

# GAA HANDBALL WEXFORD PLAYER PROFILE

## *Ray Breen, Templeudigan*

### Major honours:

World title	(1)	19 and under	1994
All Ireland softball (60x30) titles	(1)	JS	1996
All Ireland 4 wall (40x20) titles	(2)	JS + JD	1996
Leinster titles		Multiple	
County softball (60x30) titles	(19)	U21D	1996
		U21S	1995
		MS + MD	1994, 93, 92
		U16S + U16D	1991
		U15S + U15D	1990
		U14S + U14D	1989
		U13S + U13D	1988
		U12S + U12D	1987
		U11D	1986
County 4 wall (40x20) titles	(22)	U21S + U21D	1996
		U21S	1995

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MS + MD	1994, 93, 92
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U14S + U14D	1989
U13S + U13D	1988
U12S + U12D	1987
U11D	1986

The above achievements at county level include winning 40 consecutive county championship titles, 18 in a row in softball and 22 in a row in 4 wall.

**Started playing at:** Age 10

**Greatest influence on career:** There is two really, firstly, my father, Tony, throughout my under age days brought me the length and breathe of the country for all my training and competitive games, sometimes neglecting his own playing career as a result.

Secondly, my then girlfriend, and now my wife, Denise, was very supportive after I had major surgery on my shoulder in 1996. This kept me out of the court for 6 months and away from competitive action for 9 months and at only 21 years of age, was an extremely disappointing and mentally challenging time. Having played handball 5 days a week for most of my life, to come to a

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sudden standstill and have to give up the game I loved was extremely difficult to come to terms with. Denise supported and encouraged me and inspired me to get back and play again.

**Extra:** During my time out, I found a love for psychology and it was then I began reading books and articles on the topic. My first book was 'Sports Psychology' by Stephen J Bull, which was a particularly great help to me in how to understand the emotions I was going through and how best to deal with it.

After a long process, I eventually got back playing but unfortunately my shoulder would only last another year before it went again and that was my handball days finished. At that time I felt that I was on a good path to achieve bigger and better things in the game, as I felt I hadn't peaked and reached my full potential yet. I knew I had the determination and passion to do so and with the combination of on court drilling and off court psychology, I felt that I was on the right course to achieve my goals, bigger things.

**Favourite code (softball, 4-wall or 1-wall):**

I actually enjoyed both codes but my heart was with the 60 x 30, pity the season was always shorter.

**Favourite court:**

A few I'd say. 60 x 30 Garryhill, Talbots Inch & New Ross, all with high walls and you could float the ball around the court. Ballymitty with it's uniqueness in the right hand corner of the front wall, kill it and the ball would still come to the back of the court, great passing shot in the end, phew!!!

40 x 20 I loved Borris, O'Loughlins and Ballyhogue, all fast courts.

To be the best you can be when it comes to courts, the most important thing for a competitor is **not** to have a court that **you dislike**. Otherwise it could be a recipe for failure from the start, before you go on court you have negative thoughts, emotions or possibly past memories from previous games where things did not go your way. You can only

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control the controllables and in controlling ourselves, we can control our own thoughts, our focus, our attention and our mentality in the moment.

**Favourite shot:**

Kill shot and floating lob

**Favourite player:**

Never had one

**Toughest match:**

(1) Against Gavin Buggy Leinster minor singles final in 1993. I always remember been on the back foot for most of the game and was 11-0 behind in the third, but probably one of my strongest attributes was never to give up, leave everything on the court which I did and eventually I wore Gavin down to win 19-21, 21-17, 21-16.

(2) Against Ciaran Heneghan, Roscommon in the 1992 All Ireland minor singles semi final. He was 19 and had lost the All Ireland minor singles final to Brian Gilhooly the previous year. I had just turned 17 and I won 21-16, 21-19 in a fantastic game at Garryhill.

**Toughest opponent:**

Michael Finnegan, Cavan, a true champion, knew how to win, powerful, determined and a mentally strong athlete and Ken Cottrell, Kilkenny, an extremely gifted player with a fantastic pair of hands.

**Most enjoyable victory:**

A few, for different reasons. Winning the world championship plus a double victory with my father winning the masters doubles at the same games. It was my big break through and leading up to the championships that year I was working and living in Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary. I would work until 9.30-10 each night and then spend hours in the court drilling on my own till around 12-1am. I felt I had improved overall as a player and it gave me great personal confidence and satisfaction.

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Victory over the holder Brian Gilhooly in the league stages of the 1996 county softball senior singles at Ballymitty was also special. I felt I was playing really well and I wasn't far away, but my shoulder went again later that year. Brian went on to retain his title and was a great player and a great champion. I was due to compete in the National Intermediate Championship in 1997 which I had hoped was my next step towards the senior ranks, but my handball career was effectively over at the age of 21 in 1996.

**The best softball (60x30) player of your era:**

Michael Finnegan

**The best softball (60x30) player of all time:**

Ducksy Walsh

**The best 4-wall (40x20) player of your era:**

David Chapman

**The best 4-wall (40x20) player of all time:**

Paul Brady

**Pre-game meal:**

Nothing in particular but it was approximately 4 hours before a game.

**Tips you would give to young players seeking to improve? :**

You can train and drill on court as much as possible and it will improve those aspects of your game that are vital at a young age, but as you advance through your teenage years, sports psychology and visualisation become the most important aspect for you to focus on. It can help you to move to the next level and reach your full potential.

You need to find a way where this works for you, to trust and believe in the process. Use it to improve and develop your game along with improving on your weaknesses. It takes time, dedication and discipline to perfect this and you need to be able to hide yourself away to work on it. My place was the bedroom, for 30 minutes at a time. For example, visualise yourself returning those shots you normally have trouble making, you will eventually reap the rewards and see the benefit and the effect this will have on your game.

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In addition, if you have a court where you tend to underperform, from your last match in the court you will find that you actually did have times in the game where things went well. You might not remember it because the disappointment was greater, but look at the good moments, good shots, great serves etc that did work for you. Take note and visualise these successful moments over and over, with you performing at your best in this court.

Finally, I began this too late, but I would advise all players to keep a profile page of all your major opponents, every time you play them or see them play, keep notes on what worked and didn't work. This will be advantageous to you in training before you play them again, it will help you have a clear game plan before you go on court and it creates confidence.

I would say that my on-court attitude was exemplary, I always treated my opponents, win or lose, with the respect they deserved, I was very fair and honest on court, if I didn't get a ball I would call it so and I continue to be that player today. I urge young players to play with this attribute, it is important to acknowledge your opponent and respect them; you will be competing against one another for a number of years and hopefully be friends on and off the court. After all, it is just a game.

### **Suggestions for making handball better (if any):**

Psychology is under rated but exists in all sports and implementing it at an early age would be beneficial, even just providing young handballers/parents with some very good sites online as a starting point and let the parents explore it on behalf of their kids. In other words, make child sports psychology part of their game. [www.peaksports.com](http://www.peaksports.com) is one I have subscribed to and used.

### **Other sports played:**

I have a love of court games and I've played badminton, squash and racquetball over the past few years. The different stroke technique used compared to handball has enabled me to participate in these events.

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### **Greatest sporting hero (all sports):**

They call him the g.o.a.t. and it has to be tennis legend Roger Federer, an amazing champion who is a graceful player with sublime talent, always dignified on and off the court. He seems down to earth, accessible, has a clean image, always says the right thing and stays away from controversy. He speaks graciously of his fellow top players and his on-court attitude is a joy to watch, a lesson for all young players. As a result, I believe he has won the Stefan Edberg sportsman award a record number of times, 13, an award voted on by his fellow players. I must say being injury free all his life is rare for an athlete at the very top level, but he has managed to do just that for most of his playing career. When the challenges came his way in the form of Nadal, Djokovic and Murray, he struggled for a while to get back to the top but he took time away. He said that he “visualised the game needed to take on these great players and worked on it tirelessly”. He adapted and adjusted many aspects and came back to win another grand slam. A true champion!