

Feature

What is handball?

For the sport's 15,000 Irish enthusiasts, the question could seem insulting. However, to others, who have never even seen a game of handball, the question makes very little sense. The big disparity between both sides is the very conundrum the sport faces today.

The sport of handball has been played on Irish shores for at least 200 years with early depictions of the game dating back even as far as the 16th century.

For many people in Ireland however, the game of handball is something they know very little about, if anything at all.

With 170 clubs and 15,000 members, the game's popularity has grown significantly in the last few decades however it still largely lurks in the shadows of Irish sport. There are over 50,000 people playing cricket in Ireland and 300,000 playing basketball yet handball, a traditional Irish sport trails well behind these imported games.

So, we will ask again, what exactly is handball and why is an Irish sport being lost in the shadows to other overseas games?

There are three codes within the sport of handball, 40x20, 60x30 and one-wall, with each code played at a different time of the year. While handball was officially founded in 1884 alongside hurling and Gaelic football, the game was played on the island long before this.

The Spanish game Pelota is very similar to handball. Spain had strong trade links with Ireland in centuries past and GAA handball say it is "very likely one game originated from the other".

When one begins to look at the geographical spread of those playing handball in Ireland it starts to become clearer why the sport is played by so few.

In Ireland, there are 170 handball clubs. Dublin holds a quarter of the population in Ireland however it has just 11 handball clubs with a third of these in fact colleges. On further investigation, the figures are even more staggering. Excluding colleges, Roscommon with just 60,000 inhabitants possesses more handball clubs with nine, than Dublin, a county with 20 times its population and 1.2 million residents.

The situation is the same with other rural counties like Mayo and Galway where, despite having less than a tenth of Dublin's population, they still have more handball clubs.

Handball is a game that has thrived in traditionally poorer rural areas however as we can see in urban centres like Dublin the game is close to extinct.

Darragh Daly – the National Handball Development Officer in Ireland explains that urban areas like Dublin lack the community aspect that rural towns possess.

"Handball's a huge community game so in the small rural towns you have that community factor but that's exactly what is missing in urban areas," he said. I'm from Carrickmore – a

small village in Tyrone and handball and the GAA is everything. In the urban areas, it's very different though."

Darragh believes the vast number of other sports in areas like Dublin is causing handball to be overlooked.

"There's any number of sports people can play in and that they can get paid for playing too," he said. Handball is an amateur game though and for those who do take it up they almost always give it up for another sport down the line."

When one begins to shine a light on the leading figures in handball it illuminates just how neglected the sport is. Martin Mulkerrins, one of the most decorated handballers of the last decade, is known by almost every person who has ever picked up a handball. Outside of handball circles however, the question is usually Martin who?

Martin is no stranger to success. He has won the one-wall nationals on two occasions in 2016 and 2019. The 40x20 Senior Championship in 2018 and the 60x30 Nationals in 2019. With All-Ireland titles across all three codes, it is something that is a rarity with most handballers excelling in one code. Martin however remains largely unknown outside the sport.

Martin is from the Moycullen club in Galway - one of the top five biggest handball clubs in the country. While recognising the game is not very popular across the country, Martin does feel like the game has grown especially in Galway since he started playing.

"I can categorically say that the numbers in Galway have increased dramatically since I started playing, dramatically," he mentions again to highlight the significance. "When I started playing handball in 2004 there was only really one club in Williamstown with juveniles but now there are 11 or 12 clubs."

Martin also feels that numbers playing handball in schools in Galway have increased significantly.

"The Cumann na mBunscol competitions have regularly 100-plus in them, this would have been unheard of when I started," he said. That's massive growth and new clubs are opening all the time too."

On investigation of the figures, Martin's assessment is very accurate. Galway is one of the strongest handballing counties in Ireland with 16 handball clubs, second only to Wexford with 17. While the game of handball is strong in both of these counties, the same cannot be said for the rest of the country.

Martin feels that marketing and financial muscle are two areas where the popularity of the game is being handicapped.

"With other sports, take cricket, for example, you see it on the telly and you would know that Ireland had played," he said. "But handball just doesn't feature on it. We get plenty of radio coverage locally and in big papers occasionally but TV is almost absent and it's the Rolls Royce of coverage."

"I often think if handball could get something like the ladies' football with a segment on the Sunday Game – even if it was only for a couple of minutes – that would probably do more for the game in one show than all the articles in the year," he remarked.

Paul Rouse - Historian at University College Dublin (UCD) and regular writer on the sport of handball is sceptical the sport can secure more TV coverage.

"I think there's a very limited chance handball gets more coverage," he said. "I think the reality is that there is not a public appetite for handball and there's no evidence that there is. Until that changes, I am not sure where it would go which is a shame for an Irish sport."

Paul believes the chances of handball coverage lies within its own channels.

"The future of handball broadcast lies in the development of its own YouTube and Facebook channels," he said. But that's ok if you play handball and you know where to get this coverage but breaking it into a bigger market is what needs to happen."

One thing that would certainly break handball into a bigger market would be its inclusion in the Olympics. While handball is only played by 15,000 members in Ireland, the sport has been pushing for Olympic inclusion for the best part of a decade. Unfortunately for fans of handball, the sport is still a long way from being included.

Darragh is philosophical about the situation.

"Look this mightn't be what people want to hear but we aren't that close at all to getting Olympic recognition," he said. "I mean squash isn't even in the Olympics and it's a huge sport worldwide so we have a long way to go."

On inspection, it makes for grim reading for fans of handball. That squash, a sport played by over 20 million people in 185 countries can't be included in the Olympics makes handball and its 15,000 following seem very insignificant.

What exactly can handball do then as a sport to get closer to Olympic inclusion.

"We need other countries to have handball national governing bodies," Darragh said. "In Ireland, we (GAA handball) are the governing body and in America, you have the USHA (United States Handball Association) but so many other countries haven't got the same recognised bodies.

I'm going to call a spade a spade, the Olympics isn't on the radar now and it's a long way away but it's a nice goal to have. Sometimes we can build handball up and think it's the best thing ever but sure every other sport think that too," Darragh remarked in a serious tone.

On the route forward for handball, Darragh and Martin are both of the opinion that the one wall code holds the key.

"I think every handball community appreciates that one wall is the way forward. In terms of internationally, for handball to ever even have a hope of Olympic recognition, handball associations need to agree on a code and I think everyone is coming together to play one wall," Darragh said.

Fast forward to the present day, handball like every other sport in Ireland has been impacted significantly by COVID-19. Handball was badly hit because it is an indoor sport so everything was cancelled.

“When can we get back to normal in terms of spectators it hard to know. I think it’s probably still looking like a year and that’s a best-case scenario,” Darragh said.

While handball is not as popular and may never be as popular as other sports in Ireland, it has come a long way in the past two decades.

When Martin started playing handball in 2004, handball was a game that was almost devoid of juveniles. In 2021 however, the landscape has changed significantly with the game now dominated by enthusiastic juveniles.

While Olympic inclusion would be an extraordinary breakthrough for the sport the truth is it is still a long way away.

While handball does still lurk in the shadows within Irish sport, it is one of the few traditional games left on the island of Ireland and is one that is here to stay.