

# THE MEANING OF "FIVES"

By JOHN ARMITAGE

EVERY Fives player must, at some time or other have been asked the question, "What does Fives mean?" If he was honest about it, he probably replied that he did not know, or that the name might easily have been derived from any of many things. It is true that there are many explanations, some of which are plausible enough; there are others which are not. There is, for instance, this explanation which I came across not so very long ago, and which must be forgotten as soon as read. The author said that the name "Fives" is clearly derived from the fact that the figure five played a prominent part in the course of a game: one played with five fingers of the hand, the scoring was a multiple of five, five persons took part in a match, four players and the ball.

I think we must agree that it is difficult to believe that the derivation of our word "Fives" is in any way connected with any unpromising reasoning, and yet when at the end of this article, I give my explanation of the origin of the word "Fives," it will be found to be little better substantiated. For many years there has been this curious diversity of opinion regarding "Fives," both about the origin of the game and of the name. It is of the name only that we are speaking here, but there can be no proof of its meaning; we can only sift the evidence and decide which explanation we can best accept ourselves.

The difficult question that we must ask ourselves is, why did the simple name like "hand-ball," which we know was used in the fourteenth century, give place to the most complicated one "Fives"? It is not easy to answer. Hand ball is mentioned frequently in mediæval documents, the most famous instance being the Royal Proclamation of 1363, which in order to encourage the declining art of archery, forbade all play at ball, club-ball, golf and hand-ball. Fives, as far as we can ascertain, was at that time, a word officially unknown, and we find the first reference to it in Dr. Johnson's famous dictionary. He apparently, knew as little about it as possible. Fives, he remarks, not without a certain vagueness, is a "kind of play with a bowl." We turn up "bowl" and make this discovery: "bowl," a round mass, which may be rolled along the ground.

Now many dictionaries and encyclopædias will assure their readers that the name "Fives" is derived from some far distant time, when the game was played with five aside. This information is based on the following passage of an old chronicle, Nichols' "Progresses of Queen Elizabeth," which I will quote in full length. "The same day after dinner, about three of the clock, ten of my Lord of Hartford's servants, all Somersetshire men, in a square green court, before Her Majesty's window, lay up lines, squaring out the forme of a tennis court, and drawing a crosse line in the middle. In this square they (being set out of their doublets) played, five to five, with the hand ball, at bord and cord (as they terme it), to so great liking of Her Highness."

Now that is not "Fives" as we know it to-day, nor is it the old simple game of hand-ball. It is a description of the game of tennis, or more nearly, "jeu de paume," and this particular game was most probably played with the hand. Tennis, jeu de paume, and pelôta are all connected one with the other; it is quite certain. What is still more certain is the fact that the "racket" had been evolved these games were all played with the hand, and even afterwards the old hand form did survive, as they still play hand pelota in the Spanish provinces to-day.

The point here is that simply because Nichols writes in his chronicles, that the Somersetshire men, "played five to five with hand ball," and without their doublets, we are not justified in stating that this is the origin of the word, "Fives." Every

man, woman and child loves a ball, and every man and child, will prefer to bounce the ball against a wall so that it will return to him, rather than chase after it on each occasion to where he or she has thrown it. This is the earliest form of ball games, and children still play it by themselves for hours to-day. The next step is to find an opponent, and then to beat him. To do this the player will want to hit harder; comes the racket and the rules and regulations of play. The curious and most interesting feature of the development of these games in England is that although games with rackets and more complicated rules were evolved, the old original game was not forgotten, changing nothing, except perhaps from one wall to three, and very much later from three to four. All the same for three centuries or more, it enjoyed little popularity, and when once again it did come into its own, it was to be known, not as "hand-ball," but "Fives." I have to answer why.

Indeed, the answer is quite simple, although I cannot be certain that it is correct. In dealing with the history of these games one is forced to rely a good deal on surmise, but as what I am going to suggest is not in the least original, I have no hesitation in stating it, only it is to be hoped that some of the reasons that are brought forward to support it, will be convincing to others besides myself. I submit that although in documents the game was always referred to as "hand-ball," it was nevertheless, among players, known always as "Fives." "Fives" is the oldest, or one of the oldest, slang terms in existence. There is a Latin reference to a bunch of Fives, which meant, as now, the closed fist, or the hand working as one unit, undivided by fingers. Those, who grumble at this theory of the origin of the name "Fives," complain that the game is not played with the fingers, but only with the palm of the hand. Flick your wrist, as if to make a shot, and you will discover how untrue this statement is, for most of the leverage comes not from the palm but from the fingers. Anyway, ask these people in return, to play the game and then locate their most painful bruises; the middle joints of the fingers suffer much.

I said above that once a man could hit the ball against a wall, and had an opponent to beat, he desired to hit harder. To do this, we know, that in the Middle Ages the hand-ball player bound his hand with skins and cords in such a way that the fingers did not act, as they do to-day, as separate units, but as a whole with the palm, in reality a bunch of fives. This is most interesting, for in binding his hand the player had in truth, formed the first bat or racket of his hand. We need not suppose that that it took him very long to invent the real racket, at first in the shape of a modern ping-pong bat and then with a longer and more serviceable handle.

This explanation of the name "Fives," I am very conscious, is not unassailable. It would be sad if it should be so, for there is no more pleasing ground for controversy. But at least it is based on some actual knowledge, and I would point out two subsidiary facts that support my argument. The first is not uninteresting. When Fives gloves came into use, it was the custom for them to be made without fingers, with the thumb separated, as is the case with certain heavier types of gloves to-day. Further, although I read in a dictionary compiled about 1860, that Fives is a game played with five players aside, Hazlitt had written before that Jack Cavanagh played singles. It is not easy to contemplate the court which was large enough to accommodate ten players at once being used for a hand ball game of singles. Nor can this mean that five men on each side formed a team, as four men do to-day, for five is an odd number and we know that doubles were played. No, although it may be hard to believe that a slang term was responsible for the final name of a game, it is more admissible than any other explanation. A "bunch of fives," it is a pleasing idea.