



GAA
HANDBALL

'The Big Alley'

A Coach's Guide for
60x30 Softball

Introduction



60x30 Softball is one of the four codes of the game (60x30 Softball, 60x30 Hardball, 40x20, One-Wall) governed by GAA Handball. The 60x30, or 'Big Alley' as it is commonly referred to, is considered by many to be the traditional form of the game, and got its name from the dimensions of the court (60ft x 30ft). The term 'Big Alley' then attached itself to the code after the introduction of the 40x20 court, or the 'Small Alley,' to Ireland in 1969.

The 60x30 court hosts two codes of Handball; (i) Softball – which will be the primary focus of this document, and (ii) Hardball. Whilst requiring a similar generic Handballing skill set as other codes, there are still various key differences unique to 60x30 Softball. This document will highlight various tips and strategies to improve your big alley game.

- The ball is larger and made of softer rubber.
- The game is very cardio based due to the size of the court, and thus requires a different type of fitness to the 40x20 code for example.
- It is less demanding on the lower back and hips when compared to the 40x20 court. This is due to less bending/low retrievals.
- The floor is concrete, which can be punishing on the joints, thus a good pair of court shoes with cushioned soles is advised to protect the knees.



Tactics

1) Serves

Every rally in Handball is initiated with a serve, and thus its importance is paramount. The serve is also the only time that a player has complete control over the point. As well as initiating the point, the server can also retain control over the point by hitting a serve that will dictate the type of return that will be made by the opponent.

The aim of the serve could be defined as:

'To make a point by serving an irretrievable ball or by putting the opponent in as much returning difficulty as possible.'

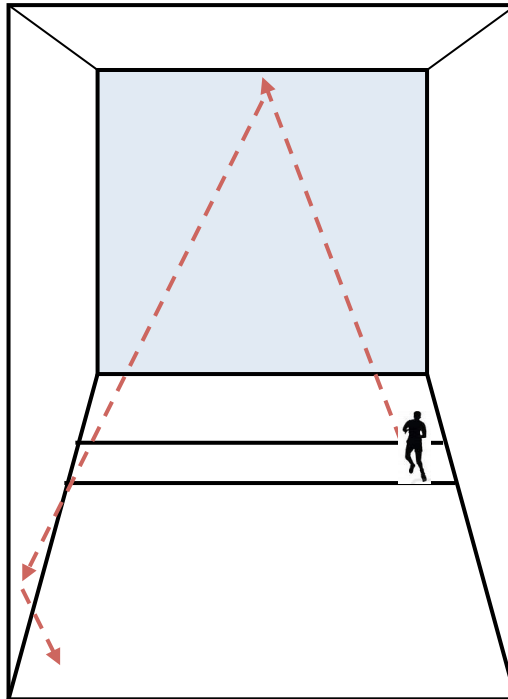
It is important to remember that there is no set number of serves, and creative ability can call for any type of serve to be used. The serving types we have presented in this document are merely some of the more popular, effective serves.

As well as that, serves can be executed in an offensive or defensive mode. For example:

- a) A power serve may be executed with the aim of getting an un-returnable point
- b) A lob serve may be executed to force a weak off-hand return from the opponent in order for the server to gain immediate advantage in the ensuing rally.



Two Wall 'Soft' Lob Serve:



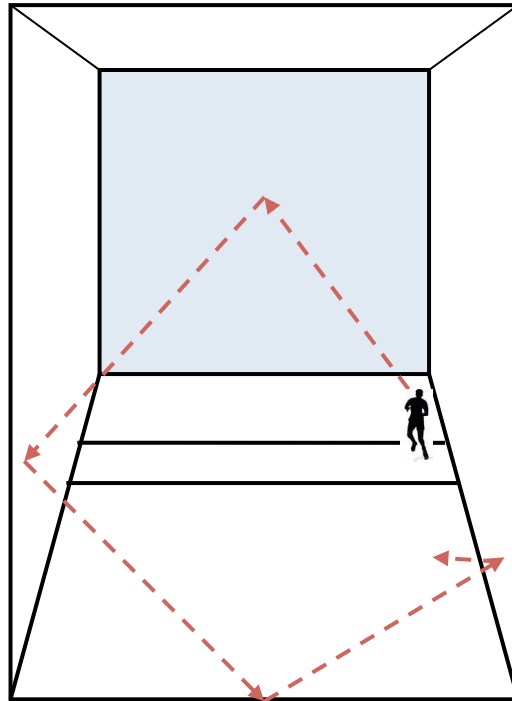
Key Points:

- Use the full height of the front wall, aiming to hit as close to the top of the wall as possible. This allows you to hit the ball slightly softer, enabling the ball to run across the back wall, ensuring a difficult return as it is harder to swing at and generate power
- Point of contact on front wall should be slightly off centre, closer to the wall you are aiming to descend off
- Ball should be on the descending arc as it reaches the side wall, cutting in low off the sidewall, close to the back wall
- Ball should not reach the back wall
- This serve can be executed using either the overhand or the underhand stroke

Tip:

Due to the natural spin developed from hitting the ball with your open hand, after trial and error, players should discover what height/direction/speed is required for them to execute the serve. Again, due to the natural spin of the ball, this serve works best for right-handed players to serve from the right, and vice versa.

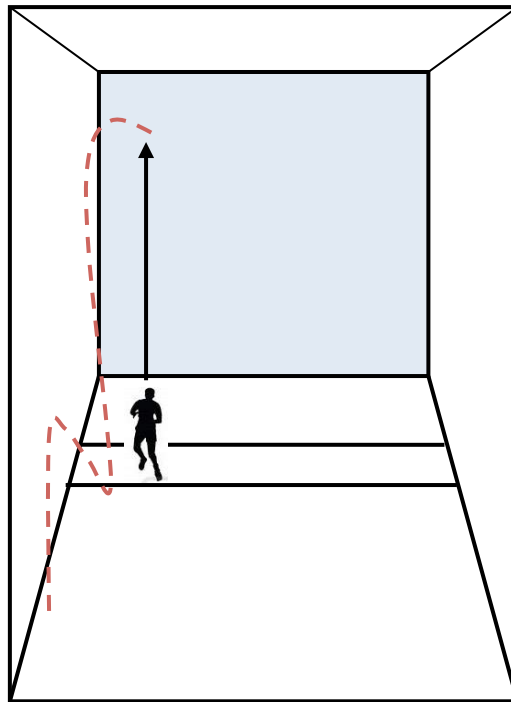
Two Wall 'Hard' Lob Serve:



Key Points:

- Point of contact on front wall should be slightly off centre, 2/3 the way up the front wall, and closer to the side wall you are aiming to descend off
- Ball should be on the descending arc as it reaches the side wall, cutting in low off the sidewall, close to the back wall
- You want the ball to run across the back wall on to the opposite side wall to force a weak return
- This serve can be executed using either the overhand or the underhand stroke

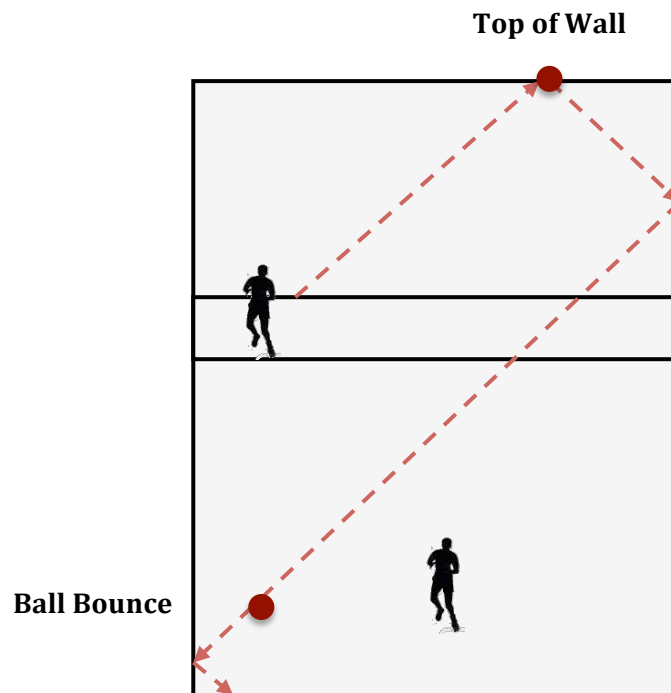
Straight Lob Serve:



Key Points:

- This serve can be executed using either the overhand or the underhand stroke
- If using the overhand stroke, the ball must be bounced above shoulder height to allow ease of the overhand swing
- Point of contact on front wall is to be close to the side-wall, with the ball returning along the sidewall as close as possible. This is however a case of trial and error for the individual player to find out where on the front wall works best for you. This can depend on the natural spin of the left or right hand.
- Ball should be on the descending arc as it reaches the back wall
- Aim to strike the ball as high on the front wall as possible, whilst bouncing just over the service line, for the most effective use of this serve
- Beware your opponent moving in to return the serve on the fly

Three Wall 'Z' Serve:



Key Points:

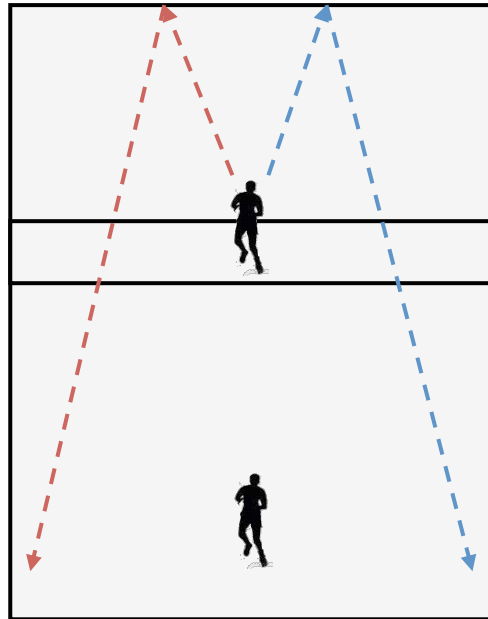
- Point of contact high on the front wall close to side wall
- Ball kept at shoulder height so as to reach deep court
- Ball to hit sidewall close to back wall and descend
- The natural spin should keep the ball off the back wall
- Can be executed with underhand or overarm
- Can be used from either side of the court

Tip:

For a right-handed player doing a three wall into the left, using the fist is an option because the natural spin of the open hand will not allow the ball to carry over sharply to the left sidewall.

This is a serve to use every so often because if used regularly your opponent will anticipate it and may volley the ball hard back at you.

Low Power Serve:



Key Points:

- Ball should be contacted low and hit with power
- Point of contact on front wall is approximately half way between server and sidewall, but is dependent on the spin put on the ball
- Ball kept low so as to bounce just behind the short line
- Ball to be kept close to sidewall and off the back wall
- In most cases should be directed towards the opponents weak hand
- Can be executed with underhand or sidearm
- Can be used from either side of the court, as shown.

Tip:

Keeping this serve off the back wall is critical, and due to the nature of the lively ball, this can be difficult. However when mastered, it can be a very effective serve against opponents, particularly if they have a weak offhand.

2) Return of Serve

The return of serve is critical in the 60x30. Due to the size of the court, your positional play can often leave you very exposed if your return of serve is not adequate. There are a few tips to remember when considering your return of serve.

- In any Handball game/shot, you want to give yourself the best opportunity to get into the centre court position. This is no different with the return of serve, where your aim should be to bring the server out of the centre court.
- Prevent the server from volleying your return. Below are three suggested return options:
 - (i) High enough that it goes over opponents head
 - (ii) Driving the return hard and straight down the sidewall
 - (iii) Overhand shot that bounces well in front of the server, preventing the fly
- If struggling to return a serve, try a different tactic e.g. move in to fly the ball.



3) Shot Selection



Your shot selection has a huge impact on the outcome of the match. Knowing when to hit certain shots is a major strength for any Handballer to have. Your shot selection can be dictated by numerous factors (e.g. Handballing ability, fitness levels), but below are some tips to keep in mind to improve your shot selection.

- Consider using particular serves or shots, where your opponent's natural return is towards your stronger hand/preferred shot/strengths. Look for strengths and weakness during the warm-up.
- Practice different serves and shots in the warm-up and use them during the game to figure out what your opponent struggles with.
- Anticipate the ball's natural spin, particularly on the rebound from the sidewalls.
- Avoid giving your opponent easy opportunities to fly the ball.
- Vary your shots to move your opponent around the court with the aim of tiring him/her out. Over a long match this can take its toll.
- Using the sidewalls when killing can be very effective
 - (i) Be aware that a right-hander killing into the right corner will see the ball shoot quickly across the frontcourt.
 - (ii) A similar height shot into the left corner will see the pace of the ball drop significantly off the ball upon contact of with the side wall.

4) Court Positioning

This is dictated by a number of factors; your own strengths, the strengths of your opponent, and whether you and your opponent are right or left handed.

- In general you want to try and dominate centre court. You dominate centre court so you can quickly move to any part of the court in fewer steps; if you are in centre court generally you are in control of the rally, with your opponent behind you.
- Remember, your court positioning not only improves your own shot execution and selection, but it can have a major bearing on your opponent's shot selection. Not only does it narrow his/her options, but it can also help exert extra pressure on him/her to execute the shot well.
- Think several shots ahead, try and anticipate where your opponent wants to hit the ball, particularly on his return of serve. If you study matches, players generally seem to follow a pattern of shot selection depending on court positioning or the type of serve/shot they are returning.

5) Doubles Play

Doubles is very different to singles, yet many players attempt to play a similar tactical game in singles and doubles. What you will observe from the successful doubles pairings is that they both have an excellent understanding of their roles, and constantly communicate with each other.

As in most doubles matches, the left-sided player generally receives most of the play, covering the left and more of the backcourt. The right-sided players can often find themselves out of the play a lot, but there is a real art to playing the right-hand side, and this role can prove to be crucial in the outcome of the match. Right-sided players must be patient, but also constantly be alert and very efficient when their opportunity arises.

Aside from the generic doubles strategies and tips, below are some aspects of play for the 60x30 to be aware of:

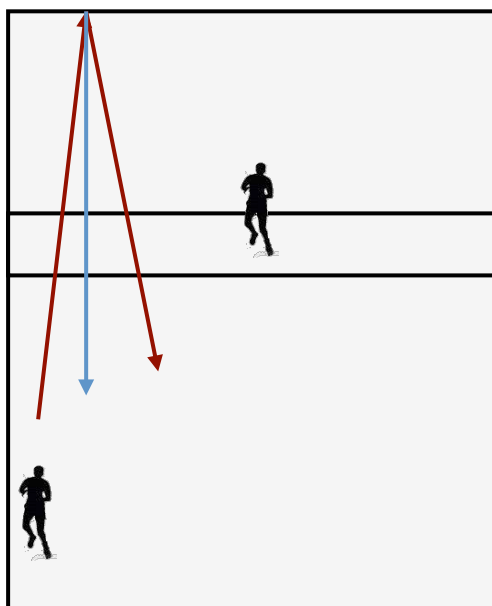
- 1) Have an array of serves in place for both opponents, considering the possibility of playing a left-handed player
- 2) Right-sided player should aim to fly the ball as much as possible, driving the ball back out into the back court
- 3) Due to the size of the court, the attacking team should exploit opportunities when one or both opponents are out of position by moving in to fly the ball

Expert Tips / Signature Shots:

There have been many great champions down through the years, all with very contrasting styles and strengths. Here we take a quick look into the styles of three players who dominated the 60x30 court, identifying their playing styles and tips.

Expert Tip – Fist Spin:

The natural spin of the 60x30 Softball can often catch you off guard, but you can also use this spin to your advantage to help get out of a difficult position. By using your fist and coming around the ball, you can change the ball's trajectory to be almost opposite of the expected trajectory.



See Diagram.

If the receiver were to return the serve normally with his left hand (red line), then his return would end up heading towards the centre court. However, should the receiver come around the ball with his fist (blue line), then he/she will be able to straighten up the return down the line, different from the expected trajectory.

No Spin

Fist Spin



Robbie McCarthy
Westmeath

Eoin Kennedy
Dublin

**Current, 3 x All-Ireland 60x30
Singles Titles**

**8 x All-Ireland 60x30 Singles
Titles**

Robbie's retrieving of the ball, and re-killing from such retrievals is a key aspect of his game. The Mullingar man's natural two-handed overhand game in particular allows him to get out of trouble, pushing his opponent back into deep court.

Popularised by St Brigid's clubman Eoin Kennedy during his dominance of the big court in the 2000's was the hard overhand two-wall lob serve. This deep court serve ran across the back wall, forcing a return that opponents found difficult to generate power off and achieve a full swing.



Michael 'Duxie' Walsh
Kilkenny

**16 x All-Ireland 60x30 Singles
Titles**

The all-time record holder, Duxie used a soft two-wall lob serve, which combined with his speed, enabled him to master the fly kill shot off the return of serve. His perfected serve was primarily aimed to set up the fly kill, effectively ending rallies quickly.

Tom Sheridan
Meath

**12 x All-Ireland 60x30 Doubles
Titles**

Kells clubman Sheridan is the ultimate doubles player, having won 12 All-Ireland titles with three different partners. His underarm power is particularly effective with his renowned passing shots, and long range kills in the left corner.

5 Key Areas to improve you 60x30 Game

- ❖ **Utilise your Serve** – plan your serve to suit how and where you want the ball to be returned. Thinks several shots ahead.
- ❖ **Maintain Centre Court** - after striking the serve, maintain centre court position, as opposed to the natural instinct to step back
- ❖ **Return of Serve** - get the ball over the server's head – do not give them the opportunity to volley your return.
- ❖ **Volley the Ball** – the 60x30 court takes a lot of covering, so volley the ball to save energy, and put your opponent on the back foot.
- ❖ **Spin of the 60x30 ball** – be conscious of the nature of the 60x30 ball, which is a lot livelier than balls used in other handball codes.





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