

From a sporting point of view, Switzerland had almost everything – skiing, tennis, football, lakes for boating, cycling, even Eton Fives – except Rugby Fives. I noticed that Switzerland lacked a Rugby Fives court, so I decided, with my friend Russell, to build one there.

It so happened that the family farm of my wife had a high barn with just enough space for a Fives court. The farm is in the French-speaking part of Switzerland near to Lausanne (on the side nearest to the UK), a beautiful and welcoming part of the country. So we began late in 2008 with little knowledge of how to go about the task, but with lots of enthusiasm. We worked as a team – I asked people in the Fives world and Russell asked the best builders that he knew. I taught Russell how to play Fives so that he would understand what he was doing, but also so he could look forward to enjoying playing on the court. The technical specification for a Fives court is available to anyone who asks and we were sent the full document by Ed Fuller. We puzzled over some of the more demanding details. It states, for example, that the walls must be perfectly true, flat, smooth and without joins, and that the floor must contain granite chippings. The plaster for the walls must include Keene's cement (which no-one stocks) and the lighting should be bright and uniform. This was all very well, but we were a long way off any finishes and needed to get some walls up. In our case, there was already a roof and the concrete floor was so thick that foundations were not needed and we could therefore work in all weathers as long as the temperature was more than five degrees above freezing.

The language was always going to be "une probleme" because schoolboy French does not extend to words for scaffolding tower, builders' lime and spirit level. However sign language and enthusiastic pointing at the builders' merchants can go a long way! We also got lots of encouragement from Andy Pringle and even an introduction to another Fives player who lives in Switzerland.



The Swiss court's viewing gallery © AH

to go to his grave and is happy to share his knowledge (if you want to know). However it is a very skilled process and an experienced plasterer is needed – preferably one who has not even heard the expression "good enough, mate" let alone used it.

Lighting needs to be set up to avoid dark patches, but also to make the court pretty bright. As a practical matter, the lights need protecting from stray Fives balls and ideally there should be some redundancy – enough lighting so that if one bulb is out, the light levels are not seriously affected. We used squash fittings which were available fairly locally (Austria, actually) but you need more light than a squash court because the Fives court walls are black.

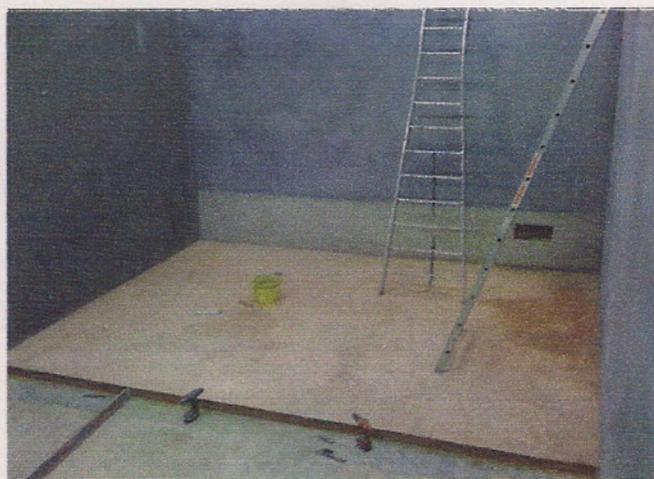
Talking of black walls, the top layer of plaster is a real challenge – it needs to be perfectly flat and plumb, smooth and shiny, it covers a large area and has to be strong enough

Russell calculated that we needed about 2,500 large concrete blocks, over 400 bags of cement, 160 metres of batten, and a small beach of sand. Russell is an experienced builder, but not the sort who uses phrases like "good enough, mate". Working with a perfectionist and one who knows how to play Fives meant I never needed to worry about the quality. My other tip for building a Fives court is not to build in a foreign country! Despite this the Swiss were exceedingly helpful, very precise and of course very honest – you can leave tools out from one visit to the next without them being stolen (though I have discouraged that practice as they do go rusty).

If you do build a court, you will discover just how high a court needs to be – the play line is 15ft up but the ceiling needs to be higher than this. You will need a strong scaffolding tower and lots of associated equipment – supports called "bandstands" to make platforms, strong planks, a large cement mixer and an angle grinder for cutting blocks. Simple really.

Once we got to a certain height, it became clear that we needed a very solid platform off which to build the ceiling. In our case, there was lots of timber around the farm so we built it from a couple of tons of old wood – some of it riddled with woodworm, but thick enough to be reassuring. Any new timber we used was treated against woodworm. The ceiling construction is ideally done with wood rather than plasterboard so that it can take a battering from Fives balls. We used large sheets of 3/8 inch plywood. Only of course Switzerland is very metric, so these were 8mm and the sheets were in metres but were large – equivalent to about 10 foot by 5 foot.

We were told that the formula for applying the plaster was a closely guarded secret known only to two very elderly Englishmen who planned to take the secret to their graves. However, we believe that we have also discovered the formula and it is known to one Englishmen who has no plans



The new Swiss court with the floor half laid. © AH

to resist a hard, fast ball. On top of this it has to be applied to each of the three large walls in one go. For this job, we had a team of four – two plasterers and two mixers – who started the large front wall at 8 am but didn't finish until 4 am the next morning. The next day, some of the team started late!

For the floor, we needed lots of pink colouring powder from Jewsons and another very late shift. We did the floor in two halves and the picture shows its depth and colour. After that, all we needed to do was add the bar and the door. The first games on the court should be in July 2010.

Hopefully Rugby Fives will soon overtake skiing as the Swiss national sport and readers of his magazine will all come and try out the Fives community's newest court.

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