

ROAD BOWLING

SERIAL WINNER | Martin Coppinger has won four senior All-Ireland titles since 2010

Bantry bowler who conquered Ireland wants to show he is up there with the best in the world

Coppinger targets European domination

BY GER MCCARTHY

FOUR-TIME All-Ireland senior bowling champion Martin Coppinger has plenty left in the tank and is itching to make his mark on the European stage once again.

The Bantry native remains one of the biggest draws when it comes to modern-day road bowling. His reputation stretches beyond the county bounds up north to Armagh and with good reason. Rarely has an individual dominated the business end of senior bowling as much as Coppinger has over the past 20 years.

In 2010, Coppinger defeated James O'Donovan in the county final before besting Eddie Carr in the senior All-Ireland decider. Two years later, he beat Christy Mullins in Cork and Conor McGuigan at Derrinasa-fa to claim another county and All-Ireland double. It proved a profitable year with Coppinger adding a dramatic King of the Roads title to his trophy cabinet. A walkover in the 2013 All-Ireland (after an injury to Eddie Carr) followed a county final win over Brian Wilmot. 2017 saw Arthur McDonagh overcome in Cork and Bryan O'Reilly defeated for a fourth county and All-Ireland triumph.

It's safe to say that few road bowlers possess as impressive a CV as Coppinger's. More recently, Covid-19 and its subsequent lockdowns halted scores all over the country and it's been a frustrating time for sports enthusiasts desperate for a return to normality including the four-time All-Ireland bowling supremo.

'I would have last bowled a proper score back in February 2020,' Coppinger says.

'It was a charity score organised by West Cork Whiskey in Skibbereen against David Murphy and Thomas Mackle. There would have been little opportu-

nity to bowl after that before the lockdown started, which was frustrating.

'My wife Kim, my son Tommy and I moved out to Crosshaven recently. We have another child on the way in the next couple of weeks too. Between that and all I have going on with my work at Johnson and Johnson, I've had little enough time to think about anything else.'

Also last year, the new Crosshaven resident successfully completed a Diploma in Management and Team Development in UCC. With his family and work life becoming increasingly busier, Coppinger contemplated saying goodbye to the sport he has dominated and loved for so long.

Thankfully, that contemplation dissipated within a month as thoughts of returning to the roads were fuelled by a desire to atone for a European loss two years before.

'To be brutally honest, as busy as I've been, I missed it (bowling) too much,' Coppinger says.

'I'm currently getting a team together to be ready for when bowling comes back. There is a European Championships coming up next year as well so I believe it would be the wrong time to bow out because I'd give myself a very good chance out in Germany.'

'The championships were cancelled last year and I presume people will have to qualify once again. I've kept up my training and would have always been interested in the differences between the Irish (on roads), Dutch (on grass) and the German (lofting, like the shot put) styles. Overall, I'd be confident of my ability to compete over there.'

'There is a Dutch bowler by the name of Rob Scholten who I faced at a centenary competition in Germany two years ago. He beat me by about sev-



Martin Coppinger is one of the biggest names in road bowling.

en metres in the end. It was a right close battle. We finished in the gold and silver positions. Rob had previously won the Europeans back in 2016 when I wasn't there so that's one I want to put right. He is a very, very good bowler but I want to go up against him again because I think I have that bit more power.'

Trophies and titles no longer interest Coppinger perhaps as much as they once did. His interest now lies in testing himself against the best Europe has to offer. Beating someone of Rob Scholten's stature, at his own native game, represents the kind of challenge Coppinger is looking for before finally calling it a day.

'Taking on European bowlers is high-level competition and you are representing your country as well. That's what I'm interested in now more than anything else,' he says.

'Between the three averages (Irish, Dutch and German), and if I were 100 per cent right, I'd be up there amongst the best in the world. I'm convinced of that. I have a good loft for the German game and am good at both the Irish and Dutch disciplines. I'd be happy to take on anyone in all three. Dutch bowling takes place on moors grass. It is the same as the Irish in that you get ten shots and your distance is measured from there.'

Moving from a West Cork bowling stronghold to an area not associated with the sport has allowed Coppinger a chance to breathe.

'Bowling is hard, boy, always

'I'm currently getting a team together to be ready for when bowling comes back' - Martin Coppinger

has been. It is dog eat dog at the very top, Coppinger says.

'When you win everyone is with you and backing you. When you lose, you are left with the people that have always supported you. No longer living back home means I don't have to listen to a lot of the post mortems that I used have to after scores. Here in Crosshaven, I don't know anyone and few if anyone here knows much about bowling. That suits me grand.'

'As for how long I'll keep going, well, there are two European Championships scheduled back-to-back and I intend to go to both. One will be in 2022 and the next one in 2024. Both are going ahead in Germany; one will be in the North up by Hamburg and the other down south near Bremen.'

'Bowling is still part of my life. I grew up with it on my doorstep. The big senior scores during Bantry Mussel Fair when the likes of Michael Toal used come down from the north to take on the best in Cork. I went to loads of scores with my father as a child but watching the huge crowds, experiencing the atmosphere they generated and following those senior scores is what I wanted to be part of. I still do.'



Martin Coppinger, pictured with his father Mick, after winning his first senior All-Ireland in 2010.