

Irish Racquetball Review

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Congratulations

Congratulations to Noel O’Callaghan and Bernie Comerford who got married in Kilkenny on New Years Day.

On behalf of the RAI, I would like to wish them the very best of luck and many years of happiness together.

Leinster Open

The Leinster Open is the next event on the National Calendar of Events. This will be held in Arklow on the 20/21 of January.

All the various grades are on offer to cater for players of all standards. If you are interested in playing, please contact either Susan Farrell at 086 8455765 or John Comerford at 056 7764181.

The closing date for entries is Sunday 14th of January.

5th & 8th Place Finishes for Irish Juniors

Mexico was again the dominant force at the World Junior Racquetball Championships which were held in Tempe, Arizona. Under the guidance of Coaches Elma Gibney and Liam Hughes, Ireland improved their overall ranking on the World stage thanks to an impressive 5th place finish in the Esprit Cup and 8th place finish in the World Cup.

19 players travelled to participate and represent their country and they did so with great pride. The team was well prepared for the event and this was very evident by the performances and the results.

If the players can continue to work hard at their game, techniques and fitness, then continued progress over the next 12 months is assured as we are lucky to have some of the most talented juniors in the 28 year history of our Association.

It took a massive effort from a lot of people to get the team to this event and as President of the RAI; I would like to thank everyone who contributed in any way. Huge sponsorship was raised and a lot of tickets had to be sold. Thanks to the parents of the young players for their continued support and co-operation. Without your help it would not have been possible. Thanks to Elma and Liam for their time and effort in preparing the team as well as all the club coaches who are also giving up many hours of their time to help progress the standard of these players.

Congratulations to all the players on their performances and I hope it was a very enjoyable and well worth trip for you all. The team in full was Clodagh McManamon, Donna Ryder, Ciara McManamon (all Newport), Majella Haverty, Eoin Lisibach, Katie Kenny (all Castlebar), Johnny O’Keeney, Chris Carey (both Fermoy), Joe Dillon, Daire Gargan, Ruaidhri O’Rourke (all Kingscourt), Colm O’Regan (Arklow), Ailish Gibney (Moyleagh), Julie Skehan, Eithne Skehan, Eoin Kearns, Garvan Dunford, Dean Cliffe and Conor Skehan (all Touraneena).

Top 8 Place for Daire Gargan

Some outstanding performances in the 12+under grade saw Kingscourt's Daire Gargan finish in the top 8 in the World which is the best ever result for an Irish male junior.

In the round of 64, he defeated the Mexican player Eduardo Olivas on a 15-12, 15-4 scoreline. Next up was Ecuadorian Antonio Barahona in the round of 32. Again Daire made no mistake and progressed through to the last 16 thanks to a 15-12, 15-2 victory.

Here he faced Anjandro Montiel from Mexico. After losing the opening game 15-3, Daire fought back to level up proceedings and set up a deciding tie-breaker after clinching the second game 15-10. A solid performance in the decider resulted in an 11-6 victory and a place in the quarter finals.

Here he faced the top seed Marco Rojas from USA. Despite Daire's best efforts, this proved to be a hurdle too many and he had to give way to the player who went on to win the title. 15-2, 15-1 was the final outcome.

Italy to host Europeans

It was recently announced that the 2007 European Championships will be held in Italy. The likely dates of the event are the last week of July.

Ireland put in a bid to host the event but unfortunately it was unsuccessful. I would like to thank Sean Gargan for the work he put into preparing our bid.

Lisibach & Dillon win Bronze Medals

Eoin Lisibach and Joe Dillon will feel well pleased with their performances at the recent World Championships which resulted in them bringing home the bronze medals in the 12+under doubles grade.

In the round of 16, they overcame their best challenge of Raul Javalera and Raul Quintanilla from Mexico on a 15-2, 15-8 scoreline. This set up a quarter final encounter with their compatriot Conor Skehan and his partner Anthony Schonberger from Canada. The Irish duo again hit form here to record a 15-11, 15-2 victory and book themselves a semi-final spot against the top American pairing of Jose Diaz and Marco Rojas.

Eoin and Joe battled hard throughout the match but on the day they had to concede defeat to a stronger pairing. 15-6, 15-4 was the final score. Bronze medals were secured and both players will be well pleased with their overall performances.

Club Activity

In the next edition of Irish Racquetball Review, we will be reporting on activities on the club scene around the country.

If you would like to include the results of your local league or any other club activity, please forward the information to racquetballireland@eircom.net .

Longest Serving Club & Player

In the last edition, I asked the question as to what club is the longest joined the Association and who is the longest serving player.

After doing some research, it looks like the Templederry Club in North Tipperary is the longest serving club which would make Paddy Kennedy the Irish grandfather of Racquetball!!!

All Ireland 'B' Championships

The All Ireland 'B' Junior Championships will be held in Castlebar on the 27/28 of January. Entry forms have been sent to the clubs and players as asked to return them to Liam Hughes before Friday 19th of January.

Players who have already won a gold or silver medal in the All Ireland A's, a gold in the All Ireland B's and players who have represented their country are ineligible to play in these Championships.

National Doubles & Overage Championship

The All Ireland Doubles and Overage Championships will be held in Arklow on the 24/25 of February. Entry forms have been sent to clubs and all grades with sufficient entries will be played for.

I would ask all players to consider playing in all our National

Championships and try to promote it to you club mates and friends.

Tiebreaker Victories for Noel & Susan in Kingscourt

The Kingscourt Open kickstarted a very busy month for racquetball in November. In the Open singles grades, it took a tie-breaker to decide both men's and women's finals. In the men's grade, Noel O'Callaghan showed his true class when he fought back from losing the opening game 15-3 to Triston Hickey and went on to take the title in impressive style by winning the following 2 games.

Susan Farrell confirmed her position at the top of the National seeding list when she overcame the challenge of Elma Gibney in another tie-breaker decider to claim the women's title. Susan teamed up with her sister Toni in the Open Doubles where they finished runners up to Julie Skehan and Ailish Gibney.

The Ballyanne club in New Ross had their first win on the National Circuit when Sean Lyng won the Novice Men's singles title with a victory over local player, Michael Carolan. Junior International, Colm O'Regan from Arklow won the 'D' singles while Moylagh's Gerry Farrell became the latest player to join the Open ranks when he won the 'B' singles final against John Fitzgerald of Arklow.

Sheree Clarke ran out victorious in the C/D/Novice women's grade while Padraic Benson added the 40+ title to his list of achievements. Triston Hickey and Adam Neary confirmed their standing as Ireland's top doubles pairing when they

got the better of Jimmy Gannon and Joe Farrell in the final encounter.

6 Clubs win 10 titles at National Juniors

The All Ireland Junior Uneven Championships were held in Fermoy and they proved to be a massive success with some outstanding displays of racquetball from the future stars of our game. A total of 10 titles were up for grabs and it was brilliant to see that they were won by players from 6 different clubs.

Star of the show was undoubtedly Clodagh McManamon from the Newport in Co. Mayo. She showed great determination and some of her undoubted skill en route to winning both the Under 15 and Under 21 titles. In the Under 15 final, she defeated her twin sister Ciara while in the Under 21 final, she overcame the challenge of Senior International Julie Skehan from the Touraneena club in Co. Waterford.

Kingscourt also had a double delight with the popular Joe Dillon finally winning that first National title in the Under 13 grade when he defeated his first cousin Daire Gargan in the final. Ruaidhri O'Rourke won his club's second title of the weekend when he outscored Touraneena Garvan Dunford in the Under 15 final.

Touraneena's Clodagh Kearns, Dean Cliffe and Eithne Skehan won the Under 11 boys, Under 11 girls and Under 17 Girls titles respectively. Clodagh recorded her victory over Templederry's Clíodhna Ryan; Dean defeated Rossmore's Stephen Quinn while Eithne secured her title with a tie-breaker victory over Newport's Donna Ryder.

Castlebar's Katie Kenny beat Rossmore's Aisling Hickey to take the Under 13 title; Fermoy's Johnny O'Keeney defeated Sean Dalton from Touraneena to win the Under 17 title while Arklow's Colm O'Regan wrapped up proceedings with a victory over Johnny O'Keeney in the Under 21 grade.

Well done to all the participants for contributing to a great weekend of racquetball.

National Seeding Lists

Open Men

- 1 Noel O Callaghan 87
- 2 Triston Hickey 62
- 3 Adam Neary 41
- 4 Jimmy Gannon 34
- 5 Joe Farrell 29
- 6 Stephen O'Loan 25
- 7 Gary Lynch 14
- 8 Anthony Butler 14

Open Women

- 1 Susan Farrell 77
- 2 Elma Gibney 63
- 3 Helen Shanahan 42
- 4 Julie Skehan 38
- 5 Bernie O'Callaghan 37
- 6 Ailish Gibney 30
- 7 Geraldine Byrne 30
- 8 Eithne Skehan 22

40+ Men

- 1 Michael Murphy 41
- 2 John Comerford 35
- 3 Padraic Benson 27
- 4 Pat Traynor 21
- 5 Vincent Fitzgerald 14
- 6 John Fitzgerald 13
- 7 Oliver Gibney 12
- 8 Joe Glynn 11

Mid Week Break

In the lead up to the Junior Team going to the

World Championships, a fundraising draw was held where the prize was a Mid Week Break at Carlton Atlantic Coast Hotel in Westport. The winner was Jonathan Duffy,

Belcarra, Castlebar, Co Mayo. The seller was Mary Ryder from Newport.

Player of the Month (November)

It really could be only one person as Newport's Clodagh McManamon stole the show at the All Ireland Uneven Junior Championships in Fermoy.

Clodagh won both the Under 15 and Under 21 titles beating her twin sister Ciara and Julie Skehan of Touraneena in the respective finals.

Clodagh also won the Evening Herald/Snickers Player of the Week during the month of November which was the first one of these awards won by a racquetball player.

PR on the Up for Racquetball

In recent weeks, the game of racquetball is certainly receiving a lot of coverage from the National media.

Seaghan Hegarty writes a brilliant schools supplement in Thursday's Evening Herald and he has given us some terrific coverage in it. As always, our good friend Lindie Naughton also comes up trumps in her minority column on Thursday's in the Herald.

Paddy Hickey in the Irish Independent was given us regular coverage this season and so too has Colm O'Connor in the Irish Examiner. All of this is contributing to creating a greater awareness for our sport.

You can also follow what's happening in the world of racquetball on our website, www.racquetball-ireland.com.

3 in a Row for Arklow

Arklow secured their third Open Men's title in a row at the National Club Championships in Kingscourt on the last weekend of November. Adam Neary, Jimmy Gannon and Larry Byrne did enough to outscore a fancied Fermoy team of Liam Hughes, Dwayne Magnier and Chris Carey in the final decider.

Templederry won the Open Women's title for the third time. Captain, Catherine Shanahan was joined on the team by her sister Helen and Maire O'Doherty.

In both of the Intermediate grades, the titles were regained by the reigning champions. Joe Glynn, Padraic Benson, Owen Diviney and Martin Fitzpatrick made up the Newcastle/Athenry that created an upset when they defeated the pre tournament favourites, Fermoy to take the title. In the Women's grade, the title returned to the Deise County with the Touraneena club defeating Kingscourt in the final. Karen Kearns, Eithne Skehan and Gemma Cliffe were the victorious trio.

Another upset happened in the Novice grade when the Kingscourt Young Guns of Joe Dillon, Daire Gargan and Ruaidhri O'Rourke gained pole position in very impressive style.

Both the Junior Boys and Girls grades were won by the Touraneena Club. Sean Dalton, Garvan Dunford and Eoin Kearns made up the victorious boys team while Eithne Skehan, Gemma Cliffe and Clodagh Kearns teamed up to take the girls tile for the second consecutive season.

2006 – A Good Year for Sport

2006 was certainly a good year for Irish sport in general. Racquetball also had its moments. The Senior Team finished 11th at the World Championships in the Dominican Republic, The Juniors finished 5th and 8th respectively in the Esprit and World Cups at the World Championships in Arizona and Noel O'Callaghan won his 16th National Singles title in a row. Here are some unofficial awards for the year:

Male Player of the Year: Noel O'Callaghan.

Female Player of the Year: Susan Farrell.

Tournament of the Year: Irish Junior Open in Castlebar.

Game of the Year: It has to be Ailish McManamon versus Clodagh Kearns in the Junior Open. I have never seen such an atmosphere at a racquetball match like this one.

Junior Players of the Year: Because there is an official Player of the Season here, I won't name who I think they are...

(Some non racquetball ones)

Sports book of the Year: Back from the Brink (Paul McGrath). No contest really, every Irish sports fan has to read it...

Sportstar of the Year: Derval O'Rourke (athletics)

Shock of the Year: For me it came at the RTE Sportstar of the Year. How Derval O'Rourke wasn't awarded the title, I'll never know. How many World Champions does this country produce!!!!

Team of the Year: One way traffic here, the Munster Rugby Team.

Sports Pundit of the Year: George Hook!!!! I don't think so..... It has to be Eamon Coghlan. He has a huge knowledge of his sport.

Player of the Month (December)

He finished in the highest ever position by an Irish male player at the Junior World Championships. Daire Gargan from the Kingscourt club in Co. Cavan finished in the top 8 in the World in the 12+under grade.

Daire is a superb young talent in many sports and is a name to look out for in the future. A hugely intelligent player on the racquetball court.

17 for Noel???

I stand to be corrected on this but I think the record for consecutive National titles in any sport in Ireland is 21 and it is held by the great Terry McHugh in the sport of javelin.

Around this time of the year, a lot of racquetball chats often throw up the topic "Will Noel win again this year". On the 12th of March, he will be going for his 17th title on the trot. A superb record by any athlete in any sport.

Well, will he be stopped this year; I just can't see it happen. Year in year out, Noel peaks for this tournament and he usually wins it with considerable ease. To date this season, no player has made any inroad into upsetting the form book and it's hard to see where the strong challenge will come from.

Over the years, we've had a few "dead certs" to dethrone the champion but it just hasn't happened. Where will the next serious challenge come from? At the moment, it looks like Triston Hickey is the best equipped player to do it but he has still to beat him in any competitive match. Who

do you think will eventually dethrone the greatest ever Irish Racquetball Player??? We may have to wait for a while yet before it happens....