leaving aside for a moment his exceptional display on that occasion, something else turned out to be historic about his win in the under 17 singles on that day and it does more justice to his achievement than written words ever could. Consider this – ***in the 31 years since his triumph, no other winner of the under 17 softball singles went on to win a minor softball singles title.*** Just think about that for a moment – the Wexfordman won in 1989 and since then 30 players have won the under 17 singles championship, but not one has been good enough to win a minor! Gilhooly achieved this notable feat in 1991.

After his under 17 success in 1989 Brian went from strength to strength and with minor in those days being an under 19 competition, he was ready to challenge the best in 1991. It would prove to be a big step up from the calibre of player he had faced at under 17 level but he was unfazed as he defeated Seamus Kavanagh, Carlow, Joe Daly, Kilkenny and then Sean Murtagh, Meath in the Leinster final. He

had been impressive in all of his outings, but those performances paled in comparison to what he produced against David Moloney, Tipperary in the All Ireland semi final. The Suirsider took the court with a big reputation, having already won 3 All Ireland titles in 40×20 and hardball that year, but he appeared completely unprepared for the sheer variety of shots coming from Gilhooly who roared home a 21-10, 21-8 winner.

As the final against Ciaran Heneghan, Roscommon approached, that left corner at St. Peters College probably seemed like a distant memory, but the lessons learned there were not forgotten and the lean, mean, fighting machine that was now Gilhooly was ready to set a record that would stand for the next 31 years.



Brian Gilhooly with the minor singles cup alongside then President of GAA Handball, Kit Finnegan. Picture was taken outside Croke Park that evening.

The scores were level four times up to 9-all in that final at Croke Park on September 14th 1991, but then the greater all round skill of Gilhooly began to pay dividends. Slowly but surely he took command and with no weaknesses for his opponent to exploit (remember those words again *"I lived in that left corner and then it was my strong point"*) the Connacht champion and previous year's minor doubles winner succumbed in straight games 21-13, 21-13.

Croke Park with its glass walls, huge crowds and sometimes intimidating atmosphere is no place for the faint hearted on finals night, but a supremely confident Gilhooly made it look like that 'home' alley in St. Peters College on that famous occasion.

He remains to this day the last Wexford winner of the minor softball singles grade.



Gilhooly was now on a roll and following on from that minor win his thoughts turned to the under 21 grade the following year, 1992. Once again he cut a swathe through a quality field before defeating Paul Walsh, Clare 21-15, 21-14 in the All Ireland final at Cashel. Brian was moving inexorably towards the senior ranks but he would have to wait another three years before that pinnacle was reached.

The road from intermediate to senior was steeper and had potentially more twists than either under 17 and under 21, due to the range of experience and talent joining him on the journey. He knew it would take something special to win this, but having honed his mental and physical attributes in the Wexford senior championship for a number of years, Gilhooly was poised to step up. The Wexford senior championship has always been a cauldron but just have a look at who was in the field when Gilhooly won it for the first time at the age of 21 in 1993; Pat Cleary, John Fleming, Tommy Hynes, Ned Buggy etc. If you could win in that company then you were ready for anything.



Brian with his collection of medals and trophies

History records that Gilhooly won this intermediate singles title in a proverbial canter, beating Jimmy McKeon, Cavan 21-11, 21-4 in as one-sided a final as ever played in this grade. Newspaper reports said "passing shots, killshots, power shots etc, all flowed from Gilhooly's cultured hands at St. Comans", as he stamped his class all over this championship. It was a replica of what he had produced in the provincial championship and All Ireland semi final, but to do so on the biggest occasion of all spoke volumes for how far he had come since his St. Peters College days.

Since he *"lived in that corner and it was my strong point"* to be precise.

But not beyond his wildest dreams!

Sadly Gilhooly was only to partake at senior level in 1996 when he lost out to Tom Sheridan, Meath and thereafter decided to take a break from the game. In many ways it was an understandable decision after 10 years of intense activity, a period when he practically put his young life on hold while seeking to continuously upgrade. With the support of his proud parents, the late Mick and Joan, he had followed his dream as far as he needed to at that point in time. His national record of under 17, minor and intermediate singles stands unique in the game, while his three Wexford senior singles titles in

1993, '95 and '96 secured his outstanding legacy at local level. There was a plethora of additional provincial and county medals too and while he did step away at a young age, he had earned the right to do so, and at a time of his choosing.

These days he no longer needs competitive action to feel that buzz of excitement and can regularly be found in either a 60×30 or 40×20 court, with all manner of opponents. Still striking equally with left and right, underarm, sidearm and overhead, just like he was over 20 years ago. Still in love with the game and all it stands for in his life.

This is by any standards an inspirational story, with a template for success that will not however be a good fit for everyone. Gilhooly's words though can be applied to us all *"live in the alley. Eat sleep and drink it while you are young and able, once you enjoy it"* he said. He did that and more and it turned him into one of the most talented players to have played the game.



Brian is with final opponent Jose Hernandez, California. Caimin Jones is on the left.

Brian Gilhooly had little more than a passing interest in 4-wall (or 40×20 as it was then called) but he did play in the USHA championships in California back in June 1994. It was supposed to be as a holiday but he ended up entering and taking part in the 'B' singles, the second highest grade on offer.

With Gilhooly of course there was no question of merely 'making up the numbers' so effectively the holiday aspect of the trip was at an end before it had even begun. He survived tiebreak wins on both Saturday and Sunday, before reeling off three successive straight sets victories in the following days to take the title. Not for the first time he showed the type of determination and adaptability that was to consistently define his legacy.