

THE XVIth VOLUME OF THE LONSDALE LIBRARY

RUGBY FIVES, by JOHN ARMITAGE. Reviewed by J. F. BURNET. ①

A reviewer, who happens to be an enthusiast for a game which is very little recognized by the general public, is bound to be so delighted with the appearance of any book upon Fives in general and Rugby Fives in particular, that he will run a great risk of plunging into a sea of extravagant words of praise, whatever it is like. But moderation, which should be, but is not, the keynote of all reviewing, is very difficult in the present case. The section with which I am at present concerned is but five chapters in thirty-six, a mere forty pages in some three hundred. As with the "Squash Rackets" part of the book, the Rules of Rugby Fives are printed first, as laid down by the Rugby Fives Association: in the case of this game the printing of the Rules is of the first importance, since they are not at all widely known nor generally recognised. The author, indeed, in commenting upon Rule 4 of the Doubles game ("The side that is 'down' must change strikers after every point scored by their opponents") shows that he has little sympathy for the rule. 'Probably' he writes "it will not matter a great deal if tradition remains too strong for this rule, as long as teams can come to an amicable arrangement"; in the case of matches, which are played purely for fun, (and there are more of this kind, I think, than in almost any other game) tradition will very likely overcome the rule, and I hope that it is not a very serious contravention of the spirit of the game to say that (like the author?), I very much hope that it will! This could scarcely be held as a serious point of view in any other game, this flouting of constituted authority with regard to a ruling, and it is part of the charm of the game that it was possible, as recently as last season for players competing in the Amateur Doubles Championship to ask their opponents what the rule was and to have no knowledge of the truth of the answer. (I would also hazard an opinion that the first Open Singles Champion of the game does not know them yet).

Upon the simplicity and sociability of the game the author does well to insist, and this he does in his own quiet way producing an opinion which clearly has come to him from the experience of numerous matches and many enjoyable games. "Fives is a game to be played in order to be understood and loved, for its fascination, so slender in appearance, is deep and glorious for all those who look for enjoyment and not for honour from their games." It cannot indeed be asserted that championships, standardised courts and rules, have done the game any good, though this is far from saying that they have actually rendered bad service to it. The question of 'lets,' which is sanely examined in this volume, is one which the greater publicity afforded to the game in recent years has rendered more vexed: even with the clearer ruling of the game of 'Squash Rackets,' there are many cases where not even the most unbiassed spectator can distinguish between accidental and deliberate obstruction, and few who could positively decide whether the player claiming the 'let' could really have returned the ball in any case. In Rugby Fives it is generally left to the player: in this game the player claiming the 'let' is allowed, as it were, both to eat his cake and have it: he may attempt to return it and if he bring off a winner rest content, but if he fail to do so or be in any way dissatisfied with his shot he may say 'Let Please.' The question is a difficult one, and the writer in this volume admits that it leaves much to be desired. He says that the same difficulty is experienced in Squash Rackets, but, if I may

venture a criticism of what has been to me a very nearly perfect section of a very nearly perfect book, it can hardly be called the same difficulty. The ruling about the 'let' in 'Squash Rackets' does not play quite so convincingly into the hands of the player who is impeded as it does in Rugby Fives: in 'Squash Rackets' the rule is really the one which is the foundation of the Laws that the M.C.C. have evolved for the game of cricket—in any case of doubt the existing state of things shall continue. In Rugby Fives the principle is the same, but more seems to have crept into it, an idea of "unless you can make things better for yourself by ignoring the obstruction: then, if you find you can't point it out!" It is all perhaps rather vaguely put, but that the idea, however unconscious, is there I am certain, and I would go further, I would like to see it altered and brought into line with Squash Rackets. (But I feel that tradition would be too strong for my ruling and get its own back for the changing after every point to which I have referred earlier).

I also wonder if it struck the author, when he was pouring forth his scorn upon that lamentable match between two one-handed exponents who are both left handers that there is a way out of it. While I agree with every word of condemnation which he bestows on those who will only play with one hand, they can be very soon shown up. I remember an authentic story of a 'Varsity' Singles competition at Cambridge, which will bring out my point better than any explanation. *A.*, a left-handed player who was really good with that hand and never used the right effectively at all, had to play *B.*, who was inferior to him as a player but had more commonsense: *B.* made all his services as if he were a left-hander, so that they went straight to *A.*'s right hand, and *A.*, though he often went 'up,' never could stay there long enough to win any points worth mentioning. Surely the compulsory taking of the service on the right-hand wall must soon make one-handed exponents learn to use their other hand?

I find that I have made already two quibbles in my treatment of this excellent work; it is clearly time to stop. And before doing so there is just enough room to pay a small tribute to the author for the enjoyment which I, and surely many others have had, from his work. His treatment of 'Rugby Fives' is sane and authoritative: the pen is that of a ready writer, an experienced and good player; the style of the work is of that class usually associated with books upon more important matters than games; there are few players, whatever their class, who cannot learn something from it, while there are none who will not enjoy it.

CORRESPONDENCE

Rugby Fives Review*To the Editor of Squash Rackets and Fives.*

Sir,

What answer can one give to a reviewer who ends his review with the admission that he has been quibbling? At first one is inclined to ignore him, but when one thinks of the modicum of space in the Press devoted to the game of Fives, one cannot help feeling that no one has a right to waste any of it with quibbles. Moreover, as, after carefully re-reading Mr. Burnet's review, I am persuaded that he takes himself rather more seriously than he would have us do, let us pay him the compliment of examining his quibbles.

Mr. Burnet says that "it cannot indeed be asserted that championships, standardised courts and rules, have done the game any good, though this is far from saying that they have actually rendered bad service to it." This, if indeed it means anything at all, can only mean that things have been left exactly as they were before. Since the rules were formulated, about three years ago, I have played against many Schools and Clubs within a hundred miles of London and it is my opinion that almost all of them have adopted the rules as laid down by the Rugby Fives Association. In order to learn on what experience of the game Mr. Burnet bases his statement I have looked through the pages of this Journal for the last year or two, and I have failed to find any trace of his having played the game at all during that period. Perhaps he will enlighten us! If my surmise as to the general adoption of the Standard Rules is correct, and it is not a mere vacuous generalisation based on no practical experience, so far from having left the game where it was, the standardisation of the Rules has rescued it from a chaos which might easily have resulted in its extinction, whereas, as everyone will admit, the game has developed considerably during the last few years.

While we are mildly interested to learn that Mr. Burnet hopes that tradition will be too strong for the Rule which demands that the side that is "down" shall change strikers after every point, we should welcome some information as to the steps he has taken to find out what the tradition is. The Rugby Fives Association before formulating that Rule circularised every known "Rugby Fives" School in the country to discover exactly under what rules each played. Analysis of the replies received showed clearly that it was the more general custom to do as the present rule requires, i.e. to change strikers after every point. So far from tradition proving too strong for the Rule, it is both tradition and the Rule that are proving too strong for Mr. Burnet.

Mr. Burnet believes that "this flouting of constituted authority could scarcely be held as a serious point of view in any other game," but he doesn't say why. It seems to me that even in Rugby Fives it is an advantage to know that your opponents are playing under the same rules as yourself. Before the standardising of the Rules one could never be sure what were the Rules under which one was playing in any particular match: they differed from week to week. Evidently Mr. Burnet used to enjoy those little arguments in the middle of the Court as to what was the correct procedure in certain circumstances that had arisen.

In dealing with the right to claim a "let" even if the ball go up Mr. Burnet writes: "In Rugby Fives the principle is the same, but more seems to have crept into it, an idea of 'unless you can make things better for yourself by ignoring the obstruction: then if you find you can't point it out!' It is all rather vaguely put." It is indeed, Mr. Burnet, though a judicious use of punctuation marks and a little clearer mode of expression would make it less so. The Rule referred to is clearly put, though worded so as to admit of a generous interpretation, and here again the Rule is in accordance with tradition rather than opposed to it.

I am firmly convinced that the standardising of the Rules and the inauguration of Championships has already contributed much to the evident increasing popularity of the game, and that any attempts to belittle the work of the Rugby Fives Association in these matters, or to adopt an attitude of chauvinism, however well-meaning, can do nothing but harm.

V. E. A. BOWLEY

(Hon. Sec. Rugby Fives Association).

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An Answer to Mr. Bowley*To the Editor of Squash Rackets and Fives.*

Sir,

I do not propose to reply to Mr. V. E. A. Bowley's letter since it does not seem to require an answer any more than my review did.

I should have liked to think that, as I had personally been responsible for the idea of starting the Public Schools Championships and the Open Singles Championship, I might have been allowed to express a little purely personal regret at the fact that this sort of thing seems to have spoilt some of the fun and spirit of the game of Fives, and it appeared to me that the author of what I was reviewing in his heart of hearts agreed with me.

That is all. It does not seem to me to matter much and I am very sorry that Mr. Bowley thinks it does.

Yours faithfully,

Salisbury Tower,
Windsor Castle.

J. F. BURNET.