

The Fives Courts of Old England.

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When the specification of a Standard Court was decided upon a few years ago, the Rugby Fives Association was not sanguine enough to visualise Colleges, Schools, and other Institutions demolishing their old courts and replacing them by new ones conforming to the standard pattern, but the time must inevitably come when that pious hope will be realised, and the Editor of this Journal is anxious that, before that comes to pass, there should be some record of those old courts in which the game of Rugby Fives had its beginnings.

Prior to 1931 courts could be roughly divided into two categories, your own and other people's, or, more precisely, those which were the right size and shape and those which were not. If you were playing at home, all was well: you simply chose your best team and won the match before your opponents had accustomed themselves to the peculiarities of the court. But if you were playing away it was not quite so easy. Other factors had to be taken into consideration. A young and inexperienced player who was very good on his own court might be almost useless on a foreign court which was very narrow, or very large or very small. Indeed the Captain was no mere figure-head as he has since tended to become. In those days his duties were not confined merely to sending up scores and results to this Journal. He had to be an experienced player who knew the peculiarities of all the various courts in which his team would have to play and who could use his own players to the best advantage under unfavourable conditions. This state of affairs, however, was not entirely without its compensations. It was not necessary to invent an attack of "flu," or a sprained ankle to explain a bad defeat. You just shrugged your shoulders and said in a superior tone: "Well, look at the court!" A remark which invariably elicited sympathy, because everyone agreed that everybody else's courts were bad.

Courts in those days, as, to a lesser extent, in these, were of all sizes, shapes and colours, sometimes with a door on one side, sometimes on the other, sometimes in the middle, and sometimes with no door at all. A leap over the back-wall was the only way of entering some courts. We preferred this, however, to a door, well barred and knobbed, which the home team could hit with unerring accuracy but from which you waited in vain for the rebound. One used to become very skilful at taking the ball off an electric light switch and was not in the least perturbed when it dropped into a drain or gully at the back of the court, and we knew how to deal with a ball that was bouncing over a low back-wall. It was a little disconcerting, however, to be asked to lend a hand in cleaning out of the court a lot of rubbish, bicycles, etc., before the match could begin. In the days when Fives



was looked upon as a game only for those who could not play rugger (to-day its votaries are those who prefer a game in which intelligence and skill are more important than mere brute force) some courts did duty as cycle racks and store-rooms in addition to fulfilling their normal functions.

There still exist a few three-walled courts, but they are gradually disappearing and there are probably few players to-day who have played in them. They will not appreciate the difficulty experienced by a player accustomed to a four-walled court, in keeping the ball within the confines of three walls, one of them usually rather short, and a line. You waited in vain for a return off the back-wall; the ball went sailing away into the rugger-field and the point was against you. Or you hit the ball a little too high, it bounced beyond the line of side wall and again the point was against you.

To-day, as soon as daylight begins to fade, you touch a switch and the court is flooded with light. Ten years ago we had to finish our battles in the dark, groping our way round the court hoping to find the ball, until it got so dark that nobody could see sufficiently well to get back the return of service, and the match had to be abandoned.

I once played in a court which had a small black square in the top right-hand corner. When we had reached game-ball the server was obliged to throw the ball into this square, and the striker had the right to hit the ball straight on to the front wall if he so desired. The consequence was that it was so difficult to win the last point that the opposing side gradually crept up until they also, had scored fourteen points, and an impasse resulted.

All modern courts are closed, but formerly a large number of courts were open to the sky. The advantage of being able to play in the open was nullified by the consequent slowing up of the game. The effect of the atmosphere on the walls and floors was to roughen them and so to reduce considerably the pace of the game. Moreover the advantage which Fives has over most other games, i.e. that it can be played in almost all weathers was discounted if the court had no roof.

It would be interesting to learn the origin of some of the older courts. I should surmise that in some cases they were built to fill, more or less usefully, a corner that could not be used in any other way, the shape and size of the court being determined by the shape and size of the piece of ground to be built on. But whether they were old Sussex barns converted or derelict sections of the original Hampstead and Highgate tube dismantled and re-erected they served to provide exercise and amusement for a small, but very enthusiastic, body of players.