

THE BEST RUGBY FIVES PLAYERS.

BY JOHN ARMITAGE.

In this article I shall dare to name a few players of Rugby Fives whom I believe to be the best although very different in style and their manner of getting down to it. Praise must not be taken to imply criticism. I speak only of the players I have seen and not of those whose colour is known only by report. For instance, I have every reason to believe that in the north of England, in Manchester, in Leeds there are many excellent Fives players, whom we in the south have no opportunity of meeting. Moreover, even in the south there are players who insist on hiding their light in the dusky corners of school courts like Mr. Knott at Tonbridge and Mr. Kittermaster at Rugby. I shall not even speak of Dr. Priax. Good as he is still, he is not now at his best. What he must have been hardly bears contemplation,—such pain it is for all who would emulate his deeds. We have missed much by not seeing him at his best for by all accounts his shots were of 'such stuff as dreams are made on.' There would be nothing to gain from an imaginary picture of his might. To-day we prefer to regard him in a different way, as the presiding colossus of Rugby Fives, who, with his all embracing arms and powerful frame, looks down upon us, pygmies of his art, from Olympian heights.

Of those who play Fives regularly, enter for Championships, and altogether consider the game as a serious pastime, I would name four players, who, without doubt, stand head and shoulders above the rest. P. A. Malt, E. L. Bailey, J. G. W. Davies and H. A. Oundjian are players of a very different style and temperaments, yet each can claim an element of greatness, which has been denied to the many other ordinary players who can be called justly, first-class. If he played more often, I should be tempted to add one other name that of R. de W. K. Winlaw to my list of four. Winlaw when he was still at Winchester won the Public Schools Championships for two years in succession and more recently has played a large part in the heavy defeats of Oxford University by Cambridge. Such a list omits the names of many excellent and well-known players. There can be no mention of such fine exponents of the game as D. E. Smith (Old Alleynians), who, assuredly, is the prettiest of all Rugby Fives players and who last January so very nearly defeated Malt; nor of C. S. Farnes (Old Blues), hard-hitting and accurate, K. R. R. Readhead (Old Paulines), young and promising, and hosts of others whose names are too well known to need bare repetition here. It is more profitable to turn to my four or five players to see what can be learnt from a consideration of their style and play.

Taking, as I always do, the criterion of 'best' to be the player who most delights in attack rather than defence there is only one possible choice for the best Rugby Fives player. This is J. G. W. Davies, at school at Tonbridge and last year's captain of Cambridge University. At all games he is the same, brilliant but not sound, but at Fives he is particularly delightful. On his day he is capable of beating anyone by sheer brilliance of stroke play, but all depends upon his touch. Should that forsake him he is likely to be defeated by any player who can be called first-class. It is not surprising. Unlike other players who leave a fair margin of error for their shots above the board, Davies places so close to the board that the slightest error will lose him the point. But he is a delightful player to watch. Never content to play the

easy shot, even when it should be played, he tries to make something of every ball. He volleys superbly with either hand taking the ball from off the side walls with a flick of the wrist which is the envy of all. He can hit hard and should more often, but there is no doubt that the chief reasons for his success are his brilliant return and his perfect balance. A bad doubles player, since he cannot combine, a brilliant singles player and perhaps the only Rugby Fives player who is well worth watching for enjoyment alone.

P. A. Malt (Alleyn Old Boys) is the Ariel rather than the Puck of Fives. Boyish in appearance, easy in style, he is a delightful player, who has gained more successes than any other player in Open Championships and now stands in the proud position of holding the Singles title and the Doubles with E. L. Bailey. Malt is left-handed and a very lazy left-hand it is, disguising its venom in a cloak of kindness, ably abetted by a permanent smile. No one is quite certain why Malt wins so easily but the truth is that he knows immediately the length of a new court, can play to that length and can so exploit his knowledge as to exhaust his opponent utterly. One should play against Malt at Alleyn's to realise what playing to a length really means. There, or so it appears to the unfortunate opponents, he can make the ball reach the back wall, sit up and beg, and subside on the same spot on the floor. Except on the Alleyn's courts against E. L. Bailey no one had ever seen Malt really run until the Championships of this year. The St. Paul's courts are big and there both Davies and Smith caused him to take considerable exercise, a jolly sight, it must be admitted for all those who have played and lost. If his right hand were stronger he would be superb, but it is weak comparatively and it is plain that he is content to get things up with his right and rely on his left to win the points outright. All the same, although his opponents will take advantage of this, fighting with all their might and main to keep the ball on his right hand, they cannot win. With his left he has a superb, controlled cross-shot which is as good in Rugby Fives as the back-hand angled shot of Amr Bey in Squash Rackets, and altogether he is the most self effacing champion the game has known. Malt is also famous for his running commentaries on his own matches.

E. L. Bailey (Alleyn Old Boys) will not take it amiss if I refer to him as the war-horse of Rugby Fives. He has the ability of tens, the determination of hundreds and the grit of thousands. He enters the court with the will and determination to do and being Bailey he does. He suffers, perhaps, from a little too much keenness which is apt to bring anxiety into his play. Yet he is a splendid player of the type who hits the ball consistently hard and when things go wrong hits it a little bit harder. For the last three years he has won the Doubles Championship with Malt and on the Alleyn's small courts he has beaten Malt consistently in the final of the Alleyn Old Boys Club Cup. There is not a great deal to describe about his play since the keynote of his success is largely persistence. He hits the ball very low and to a good length, but he is not the man to win by guile although his simple strategy is always good. Many spectators who saw him defeated in the first round of the Singles Championship last year were of the opinion that he was unlucky to lose. I would not go so far as to say that,

although I am still quite certain it was the best Fives match I have ever seen and the most exciting.

Less than eighteen months ago H. A. Oundjian (Old Paulines) was still at school. He was then 'an infant phenomenon,' of whom Mr. Vincent Crummles would have delighted to say, "I'll tell you what sir, the talent of this child is not to be imagined." Last year he was very unwell and consequently unable to make his first appearance in the Championship; this year all eyes will be upon him to see if he is yet ready to challenge Malt. I have not seen Oundjian playing very often, but the first point about his style which must strike everybody is, that here is the player who is completely ambidextrous. His ability is as great with either hand, and with either hand, he hits the ball crisply, accurately and with perfect touch. Above all else he plays a thoughtful game and possesses a temperament, which should allow him to play his best at all times. His progress will give an additional interest to what promises to be an excellent season.
