

## Willie Delaney – Wexford’s Finest Exponent of Handball

*By Paul Fitzpatrick*

In the shadow of a rocky hill, 80-odd miles from Rome, lies the grave of a forgotten All-Ireland handball champion, once described in his local newspaper as “the finest exponent of handball Wexford ever produced”.

His name was Willie Delaney and he came from Michael St in New Ross. Had he not emigrated, there's no doubt he would have made a massive impact at the highest level. He was too good not to have done so.

In that era, there were many more adult handballers than there are today but only a tiny fraction of the number of All-Ireland grades; where today there are hundreds, back when Willie Delaney was playing, there were just 12.



Those who got their names on one of those dozen cups breathed rare air. That Delaney broke through and won the All-Ireland Junior Softball Singles title at just 20 years of age marked him out as something extremely special.

That win came in October 1937, when Delaney defeated a player named P Power from Kilfane, Co Kilkenny. The final was played in the Garda Depot before what the *Kilkenny People* described as “one of the largest crowds of handball fans ever to witness a final in that famous court”.

At the time, matches were played on a 'best of five' basis and Delaney won it in three, 21-12, 21-13 and 21-20.

“Afterwards,” read the report, “it was stated by well-known followers of the handball game to be the most exciting game ever played in the Depot.”

The previous year, he had partnered Michael 'Sonny' Fortune to the corresponding doubles final, which they lost to Mayo's McDonald and McCormack. Despite the match taking place on the undercard to a Dublin v Kilkenny Senior Doubles semi-final, the Irish Press described Delaney as “by far the outstanding player” on the day.

But by 1938, just as he entered senior ranks, Willie was gone. He left for England – for work, presumably – and with the outbreak of war, found himself signing up with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.

They were part of the 38<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Infantry Brigade. There were six battalions but we assume Delaney fought with the 6<sup>th</sup>, as they were the only ones to see action in Monte Cassino.

On that hill, outside the town of Cassino, stood a 1,500-year-old monastery. The Allied Forces were convinced it was being used as a German observation post and flattened it with 1,400 tons of explosives.

The enemy, though, were actually dug in on the steep slopes and soon occupied the rubble where the abbey had stood. It represented an excellent defensive position and, over the following months, they mowed down waves of Allied forces who foolishly advanced.

The conditions, it has been noted, “defied description”. The “terrible dead” piled up in the hills around the monastery. Men lay out, uncovered and starving, in the snow of that winter. By daylight, they were pinned down by snipers – they moved cautiously by night, then, many drowning in the rivers which criss-crossed the valley floor.

In the middle of it was the handballer. One wonders, as the shells fell round him, did he ever think of Kilfane and Annestown and the Depot and those innocent days in the ball alley.

On March 30, Corporal Delaney was cut down. We don't know the details, only that he died and was buried at Monte Cassino.

Word was slow to reach home, as was the way back then. It was three and a half weeks before the *Munster Express* carried the dreadful news, stating that he was a great athlete and “his ability in this sphere [handball] won him a large measure of popularity”. He was survived by both parents.

And the game he loved lived on.

Handball was first played in the rural area of Ballyanne, Delaney's home club, in 1904 and, according to a 1968 article in *The Gaelic Sportsman*, there were only two periods when the thwock of ball on wall fell silent.

The first was during the War of Independence, the other during the Second World War, “when a shortage of handballs caused a temporary halt”.

When the war ended, there was no shortage of balls – absent, though, was the club's greatest son. In 1946, a cup was dedicated to the late Delaney and it was won on a few occasions by his old friend and doubles partner, Michael 'Sonny' Fortune. In the end, they let Sonny keep it.

Life moves on. Before long, a new hero – the magnificent Dick Lyng – emerged and became, for a time, the best player in the country and proudly carried the Ballyanne colours into battle.

The foundation, though, was laid by the forgotten champion who lies in the shade of a hill, all those miles away.

### **Postscript**

There was a denouement to the tale. Years later, in the early 1970s, a Ms Redmond, a Wexford woman, travelled to Italy with the Military History Society of Ireland.

She found the cemetery with its simple white crosses and there, under the Mediterranean sun, discovered Willie Delaney's grave and took photos to deliver to the dead man's brother on her return.

Willie didn't make it back but, in a way, Wexford came to him.