

## A forgotten legend of Irish Handball

*By Paul Fitzpatrick*



The All-Ireland SFC final between Kerry and Dublin will generate thousands of column inches in the next fortnight - but did you know that a All-Ireland senior medallist handballer played a key role in an even bigger decider?

Next week marks the 68th anniversary of one of the most famous All-Ireland football finals of all time, the 1947 decider between Cavan and Kerry in the Polo Grounds, New York, at the time billed in the national press as “the greatest showpiece in the history of Irish sport”.

When Wexford man Martin O'Neill threw in the ball on a rock-hard modified baseball pitch at 3.08pm that sunny September Sunday, it marked the culmination of an amazing personal sporting journey.

O'Neill lived a life less ordinary in the GAA – he was a footballer and hurler of renown in his youth, he became full-time Leinster Council secretary and refereed All-Ireland finals in 1932, 1933 and, of course, in 1947.

What many may not know, though, was that O'Neill was also a very fine handballer.

A tall, thin man, he was an excellent all-rounder in his youth. As a child in Ferns, he started to play handball against the wall of the local castle. When the family moved to Bray after Martin's father began working in the GPO (he would commute from the seaside town to the city centre each day), his handball career took off.

With a friend, Luke Sherry, they would head away on summer weekend mornings to enter doubles tournaments in Talbot's Inch and Green Street, Castlebridge, Delvin and all the other hamlets where the game prospered, bringing home trophies and suits of clothes as prizes.

In 1925, the new ball alley at Bunclody was opened and Martin O'Neill, then 21, was chosen to play the first game. His opponent was Dan Nolan from Coorduff. O'Neill was the winner.

The same year, he won a Leinster SFC title with Wexford and 11 years later, in 1936, he would captain Wicklow to an All-Ireland junior football crown. O'Neill also found time to win three Railway Cup medals, to represent Ireland in three Tailteann Games and to win an All-Ireland senior handball doubles title, then a very, very tough championship to annex.

When he arrived in New York – carrying the six footballs with him in his luggage – he didn't hang around; the next day, he made his way to Chicago to spend some time with an uncle.

The games were in the O'Neill DNA. Martin's father had been a delegate at the very early Congresses of the GAA in the late 1880s, and played with Ferns.

The trip to New York, during which Martin celebrated his 43rd birthday, was his first time in America, and it was a poignant time. Meeting old acquaintances and viewing at first hand the effect of emigration on the displaced masses effected him greatly.

“I honestly think I cried more in New York than I did in my whole life at home,” he would recall almost half a century later.

“It was very touching to see the strains of emigration at close range and to watch the effect the game had on those exiles who, probably, would never again set foot on our Irish shores.”

He played handball in the Tailteann Games, too, running into Clare-born Mickey Maloney on all three occasions, a man he would, by an amazing coincidence, bump into in the Woodstock Hotel on the night before the final in New York.

The handballing links to that famous 1947 championship didn't end there. The secretary of the Cavan county board, Hughie Smyth, also travelled with the Breffni men to New York. Smyth was a handballer of note who partnered Leitrim native John Molloy to an All-Ireland Junior Softball Doubles title in 1930.

Victor Sherlock, then regarded as one of the best footballers in the country, won a Leinster SFC medal with Meath that year – he later transferred to Cavan (his home was in the middle of the main street in Kingscourt) and won two All-Ireland SFC medals, as well as an All-Ireland Junior Softball Singles title in 1949.

The man who became Sherlock's brother-in-law a few years later was one of the most famous footballers in the land at the time – Cavan midfielder Phil 'The Gunner' Brady, an uncle of Paul's.

The site of the Polo Grounds in Harlem now a housing project, which borders on Highbridge Park, which contains seven One Wall handball courts along with the most famous public basketball court in the city.

# A FIRST-CLASS SURPRISE

---

## Martin O'Neill Routs Gallagher

**M**ARTIN O'NEILL, of the Bray Club, representing Wicklow, scored one of the greatest of All-Ireland Championship Handball surprises when, at the Depot Court, yesterday, he defeated Pte. H. Gallagher (Collins's), All-Army and Dublin champion, in the first round of the National S.B. Singles championship by 3-2 games to scores:—21-16, 21-11, 9-21, 9-21, 21-18.

O'Neill opened with well defined tactics and excelled in service to take the first and second games.

Third and fourth games saw Gallagher display exceptional coolness and determination, when making a definite bid for supremacy. Coming into the fifth and deciding game he appeared to have found his form, when he combined perfect action with deadly accurate strokes.

Leading 13-3, the battle looked as good as over till O'Neill, with a return of brilliant strokes, found a footing, and after forcing Gallagher to four scoreless hands, he advanced to an 18-15 lead. A thrilling finish saw him beat the more fancied Army and Dublin champion by 3 aces.

O'Neill will now oppose the defending champion, Garda P. Perry (Roscommon), in the second round.

### PTE. O'REILLY CHAMPION.

In the Dublin Senior H.B. Singles Final Pte. F. O'Reilly (Collins'), All-Army H.B. Champion, defeated George Rowe (St. Joseph's)—13-21, 21-3, 21-4, 21-5.

O'Reilly played a fierce hitting service stroke, and with excellent two-handed returns from the outside he commanded the necessary advantage to take the decision and title in the fourth game.

Pte. O'Reilly will now represent Dublin v. Roscommon (P. Reid) at the Depot Court, on Sunday in the opening All-Ireland Senior H.B. Singles Championship rubber. Inter H.B. Doubles Championship—A. Clarke and P. Butterly (Metropolitan), w.o. J. Cahill and P. O'Connor (D.M.G.) scr.