

PORTRAIT OF A PLAYER: WAYNE ENSTONE

Twenty years ago, Wayne Enstone had just won a record fifth national singles trophy, causing a prescient RFA handbook secretary to write in his preface to the Golden Jubilee edition: "Whether Enstone would have reached a Bailey drop-shot or retrieved a Pretlove left hand into the nick can never be discovered, but few will argue about his right to a place opposite Dr Cyriax in the centre pages of this 50th Jubilee edition."

Two decades on, we can confirm the accuracy of this judgement. Nobody today remembers Dr Cyriax in his prime, but he is reliably recorded as having remained unbeaten in singles play for 37 years (from 1890 to 1927), an astonishing record even in the days before courts were standardised, rules codified and championships organised.

The achievements of Wayne Enstone, just as remarkable in their way, are now in the record books for everyone to see, his name is engraved on almost every trophy in the game, and his play has been admired by all who have witnessed it over the past three decades.

An only child, Wayne (first name Geoffrey, after his father) was born in Stockport in June 1951, and his first experience of fives was at the age of 14 on the narrow courts on the top floor of the old Manchester YMCA. His father was a member of the YM gymnastics team and a "good average" basketballer and cyclist, who came to fives relatively late in life. Wayne, like most athletic boys, played all sorts of sports at school, but it was Saturday mornings at the YMCA, a hot-bed of sport in the 1950s and 60s, that gave him the opportunity to discover fives as well. The narrow YM courts were ideal for singles play, and young Wayne soon began to develop a taste for the game. There were few boys of his age playing, so he was constantly on court with older, more experienced players, and progress was fast enough for him to enter a senior tournament barely three years later.

Although he played in the inaugural Lancashire Open on the YM courts, Wayne's first competition was the Scottish Championships at Loretto, which gave him at least some experience on standard courts before travelling down to Whitgift to have a crack at the National Schools singles in 1969. Having played fewer than 20 games on standard courts at the start of the event, Wayne won the Schools singles at his first attempt, defeating Stuart Endersby of Bedford School in the final. The next year, he beat another Bedfordian, Ian McLaren, to become the eighth boy in the history of the event to be singles champion two year running. His schoolmates at Poundswick High School may not have even known what fives was, but there was rejoicing at the YMCA at the feats of their young champion. It was only sad that he didn't have a partner from the same school to help him win the doubles as well!

At Poundswick, just then in the throes of turning comprehensive, Wayne obtained the necessary "A" levels to pass into Chester College to study Physical Education. Being close to Manchester meant that he could continue to play fives at the YM, and he duly entered for his first Amateur (now "National") Singles Championship in 1971. That year he was narrowly beaten in the second round by John Shneerson, but had the consolation of beating Stan Holt in the final of the plate. Andrew Cowie won the title in 1971, and Wayne recalls watching the former champion, John Watkinson, lose to Andrew in the quarter-finals: "I'd never seen anyone play so well and get beaten to such low scores!"

Back the next year, Wayne played Andrew Cowie in the semi-finals and lost



in straight games. He remembers feeling shocked to be coming off court beaten but not really tired, and he wrote notes about the match on the train going back home, determined to reverse the result if he got the chance the next year. In 1973, he met Andrew in the final, dominated his left-handed opponent by repeatedly forcing him into error down the right-hand side of the court, and won 15-7, 15-7. The RFA handbook summed it up: "Enstone's enthusiasm, fitness and above all dedication had made him a worthy champion."

The rest, as they say, is history. That 1973 win was the first of Wayne's 23 National singles titles and, won as it was by fitness allied to a modicum of tactics, it did more than hint at his potential as the finest singles player of the post-war era. He was ideally built, beautifully balanced and able to keep his opponent under pressure with either hand. He admits he tended to overhit in those days - a legacy of having learnt on small courts, and easy to do with the new "Cliff" ball - but he was able to compensate for this by fitness and speed around the court. Getting to the ball early gave him time to place his feet and achieve greater accuracy and control than most other players, and to do it repeatedly. His full repertoire - the damaging drop-shots, the cross-court forces into the nick, the drives into the back nick and the volleyed interceptions (with either hand!) - was ten years in the making, but there were hints of it already in those early days. "The ultimate game for any of us to play at fives," he says now, with a touch of hyperbole, "is one where the ball never bounces!"

In the course of the 1970s, Wayne Enstone won 5 further National singles titles (each final being against 1969 champion John East, with the 1974 match a particularly close one), and 5 National doubles crowns (with East as partner). Ill at ease in doubles, Wayne took time to adapt to the game, tending to try to dominate too much - the legacy of the narrow YM courts again, perhaps - but in partnership with the thoughtful and experienced East he was still a more-than-useful doubles player. By the end of the decade, he had won no fewer than 28 regional singles championships to add to his national titles, and had shared in a further 20 regional doubles wins. One might be forgiven for thinking that he did little but play fives, but in fact he was involved in 1st Division Manchester League volleyball, basketball and everything else at the YM, where he worked full-time as Physical Director from October 1973 to December 1979.

The only blemish on Wayne's almost perfect National singles record was a loss to Dave Hebden in the 1979 final. The relevant RFA handbook unfortunately records the wrong score and contains little comment on the match, which was played on the Alleyn's court. Wayne led 14-12 in the first game, but lost it 16-15, almost the first time he had been seriously shaken in a big final. He won the middle game almost too easily, but Hebden got away with a fast new ball to 10-1 in the third, and despite intense pressure held on to win the game to 11. The defeat hurt, and for several years after that, Wayne admits to having taken American tennis pro Jimmy Connors as his role model. He recalls how one of the YM players he used to play in earlier years had told him: "If you want to be a champion, you've got to win to love!" Wayne now says: "He was wrong, of course, but I had to find that one out from experience."

Losing to Dave Hebden that day was a salutary lesson, and Wayne's positive reaction to the defeat, coupled with his single-mindedness and continuing fitness, enabled him to regain the trophy in 1980. Incredibly, he went on to win every national singles final for another decade and a half, where lesser champions might have called it a day and retired or lost interest. As it was, all the best players of the time were to suffer in the wake of 1979. Over the remaining 17 years of Wayne's victories, John East was (again!) runner-up on 3 occasions; Ian Fuller, the present champion, lost to him in 4 finals; Neil Roberts, the 1996 champion, also came second 4 times; Tony Wynn was defeated 3 times, Roger Layton twice and Rick Carr once.

Looking back on this extraordinary litany, Wayne is characteristically modest: "I'd have been happy to have won it once, quite honestly. I'd have still been playing now, I do believe, because I enjoy the game, and I love the people

around the game." He names Fred Beswick as his greatest influence and motivator over the years, knows how much he owes in every way to the YM ("It was like a second family") and genuinely regrets not having played more purely social fives, feeling he owed it to himself and the game to adopt a professional attitude to playing to the very best of his ability.

When he left his job at the YM to become a lecturer in the PE Department at Stockport College, Wayne continued to play fives regularly on the YM courts. He soon became Head of Sports Science at Stockport, and in 1983 he met and married Lesley, who was on a squash coaching course he was giving in Blackpool. Zoe, their only daughter, was born in 1985, and Wayne is just thinking of starting her off on fives, now that the G6 ball - less hard on the hands - is with us!

With increasing commitments to his family and his job in the 1980s, Wayne concentrated his efforts on fewer championships than hitherto, giving a welcome chance to others to win some of the regionals. The reverse of the coin was that he maintained his standards in those events he did enter, winning the three Invitation World Championship singles (1983-5), the National singles and every regional singles he contested during that whole decade, with only one exception, when his old rival John East beat him in three games at the West of England in 1981. In doubles on the other hand, the classic pair of Ian Fuller and Dave Hebden were now usually getting the better of him in partnership with East or Steve Ashton, although Wayne and Steve won the three World Championship doubles in 1983/4/5 and the Cyriax Cup in 1986 to interrupt Fuller and Hebden's great run of 10 National doubles victories.

The 1990s saw the continuation of Wayne's phenomenal sequence of National singles wins, despite the gradual onset of arthritic pain in his hips, and a pulled muscle in 1993 which nearly forced him to withdraw from the final. A new chapter in doubles opened for him in 1991 when he joined forces with Neil Roberts to win the Cyriax Cup. This has turned into a winning run of 8 consecutive National doubles victories which still continues at the time of writing. "Doubles... that's what I'm relying on now!" he says with relish, and he means it!

The end of Wayne's tenure of the Jesters Club Cup for the National singles came in 1996 on the fine new courts at the YMCA, where he lost a gripping three-game final - fittingly described by Bruce Hanton in last season's handbook - to Neil Roberts. Since then, his 27(!) successive victories in the North-West singles and his 11 uninterrupted wins in the South-West singles have also come to an end.

Wayne has made valuable contributions to the coaching of Rugby Fives. Apart from working with individuals at the YM and at various schools on the circuit over the years, he has had a hand in three major projects. First, he and Geoff Sherratt produced the excellent RFA Coaching Manual in 1983, sixty pages of solid practical advice which every fives player should read. Second, from 1975 on, he and Fred Beswick ran the Exeter Coaching Course, a week of fives culminating in the South-West Championships, which Wayne has organised since their inception in 1984. And third, he appeared as the expert coach (alongside Jack Calf's polished "beginner") in the RFA Coaching video, made in 1994.

The key to Wayne's success over the years has been his utter dedication to a sport which brings few rewards in the way of public recognition. He has, it is true, met Her Majesty the Queen at Buckingham Palace, been interviewed for "Sport on 4" by Cliff Morgan and had rave articles written about him by the cricket correspondent of the "Daily Telegraph". Otherwise, the Press has only taken a polite interest in his achievements. His sportsmanship has been exemplary throughout his career, as those who witnessed his defeats at the hands of Dave Hebden in 1979 and Neil Roberts in 1996 can attest. He richly deserves the respect and admiration of all who know the game of Rugby Fives, for he has made a unique contribution to it. The RFA honoured him at last September's Celebration Dinner by presenting him with an antique claret jug, and he responded with a typically heart-warming speech. "There are still plenty of talented players about on the circuit," he says, "How far they go depends on their priorities..."