

Uganda trip “hit home” – handballer Mulkerrins

“When you see people surviving in mud huts with no electricity, no running water, and no toilets it makes the pressure of a game of handball look a lot more straightforward.”

In November 2017, Martin Mulkerrins travelled to Arda Agricultural College in North West Uganda for a seven-week volunteering trip.

Every day, the Ugandan people were forced into the monotonous disrespecting process of queuing up in large refugee camps with jerry cans for clean water. They were each handed a bag of cassava – similar to a potato and approximately 400g of maize, hardly the basis of a balanced diet.

For Martin, the short trip was life-changing.

“We all see Trocaire adds, but it’s not until you stand there and see it first-hand, does it hit home,” he said.

In 2015, Martin played in his first-ever senior handball semi-final losing out in a tiebreaker. 2016 and 2017 would be complete déjà vu as Martin lost in two more tiebreakers. In 2018, a few months after the trip to Uganda and Martin was finally victorious.

What exactly changed then? “The Ugandan experience changed everything,” Martin replied.

For those who have picked up a handball, Martin Mulkerrins is now likely a household name. For those who have not, the 28-year old’s story is probably one you have never heard before.

His handball journey began in 2004 when a new outdoor court was built in his own club Moycullen in Galway beside the hurling and football club.

Handball was certainly not your typical sport to take up at that time. The game has grown in recent years with 170 handball clubs and 15,000 members now spread across the country. This, however, was certainly not the case in 2004 with just one other club in Galway in Williamstown with juveniles.

“Football and hurling were my main sports and my dad thought it would be good to take up handball for the Winter months just to keep my eye in and to keep fit. My dad told me about DJ Carey too, he was one of the best hurlers at the time and a super handballer, he won numerous All Ireland’s.

Martin adapted to the game of handball pretty quickly and improved at a rate of knots with his hurling background meaning his hand-eye coordination was already at a high level. In his second year playing handball, he was already Connacht under 13A champion.

By 15 Martin had won his first All-Ireland with doubles partner Seamus Conneely in 2009.

“The game was in Kilkenny against Kilkenny and reffed by Kilkenny. As hard-fought wins go; they don’t come much tougher than that,” he chuckled.

By 17 Martin was the world under 17 singles and doubles champion and by 19 he was one of the youngest players ever to win the intermediate All-Ireland. As a result, Martin progressed to the senior ranks at just 20 years old.

“When I broke into the senior ranks, I moved up the ladder pretty quickly as well. After the first year or two, I was up within the top 5 players in the country.

Between 2015 and 2017 however, Martin would lose out in the semi-finals by way of tiebreak on all three occasions. When 2018 rolled around however Martin would claim his first senior title. A year later, he would add to it with titles in the one wall and big alley nationals (handballs two other codes).

Martin graduated from UCD in 2015 with an honor’s degree in animal and crop production so had a background in agriculture but volunteering was something he always wanted to do.

“A lot of people have helped me get to where I am today so I always wanted to give back and volunteering was one way I felt I could,” he said.

In November 2017, Martin travelled with his girlfriend Eilish to Arda Agricultural College in Uganda. The college was run by the Franciscan brothers and is situated close to the South Sudanese border. The college provides short-term courses for local farmers and refugees in vegetable, pig, and poultry production.

The majority of the refugees were coming from South Sudan. An alleged coup on the South Sudanese government in December 2013 ignited a brutal civil war that forced millions of civilians to flee their homes. Those fleeing the war were housed here in Arda, Uganda in large refugee camps. They were given 30 by 30 foot plots and were expected to not just live on them but also grow food on them.

While their Martin helped out with the agriculture production side of things but he also introduced the people of Uganda to the game of handball.

“We set up two one wall courts in the college and one at the cable end of a wall in the secondary school so there are three walls out there all within 5km. It was nice to bring the sport of handball to an area where people have very little,” he said.

For the people of Arda, every day is a battle with scarcely enough food and water to survive. Housing and living conditions are also not much better than that of stone age standards.

“The pressures of a game of handball and tie breaks seem so insignificant when you see the plight of the people over there,” he said in a serious tone.

“I didn’t do anything different for 2018, everything training and nutrition-wise was the exact same. I think the Ugandan experience was crucial. It put a lot of things into perspective. The pressure I had on myself was no longer there, I was just in a different zone mentally coming back out of there.”

Martin no longer felt the same pressure he once did. The pressure the Ugandans and South Sudanese people were under was a different type of pressure, it was incomparable. They scratched and clawed their way through each day just to survive.

Martin has always placed a big emphasis on sports psychology and has been going since his first year in UCD.

“The mind and mentality are probably the most important aspects at the highest level in sport. All top players have great power, speed, endurance, and skill but the mind is one area a lot of people neglect. A lot of matches come down to making the right decisions at the right time and making sure the mind holds steady to see games out.

To the present day, handball is an indoor sport so has been badly affected by COVID-19 restrictions. All activities have been cancelled with still no word from the government on when courts will be allowed to reopen.

For Martin, the inside of a court is something that almost seems foreign now.

“For personal reasons with family members being sick I haven’t stood in a court since October which is the longest time since 2004 when I took up the game of handball,” he said.

Martin hopes he can soon safely return to the handball courts and that one day a trip back to Uganda is possible to see the progress the Ugandan people have made both on and off the court.