

When we were Kings: The Brady era and before...

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*Paul Brady's reign as world handball champion began on a raucous night in Croke Park in 2003. **PAUL FITZPATRICK** looks back on the night the Brady era began and looks at the four previous Men's Open Singles champions.*



It started on a Friday night in Dublin 3. The battle between Cork's Tony Healy – already a three-time Irish senior champion by that stage - and Cavan's Paul Brady, who had won his first senior All-Ireland that April and who had been making a big splash on the USHA Pro Tour, will never be forgotten.

The gallery at Croke Park was packed to the rafters for an eagerly-awaited showdown. Brady won the opening game but began to suffer from cramp midway through game two.

Referee Norm Dunne, the Californian who was highly-ranked on the American tour at the time, indicated that Brady would have to withdraw as the rulebook states that injury time-outs are not permitted in the case of cramp.

Healy, though, sportingly insisted that he would use up his own time-outs to allow the Cavanman time to recover.

“Brady, who shot to number five in the rankings this year, an all-time high for an Irishman, collapsed with cramp midway through the second set, having taken the opener 21-14,” reported *The Irish Independent*.

Healy won the second game 21-3 and looked the odds-on favourite to close it out in the tiebreaker. Brady, though clearly hampered, managed to eke out a 9-3 lead before the Ballydesmond star clawed it back to 9-7.

However, Brady was not to be denied and took the title on an 11-7 scoreline, adding the doubles with Michael Finnegan the following day against Meath’s Tom Sheridan and Walter O’Connor.

Incredibly, Brady has not lost a singles match in the World Championships since. The previous champion was the late David Chapman, who came through a stacked field in Chicago in 2000.

Chapman eased to comfortable straight games win in the final against John Bike, with Healy and Brady marking their arrival on the big stage by making the semis, where Chapman defeated the Corkman (conquereor of Eoin Kennedy in the quarters) 21-15, 21-17 and Bike came though against Brady in a close tiebreaker.

For Bike, the hopes of a second Open Singles title were dashed. The barrel-chested American left-hander had stunned Chapman in the final of the 1997 Worlds in Winnipeg, Canada.

Peter McAuley was the best of the Irish on that occasion, losing 18,17 to Chapman in the semis, with Bike beating local favourite Danny Bell in a tiebreaker in the other semi. In the final, Bike – the hardest hitter in the sport at the time - pulled off the upset, winning 21-19, 21-14.

Chapman had been gunning to retain the crown he won at the 1994 Worlds in Ireland. On that occasion, he beat the late Michael 'Ducksy' Walsh 21-10, 21-8 in the final (click [here](#) for video).

“The 19-year-old Chapman is on a different level to Irish-based players due to his professional experience and while many fans in the huge Croke Park gallery were shocked to see Walsh suffer such an unusually-heavy defeat, the outcome was expected,” noted *The Irish Press*.

That year, the Open Singles was played on an invitational basis and Chapman had beaten Walsh earlier in the week also.

“Our standard of play has progressed immensely in recent years and to have our singles and doubles [Tom Sheridan and Egin Jensen] players reach the finals is tremendous,” commented Irish team coach Jimmy King.

“If Ducksy played David Chapman four or five times, he would be 50-50 with him. Our players will be well able to compete at a high level in the next World Championships in 1997.”

The 1991 Worlds, in Phoenix, Arizona, were won by Mexican Poncho Monreal. The tournament that year attracted a then-record entry of 558 players, with Monreal defeating Bell in the final of the Invitational Singles.

Three years earlier, in Melbourne, Naty Alvarado had been top dog. In all, 23 Irish players made the trip to Australia, nine of them on the official team.

“It is the first time for me to play senior and I will be up against the world number one, Naty Alvarado, a Mexican who will be playing for America. The other main contender is Danny Bell, Canada, ranked number 10 in America, so I will be up against it,” McAuley told *The Drogheda Independent* before he left. His words were prescient.

Bell, then aged 25, had beaten Merv Deckert in the Canadian final for the first time to book his ticket Down Under and beat McAuley and Mexico’s Oscar Calzada to make the final. However, Alvarado, the dominant force on the USHA Pro Tour at the time, took top honours.