

**MY IRISH ADVENTURES: ALASTAIR MACKENZIE AT THE WATERFORD CRYSTAL WORLD HANDBALL CHAMPIONSHIPS, OCTOBER 1994.**

When Tom Wood half-jokingly sent me an entry form for the World Handball Championships, sponsored by Waterford Crystal, to be held in Ireland in October 1994, I decided to take him up on it. Sadly he didn't live to hear what an extraordinary experience it was.

As soon as Tom O'Connor, my Irish liaison Officer, World and Irish Handball Councils' roving Ambassador and greatest living expert on all hand ball-games (as opposed to Handball games!), sent me a championship ball in July I realised what a very different ball-game I was getting myself into. International Handball is played in a 40 x 20ft court with an incredibly bouncy ball, somewhat larger and appreciably heavier than a fives ball. When struck high (as against the 30ft high ceiling) it bounds yards over your head and you have to retreat rapidly and either play a defensive overhead shot just in front of the back wall or play the ball as it drops (steeply) off it. The traditional Irish game is played in an enormous (60 x 40ft) court with a rather softer rubber ball.

I practised a bit on a squash court over the next few weeks but it is 9 feet shorter and you can't use the ceiling! I also had one practice on a real court (or 'alley' to use the correct Irish term) at the Irish Club in Kilburn before flying to Shannon two days before my Championship debut.

There were 40 different events and nearly 700 competitors in all. I had entered for the over-55 and over-60 singles and coincidentally both my opponents proved to be 6 ft 6 inch Californians so that, unusually, I was the smaller player on court. To my amazement and delight I managed to take a game (21-18) off Tim Hindman in the over-55s with a half-pace serve down the left-hand wall which he didn't like but in the tie-breaker (final game up to 11 if it's one-all in games) he bamboozled me with a high 'Z' serve which bounced about 10 feet over my head and slid down the glass back-wall. If I had won the tie-breaker I would have faced the legendary Pat Kirby, former World Champion and one of the all-time greats: definitely an experience missed. I lost more easily to Joe Orr in the over-60s but it was still a good game and a great experience.

Most of this took place in County Clare where the Oldies events were held (though my second match was in Neenagh in County Tipperery - and, believe me, it was a long way, especially via the route Joe's girlfriend (Shannon, another coincidence) who was our driver, selected. There was also a splendid banquet at the Clare Inn at which I, as representative of the R.F.A., was piped in carrying the flag of St George. On another evening we had a barbecue and there was lots of dancing on both occasions. Apres-Handball is well up to the very high standards of apres-Fives.

The next day I travelled to Dublin where the Big Boys (and Girls) were contesting the Open and Invitational World Championships. But first, at Bray, just down the coast, where we were staying, we had an unofficial One-Wall tournament, primarily for countries that don't play the four-

wall 40 x 20 game but also including a very strong team of U.S. One-wallers and a powerful squad from the local Bray club. The novice nations included England (Oldie Tony Hughes representing the E.F.A. and Very Oldie me the R.F.A.), France, Finland, Wales and Canada. It was hoped that Spain and Mexico would take part too but they didn't appear and the Dutch entered a non-playing team!

Tony lost to the brilliant (and experienced!) young American winner in the first round of the Singles but reached the final of the Plate. I managed to beat one of the Frenchmen but then faced the dynamic American. Tony and I combined in the Doubles and, after losing to the local pair in the first round, beat France in a nail-biting Plate semi-final. In the final we had a good game against the Welsh boys but the handicap of some 70 years proved just too much.

We then went to Croke Park in Dublin, Headquarters of the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Handball Council, to see the finals of the World Championships proper. It really is a spectacular game to watch when played at this level. The rallies are rather shorter than in Fives because there is no bar and so it is a little easier to kill the ball, but the speed and athleticism of the top players is breathtaking. The U.S. triumphed in the Men's Singles and Doubles, 19-year-old David Chapman beating local hero Michael 'Duxie' Walsh in the Singles and their Doubles pair, with Jihn Bike's whopping left hand outstanding, defeating their Irish opponents. The best match of all was in the Ladies' Singles where Lisa Fraser of Canada dethroned the reigning champion, Anna Engele (U.S.) in a real thriller after being 1-5 down in the tie-breaker. It was also a great thrill for me, having heard and read so much about him, to meet Naty Alvarado, reckoned to be the greatest handballer of all time - a sort of Handball Bradman, or should I say Enstone? - and to watch him play with his son, Naty junior, in the doubles semi-finals. 'El Gato' is a little past his best now but still all elegance and touch.

There were more festivities too: we met the mayor of Bray and the Lord Mayor of Dublin; the senior member of each delegation was presented with a very handsome Waterford Crystal vase; more parties and receptions followed culminating in a splendid banquet at Dublin Castle in the presence of the (then) Tiseach, Albert Reynolds.

It was all tremendous fun. The hospitality of our Irish hosts and the flawless organisation of the whole vast enterprise was truly impressive. It was the experience of a lifetime.

But what of the future? Can Rugby Fives and Handball get together in any meaningful way? Fives and 40 x 20 Four-Wall handball are both wonderful games. Any good player of one would enjoy the other immediately and, with practice, become proficient. Two weeks after the Championships I had the pleasure of teaching Robert Pruden, the Canadian President of the World Handball Council, how to play our game. We then had a 'gentle' introductory match. An hour and three-quarters later an exhausted and very red-faced instructor had just squeaked home against his 'pupil' 15-11 in the third.

We love our game; the Irish, Americans, Canadians, Australians and Mexicans love theirs. We aren't going to build expensive Handball courts over here nor can we expect the Irish, Americans and others to build Fives courts. But the One-Wall game offers a real possibility for a truly international game. As a past President of the R.F.A. I was invited, on the final Saturday in Dublin, to sit in on a meeting of the World Handball Council at which arrangements for the next World Championships, to be held in Canada in 1997, were discussed. It was agreed that the unofficial One-Wall Tournament had been such a success that it would be an integral part of the next Championships and given equal status to the main event.

All you need to play One-Wall Handball is a wall 16ft high and 20ft wide and a floor (or piece of flat ground) 34ft long and 20 ft wide. A pair of gloves, which don't need to be nearly as well padded as Fives gloves, and a Racketball ball. No expensive court-building; just a wall, a floor and some chalk or tape to mark the lines.

If the R.F.A. could promote this version of Handball, which is so much closer to our game than the Four-Wall game, and encourage Local Education Authorities to adopt it, it could lead to far more people being made aware of our own game and to our leading Rugby Fives players being able to compete in truly international competition. I hope to get it going at St. Paul's next term - not instead of Fives, as well as.

What about Wayne for World Champion One-Waller 1997?



Apres-Handball at the recent World Championships.

Alastair Mackenzie congratulating Lisa Fraser of Canada on her victory in the Ladies Singles.

## The Waterford Crystal Vase

Each delegation attending the Championships was presented with a Waterford Crystal vase. Images of The Rugby Fives Association vase are shown below.



***Geoff Sherratt, RFA President 2003-2005,  
was custodian of the vase for a period.***

***Geoff is shown here holding the vase in 2013.***



