

The Role of Handball in 1916

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It was a humdrum Easter Monday afternoon and, in a handball alley at Marino in the shadow of Croke Park, a young Christian Brother, William Allen, was at play.

From nowhere, it has been recorded, the order's Superior General, Brother Willis, arrived wearing an anxious expression. There was trouble in O'Connell St, he told the handballers – get out of town.

So began the Easter Rising. In the decades to come, 'WP' Allen would document it; in time, over the decades, his personal library stretched to over 30,000 items and would become one of the greatest primary sources at the State's disposal.

But on that day, he was just another average Joe, a teacher in a school which had produced five of the insurgents, scuttling for cover back to base.

What was the state of play for handball in 1916? At the time, it was organised on an ad hoc basis. There were more players (hundreds of thousands played recreationally) but far less championships. In fact, the first handball and softball championships wouldn't begin until 1925.

Handball had been a professional pursuit for the best players, who issued grand challenges to their rivals in the press at the time, but for the most part, competitively, it was played for silver cups and gold medals, maybe a suit of clothes, in pre-arranged one-off fixtures, much in the manner of prize fights.

In August of 1916, for example, a "challenge contest" was advertised for St Colman's College in Fermoy for the "Junior Championship of Munster".

And while the sport became stronger in rural areas as the century wore on, around 1916, it boomed in the cities, particularly Dublin and Cork.

In February of that year, an "Association for the Government of Handball in Dublin City and the County" was 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.

Handball was played in Pearse's school, St Enda's. Pdraig Pearse's brother, Willie, was a strong player. In Morgan Llywelyn's '1916: A Novel of Irish Rebellion' – admittedly fictionalised but based on fact – he mentions the younger Pearse teaching handball to schoolboys "in a little wooden court behind the house" at St Enda's.

St Enda's was situated on five acres adjacent to Cullenswood House – which included the ball alley – and five teachers from the school (Patrick Pearse, Willie Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Con Colbert and Joseph Plunkett) were among the 14 leaders immediately executed after the Easter Rising. It's safe to presume that all would have been more than familiar with the sport.

On one occasion, according to 16 Lives by Roisin Ni Gairbhí, a student, Kenneth Reddin, struck Willie Pearse with the handball and later felt so bad ("I had hurt Willie Pearse, the artists, the gentle Willie Pearse who wouldn't hurt anyone") that he sought him out to apologise.

Pearse good-naturedly dismissed him: "I wasn't your Arts Master in the handball alley today. You were mine and you taught me a sharp lesson. Next time, I'll keep my ears pinned back like a rabbit."

Coghlan was a close friend, incidentally, of the famous Limerick player JJ Bowles, after whom the All-Ireland Intermediate Softball Singles Cup – currently held by a Limerick man, in fact - is named. Bowles was the unofficial Irish champion for 20 years and came out of retirement to win a Senior Doubles with Stephen Gleeson of Fedamore in 1926. The Coghlan family still retain correspondence between the men to this day.

FX fought around the Church St area in the Rising and was arrested after surrendering at the Four Courts. He was a remarkable man with an extraordinary story.

Years later, when forces arrived to detain him, he clambered into a hole he had dug under an old iron bath; there he hid for nine days, just feet away from his foes, camped out waiting for him to return home.

After the Rising, FX had been interned in Stafford, England. It is not known whether he played handball there, but the game was extremely popular in the various prisons and internment camps, even in the UK.

For certain, it was played widely in the infamous Frongoch camp in Wales.

Colonel Eamon Morkan from Rathfarnham, who was detained in Reading jail alongside the likes of Sean T O'Kelly, Tomás MacCurtain and Terence MacSwiney among others would write years later that the prisoners passed their free time "in group discussions and reading, and at exercise by the playing of an anaemic game of handball".

MacCurtain backed that up. In his memoir, his diary from Reading jail is littered with references to handball from the summer of '16– some days, that seemed to be all they did – including a "great game of doubles" which he refereed.

Peter Reynolds, an IRA volunteer who was a dispatch courier during the rising, was later held in Kilmainham. He wrote of the internees' "sports committee" organising a tournament, for which the GAA on the outside sent in medals, won by Lawlor and Murphy from Ballaghedreen and Cork respectively, "two first class players".

"The honour of having medals with the inscription 'Kilmainham Prison Handball Tournament' on them seemed weird but honourable to the men who would win them," he would write.

John Lawlor later served on the National Aid and Volunteer Dependents Committee and was a well-known figure in Republican circles.

And, poignantly, the tournament was played in the same yard in which the leaders of 1916 were executed.

Robert Brennan, leader of the Rising in Wexford and later a founder of the Irish Press and high-ranking government diplomat, was held in Cork prison and related the same tale.

"There was no work and from early morning until dark there were football and handball matches in the narrow exercise yard," he would tell the Bureau of Military History.

The game was played in Belfast jail, too, as confirmed by the testimony to the Bureau of Frank Hynes, who was a captain in Athrenry Coy of the Irish Volunteers in 1916. Not only did the authorities turn a blind eye to the practice – in Belfast, they seemed to practically encourage it, maybe because it kept the soldiers occupied on matters other than escape attempts (which were common) and classes in Gaelic language and culture.

"We smuggled in a handball and started to play at the gable end of a building," he noted.

"There was a window in this gable and we expected that we would be prevented from playing but, instead, when we came out the next day a wire netting was neatly fastened over the window."

The same was the case in Dundalk, where the “handball championship of the prison was fought out against the gable end wall of one of the wings”, according to Drogheda man Frank Thornton.

Handballers, then, played a role in the background. While journalist Michael Foley of the Sunday Times, who researched the era extensively for his magnificent book *The Bloodied Field*, could find no overt mention of handball players, there were so many recreational players around Dublin that, in truth, many of the protagonists played the sport.

And, of course, ball alleys had long been a backdrop for revolutionary activity. Dozens of United Irishmen were shot dead in the alley at Rathnew, Co Wexford as far back as May 1798 and Bennett’s ball alley, Templeshannon, Co Wexford was used for drilling, for example, in 1913.

And even in September 21, 1919, it was reported that soldiers with an armoured car surrounded the handball alley at Laffan’s Bridge, Co Tipperary, and prohibited games to go on.

But go on they did. By mid-summer of 1916, challenge matches were in full flow again, a new court was opened in Bagenalstown, Co Carlow and, within seven years, the rules and championships were belatedly formalised by the GAA. And the rest is history.

What of our friend Coghlan? FX quickly became one of the most wanted men in the land but he remained active, going door to door ostensibly collecting premiums but in actual fact, gathering information. His is a forgotten tale of the Rising.

He died in 1974, aged 80, and with this soft-spoken Cork hero of the ball alley went, we’re guessing, many more stories that could be told.