

# ROAD BOWLING

LEGENDARY | Seamus Sexton of Nadd is regarded as the greatest junior champion of them all



# Jack Dan O'Donovan ended West's wait for junior glory

Part 2 in our series on the junior championship includes West Cork's first county winner

WITH an All-Ireland title now on offer, bowling's junior championship continued on an upward curve through the late 1960s.

At the top of the ladder, Mick Barry was in his heyday, cementing his status as the greatest when, in 1967, he completed the first of two four-in-a row senior county title successes that marked his almost complete dominance of the game in that era.

On the next rung, the intermediate grade, then five years in existence, was producing champions in the mould of Tedser Murphy, Johnny Holland, Jim Geasley and Dooley O'Mahony, all of whom would grace the senior stage without, of course, dislodging the Waterfall maestro. But those competing at the top represented just a fraction of bowling's burgeoning membership of that time.

Increased interest and involvement saw the formation of new clubs and a broadening of the game's base led to new regions being granted autonomy to run their own competitions, including the all-important junior championships. The vast numbers plying their skills in the divisions were all in

junior ranks and only the best survived.

East Cork claimed their third county title in ten years when unheralded Christy Coleman of Saleen, who with his brother Patsy hold a special place in East Cork bowling, conquered all before him in his march to the 1967 county championship. Christy defeated top north Cork contender Willie Joe Leahy of Kilcorney in a final of mixed bowling at Waterloo and then put in a great performance in the All-Ireland showdown on the Cathedral Road, Armagh, only to lose out to Ulster champion Patsy McKenna.

The City region produced the champions of '68 and '69. Mervyn McGregor of Strawberry Hill was the first recipient of the Fr Michael O'Driscoll Cup, presented to the Association in the patron's honour at Coolcower House, Macroom, in 1968, when he defeated Ardfield man Fachtna O'Callaghan in the final at Templemartin. Mervyn won the All-Ireland, played at Nadd, defeating Ulster's Malachy McCreesh in that decider.

Paddy O'Donoghue followed up for the City in '69 with a great win over another of North Cork's

**'He (Jack Dan O'Donovan) fought a wonderfully courageous campaign since the start of the championship'**

top performers of the time, Pat Corkery. That year's final was played at Carey's Cross. Gerald McKee, the Ulster champion, then won a thrilling All-Ireland from O'Donoghue at Grenagh. Flor Crowley describes this one as 'being acclaimed as one of the best ever seen. The bowling from both men was impeccable and it was McKee's brilliant opening four shots which set him up for a bowl lead over O'Donoghue which he never looked like shedding'.

Pat Murphy was an accomplished junior A champion in 1970. An uncle of current seniors David and Aidan, the Mid Cork champion enjoyed a magnificent championship and won the county against Paddy O'Leary (East Cork) in a final played at Togher in the City. Murphy then won the All-Ireland on the Knappagh road from Colm Grimley in a terrific contest and was acknowledged by Flor Crowley in the aftermath as the Cork 'best junior winner to date'.

Pat Murphy was followed in 1971 by a rising star whose subsequent achievements would rank him as the greatest junior champion of them all. Seamus Sexton of Nadd, the new north Cork winner, defeated Dermot O'Sullivan, Coolsnaghtig, Dunmanway, who was carrying the West Cork banner, in a thrilling final at Ballyshonin.

Flor Crowley in his report states Sexton won this in the bowling through the wood 'with some wonderful throws which showed him the splendid bowler which he undoubtedly is'. Sexton won the junior All-Ireland the following week on the same road from Ulster's Brendan Digby.

Both Sexton and Dermot O'Sullivan rose to senior ranks, the Dunmanway man capturing the county in 1980 while Sexton became one of the all-time greats - he won three in the premier grade, one All-Ireland and Eu-



Pat Murphy, junior champion in 1970, celebrates in Armagh with supporters.

ropean gold on the goad on two occasions.

It was back to the City for the '72 junior champion when Neily O'Donoghue came good in the final at Waterloo. A magnificent opening shot set him on his way against Donie Fehily who had accounted for London champion Pat Mullane and future senior Declan O'Donovan on the way to the final. On the Cathedral Road, O'Donoghue, from Ballyvolane, a brother of renowned Cork hurling full back Tom, annexed the '72 All-Ireland when defeating Armagh's John Mills.

Joe Twohig of Upton was a teak-tough performer in the early 1970s and captured the '73 county junior title. In a thrilling run he got the better of West Cork's youthful champion, James O'Driscoll, in the penultimate round and then, in a most dramatic finale, powered past a seemingly unbeatable last shot thrown by John Butler, the East Cork champion, in the county decider at Waterfall.

The All-Ireland finals of '73 were deferred consequence of a bitter disagreement between bodies north and south which led to Mick Barry receiving a walk-over from Danny McParland at the '72 senior final at Dublin Hill. Strenuous efforts were made to sort things out and talks between both sides, presided over by then Lord Mayor of Cork, Senator Pat Kerrigan, resolved the crisis. On April 13th, 1974 at Midleton, Joe Twohig won the '73 All-Ireland junior championship from Gerry



The great Jack Dan O'Donovan of Drinagh.



Joe Twohig, Upton, won the junior championship in 1973.

Boylan, Armagh.

At the conclusion of his report on the 1971 county final, Flor Crowley, a staunch West Cork man, lamented that West Cork champions were finding it so difficult to win the junior championship. Dermot O'Sullivan's loss had made it five from his home division to contest unsuccessfully in county finals and he stated, 'We must now ask ourselves the question, what West Cork player if any is going to win the junior county? And how soon if ever?'

It would be three years before the answer came on a famous day at Innishannon when Jack Dan O'Donovan of Drinagh clawed victory from the jaws of defeat against overwhelming favourite, Teddy O'Neill, the champion of the City region. It was a score O'Neill led for most of the way, but O'Donovan's competitive instincts kept him in touch. He was there to capitalise when the City champion badly misplayed his second last shot. The Fr. Michael O'Driscoll Cup was coming back

to Drinagh to much fanfare. In his report Flor Crowley praised the courage of the first West Cork champion.

'He fought a wonderfully courageous campaign since the start of the championship. His courage was more than ever conspicuous at Innishannon where it was the difference between victory and impending defeat'.

In Ulster there was a surprise champion too when Stephen Donnelly emerged the winner and it was the northerner who claimed All-Ireland glory in '74 when defeating O'Donovan at Ballyshonin. Described by Brian Toal as a 'marvellously competitive realm for a significant group of competent bowlers', the junior championship continued to thrive in the seventies even in often difficult circumstances that were outside the control of Associations, north and south.

**Don't miss next week's Star for the third part in this series on the junior championship**

**Ból Chumann na hÉireann**

WCheck Road Bowling's Facebook page and website, [irishroadbowling.ie](http://irishroadbowling.ie), for updates