

ROAD BOWLING

IRELAND'S CALL | Donncha O'Brien has represented Ireland twice at the European Championships

Taking my game to the next level



Drinagh road bowler Donncha O'Brien in action at the European Championships.

West Cork junior A champion **DONNCHA O'BRIEN** takes us back to his early days in road bowling

IT'S a warm summer's evening in the early 1990s on Derrinasafa road in Dunmanway. I'm sitting comfortably on a roadside ditch enjoying the sun's rays caressing my face, while the aroma of freshly-cut grass fills the air, as does the hum of an excited cluster of road bowling aficionados around me.

I'm in a state of relief. The swirling chaos of doubt in my own abilities, which had consumed me just an hour earlier, is gone.

These bowling men, mostly in their 40s and older than me, are talking and gesturing excitedly, re-enacting the key moments of a contest that has just concluded and in which I was one of two protagonists.

Most of whom come over to shake my hand and utter some version of 'well done, boy' have hands like shovels with worn, deep, wrinkled, hard skin, in sharp contrast to my soft,

clean, young palm.

The man I just defeated approaches and with a shot of adrenaline—a residue from our recent battle—I tense up and for a nonsensical moment I am not sure if he's going to punch me or shake my hand.

He offers an outstretched hand, combined with a wry smile. I relax and shake his hand firmly, as I do so the last of the contest's tension floats away on the evening's balmy air.

I'm a tall, scrawny, reasonably naive 15-year-old on my maiden voyage into this world of serious sport, and I have a lot to learn to get to the next level. That was my first proper road bowling contest. By proper, it was against an adult with money wagered on the outcome.

As it turned out my opponent was far from a master of the art of bowling but I'm sure he felt the combination of

my inexperience, the gambling and the noise of the crowd would sway the outcome in his favour. It didn't. I held my nerve.

I was destined to play road bowling. My father had been champion of the Carbery region back in 1968 and I had grown up staring at that big silver cup on the mantle piece. I started formal competition as a 12-year-old, this was after many years where most of my friends and I played the game on the quiet country roads of the 1980s in our spare time. It was on Sunday mornings after early mass, on long summer evenings or indeed as teens sneaking off to play the game on the road next to our school at lunch time.

We spent countless hours throwing practice shots and developing all aspects of our game. We threw low, fast shots along smooth straight patches. We launched higher 'shooting' bowls, hoping they would land as aircraft do and smoothly make their way as far as possible. We threw into left-hand and right-hand corners with the appropriate spin. We even threw over the big sycamore tree, taking the aerial

route over a bend in the road we played on. We challenged ourselves on rough, worn, potholed roads, and even on roads with no surface at all.

These 28-ounce metal balls (bowls) were precious to us. And we never liked to leave one behind, if it veered off course and found itself marooned in a grass verge or a thorny ditch. The search would start immediately, following the fresh tracks into the long grass. On occasion we would have to admit defeat and return the next day with a garden pike or slasher to help hone in on the lost ball. Rarely, but now and again, the bowl would not be found and we walked home depondent and empty handed.

We have a passion for the game which grew from the bowling and sporting culture in the place we were born, inspired by stories of past heroes and epic encounters.

This passion also was intrinsically connected to fact that the game is so simple. The 1980s was a less complicated time and one that suited this simple game. Yes, we needed to purchase the bowl but after that everything was free. No entrance fees. No special

equipment. No special arena. This was a time before the soccer mom culture of driving your child to everything and the insurance vultures hadn't sunk their talons into every aspect of Irish life.

It suited us perfectly.

We could all walk out of our houses and start a game. This was especially relevant in my case as we didn't have a car for part of my childhood. Road bowling, like all of the great games, is relatively straightforward and it's addictive. Anyone of any ability can play and if you're inquisitive, young and competitive, you will very quickly start asking yourself, how do I throw it faster, smoother, further? How do I get to the next level?

Looking back on my youth and thinking of the countless hours of practice and play we had put in on the roads around my home in Drinagh I now realise that by the time competition came around, I was ready.

Bowling in competition against boys my own age was usually easy enough and the small handful of spectators that were present at these scores meant the occasion was a low-key affair. At that

stage of my fledgling bowling career, I performed well in my region but had come up short on a couple of occasions at county level, though that would change in the years that followed.

Looking back now I realise the adults who were essentially my back-room team, my mentors and the ones that would be gambling on me, realised that I needed to take the next step in my development, to be blooded in the open stage of pick-up bowling. Pick-ups are usually scores played after an official contest, often organised in the moment.

Essentially, they're a variation of schoolyard football games, where you don't know if or indeed who you are playing until it happens. This is how I ended up playing against the aforementioned 'man' and how my game would evolve to the next level.

Donncha O'Brien of Drinagh is the current West Cork junior A champion and a three-time All-Ireland U18 winner (1993 to '95) and also a big player on Ireland's senior men's teams that compete at the European Championships.