

## The greatest All-Ireland final of all time?

*By Paul Fitzpatrick*

Sixty-four years ago this past autumn, 13 was a lucky number for Kerry's Paddy Downey, one of the greatest handballers from the golden era of the sport.

Thirteen was the number of times the serve changed hands at 20-all in the fifth and deciding game in that year's All-Ireland Softball Junior Singles final, which Downey won a remarkable score line of 21-20, 20-21, 21-19, 20-21, 21-20.



### ***Caption:***

*From left: TB Kennedy, Paddy Downey, Rev Canon Carroll, Jimmy O'Brien and Jack Killackey. Photograph was taken at Ballypatrick, Co Tipperary in 1956 at the All-Ireland final of the senior softball doubles when Downey and O'Brien beat John Ryan and John Doyle of Wexford.*

In many ways, it is a forgotten classic between two of the greatest players the game has produced. And, amazingly, while Downey won 17 senior All-Irelands (two softball singles, seven softball doubles, four hardball singles and the same in the corresponding doubles), Dillon – a Clare native who later played for Dublin – never got his hands on a Celtic Cross at senior level.

Why did Dillon not win one? Maybe because he spread his talents so thin. A qualified doctor, the swarthy Dillon was introduced to handball while a boarder

in the Cistercian College in Roscrea in the 1940s but also excelled as a boxer, a tennis player, a swimmer and a hurler.

Hurling was his first love and he landed five Fitzgibbon Cup medals, a Railway Cup (1954) with Munster and captained the Combined Universities team against the Rest of Ireland.

He worked in London for a time and picked up an All-Ireland junior hurling medal with the Exiles; later, while based in Wigan, he would travel home each weekend for handball matches.

Dillon had style. In the 1955 Munster Championship, he starred for Clare in their shock win over Cork. A fortnight later, he lined out against Tipp in the semi-final against Limerick.

Nothing was going right for the Banner, or Dillon, when, towards the end of the game, he stepped over the sideline to take a sideline ball 40 yards out and was met with what Pádraig Puirseal in their Irish Press referred to as “a veritable barrage of criticism”.

“Here,” said Dillon, offering his hurley to the loudest of the critics, “you come in and take it.”

Sure enough, a couple of minutes later, the handballer had the sliotar in the net – and Clare won.

That same year, Dillon won the Gael Linn tournament for the first time and he repeated that success in 1957, after which he dethroned 14-in-a-row Dublin champion Larry Rowe in the final of the capital's county championship, then extremely competitive.

“Indeed, it amazes me why he has never won a premier title, for his name has been, synonymous with the game for close on two decades,” Puirseal would write.

Downey, on the other hand, couldn't stop winning them. The Tralee man was a compositor – an old school page make-up man – in the now defunct Kerry Champion as a young man. Some of his colleagues also played handball and would practise by striking the ball against the big typeface letters they used for printing posters.

He started playing against the gable wall of little cottages on the Strand Road in Tralee before the regulation alleys were constructed in The Green in the mid to late 1940s. He developed his fitness running on “the lonely Banna Strand”, as the song has it, and was phenomenal competitor.

One contemporary report refers to his “indomitable will”.

“Many of the game's experts agree that Downey's greatest asset is his unwilting spirit and extraordinary powers of recovery,” stated his local paper, The Kerryman. Downey, like all of the great champions, was never beaten.

He emerged as a teenager and soon made his mark. Downey lost in the junior softball doubles final to Mayo's McCormack brothers in 1950 before his career went stratospheric. In '51, he won the All-Ireland junior hardball singles and the softball doubles with Tim Commane and he didn't look back. From 1960 to 1964 inclusive, he would blast his way to five senior softball doubles titles in succession, with Jimmy O'Brien riding shotgun.

His was a household name, known in ball alleys around the country. Crowds would turn up in Tralee to watch him train. Dillon was a great rival; so too was Louth legend Joey Maher.

In a 2004 interview with The Kerryman, Downey vividly recalled playing Maher in a senior hardball in Ballymore Eustace.



***Caption:***

*Joey Maher (left) shows a handball to airhostess Sharon Lynn as Dr Des Dillon looks on prior to their departure for New York in 1964.*

"I remember Canon, Carroll stopping play to say the Angelus," he said. "But it was getting dark and they had no lights in the alley. So the game was switched, to Clogh in Kilkenny and we started again at nine o'clock that night.

“Joey didn't want to finish the match and I said to Canon Carroll to give him the cup. I said I could not come back another day because my wife was expecting a

baby. The Canon eventually got Joey to play on and I won the match by four games to three."

The 1951 final served off on Sunday, September 16. Dillon was aged 25 and represented UCD, Downey, then 22, the Jones-Fitzgerald club in Tralee. Paddy, incidentally, was the Munster board's nominee – he had not actually won his provincial final as the decider against Tipperary had not been played by the time the All-Ireland rolled around.

The papers couldn't split them beforehand, and it's easy to see why. Dillon, the dapper Doc who was never photographed without his trademark dicky-bow, won the first but Downey found himself leading 20-11 in the third only for his opponent to come roaring back.

The pair had six serves each for the match before Downey finally finished it on his seventh – how he eventually won that final ace is not recorded in the annals.

Three years later, the pair would meet again in the Munster final, a game which was transferred from Horse and Jockey to Talbot's Inch due to heavy rain. Downey won again – this time the score was 21-17, 12-21, 16-21, 21-14, 21-9, 21-18.

Dillon continued to win almost every honour in the game but that All-Ireland eluded him. He did gain some measure of revenge, however, a full 13 years later in a trial game at Ballymore Eustace to decide which player would partner Joe Maher on a tour to New York for the International Games.

"Dillon had coasted to a 21-8 win in the first, led 17-8 in the second and seemed all set for victory when Downey, realising the peril of his position, threw caution to the winds and made his recovery bid," reported Sean Clerkin in the Press.

Downey seemed set to win but missed a chance and Dillon, noted the report, "buried his next one to the bottom brick."

"For one brief moment there was dead silence among the huge metropolitan following but then, realising that the hard luck and misfortune which had. Seemed to haunt: their favourite through the years, had at last vanished, they gave full vent to their feelings - and their cheers echoed and echoed through the surrounding countryside."

Sadly, the shouts of delight turned to bitter tears later that year. After returning from New York, Dillon was tragically killed in an accident at Booterstown train station, near to where he had set up a pharmacy.

Aged just 39, he left behind a wife and three young children. In his Irish Times obituary, it was noted that he had been a larger than life character and was still one of the "top four or five players" in the country at the time of his death.

Paddy Downey took up racquetball to keep fit after he retired and, in the 1980s, was instrumental in the development of 40x20 courts in his home town.

In 2000, he deservedly was honoured with the Irish handball Hall of Fame award. He is still hale and hearty in the Kingdom at the age of 86.

And, 63 years later, there has never been an All-Ireland final to beat the one played in Kilkenny on a rainy September Sunday.