

### J.F. PRETLOVE, ESQ

Wherever fives players gather, wherever, in fact, any keen sportsmen congregate, the conversation will soon turn to the question: "who was the greatest?" Was W.G. a greater batsman than Hobbs, or Woolley, than Compton? Would Gonzales have beaten McEnroe or Suzanne Lenglen have overcome Martina Navratilova? In whichever pub it is that the old fives players foregather you can be sure that it will not be long before someone will ask whether Wayne Enstone would have beaten John Pretlove or Gandhar Dower have got the better of Dr. Cyriax.

The argument is fun but it is fruitless. One can really only judge who was the champion of his era, who, in his prime, could take on and defeat all his contemporaries. For a decade from about 1955 until 1965 in the world of Rugby Fives not many players would have argued against the claims of John Pretlove as the champion. He was a fine all-round athlete, Captain of Cambridge at soccer, Cambridge and Kent cricketer, university match centurion at Lord's and above all else the top fives player of his decade in all England.

His secret was balance and timing, but few outstandingly gifted athletes have been greater competitors than he, or more capable of rising to the occasion when the odds were stacked against him. Seldom can the dear and late lamented Geoffrey Malings ball have been hit lower, more accurately or more crisply than John hit it. His service went past you like a rifle bullet and so frequently hit the crack where floor joined side-wall that one was driven to the conclusion that his powers were superhuman. His right hand was at best ordinary, for it got very little practice. Rallies seldom went on for long and he put his opponents under such pressure that they were hard put to it simply to scramble the ball back and, when they did, it always seemed to be sitting up inviting his left hand to apply the closure.

The most wicked act of opportunism of which I have ever been guilty was to ask him, on the strength of our Cambridge friendship, to be my partner in the amateur doubles. Never for a moment thinking of the millstone with which he had adorned his neck he genially agreed and for four years it was my privilege to stand in the right-hand corner of the court watching him at close quarters annihilate all opposition. It was a thing of wonder and remains so even after 30 years.

In those years I never saw him even remotely guilty of claiming that a doubtful "get" was up. He always erred on the side of punishing himself if there was doubt, and very seldom did he claim (or need to claim!) a let. He was not just a great player. He was a true sportsman and he enjoyed every moment of it, communicating that enjoyment to all who played with him. Latterly he has been keen to encourage the young and pass on his court craft and skill just as, nearly forty years before, Bill Bailey did for him. So do the great traditions and mores of our game go on, but never, perhaps, in more capable and gifted hands than those of our President, "Pretters".

D.R.W. Silk