

# A bunch of fives that hurts like hell

Rugby School gave its name to two sports in the nineteenth century of which one, the Webb Ellis way to cheat at soccer, caught on. The other, rugby fives, did not. The sport survives in 50 British schools, a dozen universities, Manchester YMCA and the odd global outpost. The secretary of the Rugby Fives Association regularly gets letters from people who think he runs five-a-side rugger.

This is a little puzzling because whacking a ball against a wall is the most natural sporting instinct there is. But the common prejudice runs to using a racket to help. It seems quaint to do without; it has overtones of mortification of the flesh, especially as the fives ball is rock-hard and feels like it even through padded gloves. They warn you that your hand will hurt a bit the first time you play. This is misleading. It hurts like hell.

My first, utterly undistinguished, appearance on a fives court came during a lull in the Cyriax Cup, the national doubles championship on the squirrel-haunted courts at Alleen's School in South London. Alleen's is a traditional

rugby fives school. So are Radley, Bradfield, Merchant Taylor's, St Paul's and Hackney Downs Comprehensive. Eton, Harrow and Charterhouse play Eton fives, which has no back wall but a front wall full of hazards, like a vertical golf course. Winchester has its own variation. The three do not communicate much.

Rugby fives has more in common with squash and the courts appear so similar that you wonder why they can't build dual-purpose ones. In fact, the standard fives court is a shade smaller; more important, it needs a rough stone floor or the hard ball would just die. Though it comes relatively slowly off the hand, it gathers pace off the wall and keeps going. You have to be ambidextrous to some degree or a smart player will work on your weak hand and break you.

The list of past Cyriax Cup finalists includes a number of county cricketers and the classic, graceful fives shot is not dissimilar to an off-drive. There are also plenty of people on the list with more middle initials than is strictly essential and one chap whose name

began with two small fs. However, the leading player these days is an un-silver spoon sort of chap called Wayne Enstone, who learned to play at the Manchester Y.

Enstone and his partner John East did not join the lunchtime group in the Crown and Greyhound. The other top pair, Ian Fuller and Dave Hebden, had a swift pint and a few Britvics and went on to beat them in the final. It was noted darkly in the pub that Wayne was very keen on fitness.

This was said good-naturedly, as indeed was everything else. I cannot recall meeting a more pleasant bunch of people in any sport. Mrs Fuller sent up coffee and egg sandwiches, which helped make up for the fact that fives spectators have to stand out in the cold and peer in.

The Association would like to improve the facilities, get some sponsors, get the results in the papers, interest more people who did not play at school. There were plans to build a national centre outside Manchester, with the help from the County Council, but these have been Thatcherised indef-

nitely. Some people are not sorry; they suspect development would change the sport for the worse — umpires might become necessary, a let for unsighting the opposition might become something demanded rather than offered; it might become less sociable and less fun.

"It may be said," wrote Hazlitt, "that there are things of more importance than striking a ball against a wall and there are things, indeed, that make more noise and do as little good, such as making war and peace, making speeches and answering them, making verses and blotting them, making money and throwing it away. But the game of fives is what no one despises who has ever played at it. It is the finest exercise for the body and the best relaxation for the mind."

Wayne Enstone backs him up. "I can't think of anything, except just possibly swimming, which demands more fitness. You're using the whole of your body, right side, left side, bending as well. I'm going to ache for days after this." He is not the only one.

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