

For Money or Honour Australia's First Intercolonial Handball Match

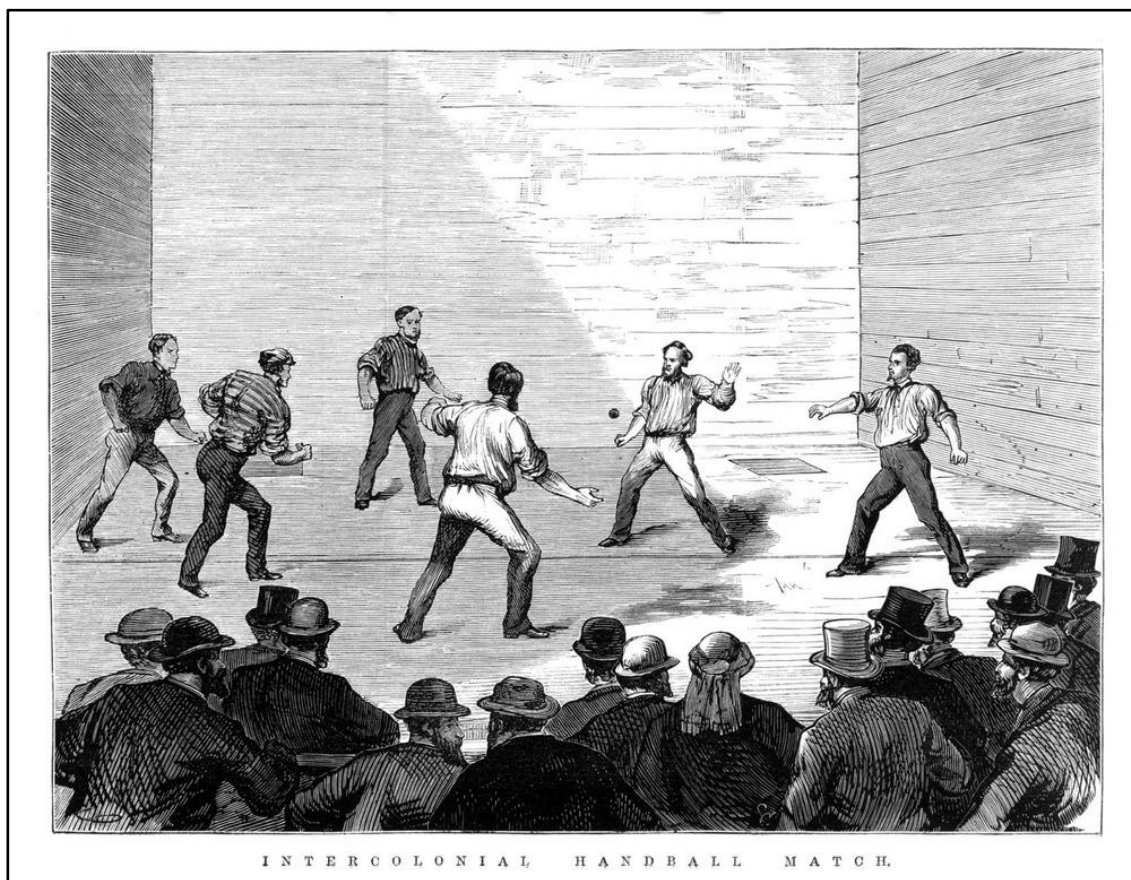


Image: State Library of Victoria

In November 1873, Victoria issued a sporting challenge to New South Wales to play Australia's first intercolonial handball match. New South Wales accepted the challenge "for either money or honour" but, in the spirit of sportsmanship, they agreed to play for honour only. The New South Wales contingent favoured their home town of Sydney for the inaugural match during the Christmas holiday period. However, Victoria won the first round by declaring that Melbourne would be a popular sporting destination at that time, owing to the visit of the All England Eleven, and the New Year's racing.¹

With the city decided, a suitable playing venue had to be found. There was a handball court in King Street, Melbourne, but Carlton, just out of the city, offered an alternative venue. The Carlton handball court, at the rear of the Loughrea (Lough Rea) Hotel in Elgin Street and backing onto Macarthur Place, was built by publicans Peter Taylor and John Curtain. The court was opened officially in May 1869 and was well patronised for both handball and racquet games. As publican of the Loughrea Hotel, Mr Taylor was able to provide a ready supply of drinks to slake the thirst of players and spectators alike. He was also credited with fostering the sport of handball, introduced into Australia by Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century.²

The first day of play took place on Thursday 15 January 1874 and was attended by a crowd of 250 enthusiastic spectators. Hot weather conditions were trying for both players and spectators, and *The Argus* commented: "The game is essentially a manly one, and no one with flaccid muscles or short wind can by any possibility ever hope to shine at it." Over the next three hours, the crowd was treated to a series of nine double-handed games, contested by brothers John and James Doyle for Victoria and Messrs. Dillon and Thompson for New South Wales. New South Wales was declared the winner in five out of the nine games, but it was noted that the Victorian players scored 141 points, to the New South Wales players' 137.

On the second day of play, Mr Dillon, representing New South Wales, took on Victoria's James Doyle in a series of single-handed matches. Dillon triumphed and things were looking grim for Victoria.^{3 4} The final day of play dawned on Monday 19 January 1874 and the Victorian team had one last chance to show their prowess in a series of three-handed games. Prior to the main event, the crowd was kept entertained by a scratch match featuring John Curtain, M.L.A, who "showed that he was no mean player." The atmosphere was electric as the players entered the court - the Doyle brothers and Mr McNamara for Victoria and Messrs. Thomson, Dillon and Gaffney for New South Wales. McNamara proved to be an asset for Victoria, while Gaffney was considered the weak point for New South Wales. Victoria succeeded in winning five games outright and was declared the winner. In the end, New South Wales won the overall competition, but Victoria won the day.⁵

Intercolonial rivalry aside, the post-competition mood was good natured and the New South Wales players were treated to a dinner, courtesy of the Hon. Michael O'Grady, at the Manchester Unity Hall in Swanston Street. By special arrangement with John Curtain, M.L.A, and the Minister of Railways, the players were granted free rail travel on government lines within Victoria. On the day of their departure for Sydney via the steamer *Wentworth*, 27 January 1874, the players had a champagne luncheon and were driven to Sandridge (Port Melbourne) in a drag and pair of greys. The farewell party included John Curtain, members of the Victorian Intercolonial Committee and several of Victoria's leading handball players, all of whom wished the visitors *bon voyage* and looked forward to meeting them again next year.^{6 7 8}

In December 1874, while plans were being finalised for the return intercolonial handball match in Sydney, a telegram from Port Darwin announced the death of Peter Taylor. When the news was later relayed to the Carlton handball court, the matches scheduled for that day were cancelled and the court was closed as a mark of respect for the man who had done so much to establish handball as a permanent fixture on Melbourne's sporting calendar. In February 1875, the Victorian team won easily against New South Wales over three days of competition. No doubt Peter Taylor would have been proud of their achievement.^{9 10}

The intercolonial handball match became a regular sporting event, alternating between Melbourne and Sydney, through to the 1890s. As the sport's popularity increased, handball clubs cropped up in Melbourne suburbs and country towns. Carlton established its own handball club in June 1882, under the patronage of John Curtain. Curtain, co-founder of the Carlton handball court, died in 1905.^{11 12}

The Loughrea Hotel at 75 Elgin Street was delicensed in 1919 and this also marked the end of the Carlton handball court. The owner, Victoria Brewery Pty Ltd, had no further business interest in a hotel without a liquor licence and it was sold in 1920. The handball court was converted into a brick factory facing Macarthur Place, then subdivided from the old hotel site in 1950. In 1970, the factory building at 22 to 24 Macarthur Place was bought by architect John Mockridge and was granted a new lease of life. The brick factory was gutted, an extra storey was added and a new residence was built within the shell of the old building. The original brickwork has been uncovered in recent years and evidence of its earlier function can be seen from the Macarthur Street frontage and side laneway.^{13 14 15}

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Notes and References:

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- ¹ *Evening News*, 3 December 1973, p. 2
 - ² *The Age*, 24 May 1869, p. 3
 - ³ *The Argus*, 16 January 1874, p. 5
 - ⁴ *The Advocate*, 17 January 1874, p. 9
 - ⁵ *The Argus*, 20 January 1874, p. 4
 - ⁶ *The Argus*, 23 January 1874, p. 5
 - ⁷ *The Age*, 28 January, p. 3
 - ⁸ *The Tasmanian*, 7 February 1874, p. 11
 - ⁹ *The Advocate*, 18 December 1874, p. 15
 - ¹⁰ *The Argus*, 1 March 1875, p. 5
 - ¹¹ *The Age*, 3 June 1882, p. 6
 - ¹² *The Age*, 24 October 1905, p. 10
 - ¹³ Index to Defunct Hotel Licences (VPRS 8159)
 - ¹⁴ Land title records
 - ¹⁵ Building Application Index (Melbourne City Council)