

RUGBY fives is one of the best-kept secrets in British sport. That being so, it is logical that possibly the game's finest exponent, indeed, maybe its greatest player—is a name only in the thousand or so households which contain active players.

To them, Wayne Enstone, 41, head of sports science at Stockport College, is a phenomenon. This weekend he has won the British Open Singles title for the 19th time in the last 20 years.

To play fives even half as well as Enstone you need to be nimble, fit, determined, skilful and ambidextrous. All the elements of a good games-player are tested: the cricketer's hand-to-eye co-ordination, the football or tennis player's sense of space and the squash or snooker exponent's ability to read the angles.

Squash is the nearest equivalent: the objective, to hit the ball above a bar on the front wall and to prevent the ball from bouncing twice, is the same.

But the enclosed fives court is slightly smaller, the ball harder—cork wrapped with twine and covered by leather—and the floor made of stone, not wood.

The quality of balls varies but a good, fast one fizzers around the court at a hectic pace. The back wall comes constantly into play and killing the ball, especially in doubles, is not easy. It can be exhausting, but it is immense fun.

The doubles element gives fives the edge over squash, wherein four flailing rackets in a small court are too dangerous.

Instead of a racket, fives players use their hands, protected by leather gloves. They are better padded than they used to be. Occasional bruises still afflict the fingers of those who, so to speak, hit the ball with the edge of the bat, but it seems that the deep-blue bruising which one used to suffer in the meat of the hand is seldom a problem now.

Long-term damage is unlikely, so women players should not be

put off, although not all might relish the pushing and shoving sometimes needed to get to the ball in a balanced position. As in all ball-games, that is crucial.

In common with the trend, equipment has improved and players are fitter. Not that one needs much equipment to play: a pair of gloves lasts most people more than one season.

Balls—which are made by the well-known saddlers Jabez Cliff—are inexpensive and so is membership of the Rugby Fives Association (£15) or one of the 32 affiliated clubs.

At most of the 41 schools who still play, courts are underused. Some, like St Paul's, where the national finals were held this weekend, are in frequent demand.

At present, however, fives is limited more by a shortage of willing coaches in the schools and a lack of awareness of its potential as an enjoyable recreation than it is by a dearth of courts.

Most players learn the game in independent schools and universities. Too many of them, having enjoyed it at school, either go to a university without a court or are too busy qualifying for a profession to keep the game up.

Some come back to play in their mid-20s at one of the 73 centres round Britain—new

glass-backed courts have been built in Oxford and Manchester recently—but the most serious of them have by then lost ground to the insatiable Enstone, who plays three times a week at Manchester YMCA.

Enstone is to Rugby fives what Jonah Barrington was to squash, only more so. As someone who spends much of his life in a tracksuit, teaching sport to further and higher education students at Stockport, he also runs regularly and plays basketball and volleyball. He has an advantage over all but a few other dedicated schoolmasters.

He began playing as a 14-year-old with adults at Manchester

Christopher Martin-Jenkins
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YMCA and astounded everyone by winning the schools championship despite coming from a high school of which no-one had heard.

An agile six-footer, he is not only exceptionally fit and quick about the court, but also a hard hitter and brilliant stroke-maker. He has practised his left-hand shots so assiduously that they are as strong as those with his natural hand.

Married, with a seven-year-old daughter who goes swimming at the YMCA while he is playing fives, Enstone has also won the Open doubles title in the last two years with Neil Roberts, of Giggleswick, the British No 2.

Ian Fuller, of Tonbridge, and Dave Hebdien, based at Micky Stewart's old school Alleyns, in Dulwich, had hitherto ruled the doubles roost and Hebdien is the only man to have knocked Enstone off his perch in 20 years.

That was in 1979. The suspicion was that he might be over the hill but it only made him a harder champion. He tells me, nonetheless, that standards have improved. "Lads at the top like Roberts and Fuller are getting fitter. One day, obviously, I have got to lose."

Having just begun to play an occasional game of fives again in my late 40s, I avoid singles if I can, keenly aware that the

game's first immortal, Dr Edgar Cyriax, who played until shortly before his death in 1955 at the age of 81 and who is reputed to have gone 35 years without being beaten, once proposed that there should be a special rule to deal with an opponent vomiting in a game.

I cannot imagine another of the game's great champions, the Kent cricketer John Pretlove, ever taking the game so seriously as to get into that state. He was a brilliantly inventive left-hander

and one of an extraordinary number of cricketers who have excelled at Rugby fives over the years. Among the earliest of them was William Clarke, founder of the All England XI and developer of Trent Bridge, who lost the use of an eye in a rare injury on the court.

First-class cricketers who have won fives Blues at Oxford and Cambridge since 1925 include: R G Tindall, H M Garland-Wells, J D Eggar, P A Whitcombe, R H Maudsley, M D Scott, C A Black, J E A Mocatta, E Marsh, V J Marks and I J Curtis (all Oxford); and J G W Davies, R de W K Winlaw, A W E Winlaw, E R Conradi, J M Mills, G H G Daggart, R Subba Row, DRW

Silk, J F Pretlove, R I Jefferson, A R Windows, and C H Hirst (Cambridge).

Some cricketers, notably Peter May at Charterhouse, have been brought up on Eton fives, the more complex version with its steps and buttresses and no back wall. Winchester fives, a second variation is perhaps the best of the lot. It has one inlet in the left-hand wall usually allowing an instant kill for a well-angled shot.

These differences are not surprising: fives evolved from at least Tudor times. No game could be more natural than hitting a ball against a wall, but it took the Victorians and the public schools to formalise the rules. Now a Mancunian with a few more championships in him yet is keen to get the message across that this can be a game for anybody to play.

The happy few have no great wish to keep the secret to themselves. Christopher Martin-Jenkins won fives Blues at Cambridge in 1966 and 1967 and is deputy president of the RFA. Information on clubs can be obtained from Jane Fuller, 10 Lovelace Road, Dulwich, London SE21 8JX.

Doubles element gives fives edge over squash and its flailing rackets