

Having coached Fives to large numbers of Eton Fives beginners at St Olave's School on the 4 Squash courts, I know the basic value of using non-standard facilities. At the time, this was an action born from necessity - it was the only way to get new young players onto some kind of court. However, it was clear that the Squash courts presented some considerable advantages in the early stages of learning to play Fives:

- a bigger court, enabling more youngsters to play on the same court (e.g. 3-a-side);
- no buttress present, so no obstacle to ruin the youngsters' rallies whilst they are still learning to hit the ball accurately. Without the buttress, the new pupils develop an instant understanding of the ball swinging across the court from the left hand wall;

- singles can be played, exposing the pupils to more shots and a sense of gladiatorial combat. They rapidly develop an ability to strike the ball cleanly and accurately.
- the greatest advantage of all as a coach: you can shut a door on all that noise!

Exactly a year ago, I was playing in a Rugby Fives tournament in Devon, and a friend of mine was bemoaning the fact that it is difficult to continue with Fives whilst at University. At this moment the penny dropped. There is no way that either the Rugby or Eton Fives world should ever hope for pure Rugby Fives or Eton Fives to grow in the British Universities. Above all else, there is simply no need. Every University in England possesses Fives courts! Squash courts are almost identical to Rugby Fives courts - indeed they are virtually the same size as the large Fives courts to be found at Giggleswick School. The only difference is the wooden floor, on which a standard Rugby Fives ball would not bounce as high as usual, and the lower ledge over which the ball must be struck.

Just as Handball courts in America became the official Racquetball courts in the 1980s (this dual use effectively saved the courts from demolition, and therefore the game of Handball in America), so the same can happen in reverse on the Squash courts that are now losing popularity in England. Let's play Fives on existing facilities! I know myself, as coach and player, the benefits of playing Squash-court Fives; the extra speed and stamina the game develops is of huge benefit to Eton Fives players. Wayne Enstone, the most successful player in the history of Rugby Fives, pointed out to me that there would be a compelling argument in his opinion for making Rugby Fives courts bigger (Squash court size) and for lowering the board too, since this would address the present situation of over-long rallies that the bouncy modern Rugby Fives balls have resulted in. There would be a greater opportunity to out-manoeuvre your opponent and to place the winning shot. Altogether a more skilful game!

As a result of this revelation, the hunt was on to find the ideal ball for use on a Squash court. The answer was a red leather-covered Eton Fives ball. The ball is slightly bouncier than a Rugby Fives ball, and this extra bounce off the side walls brings the court down closer to the scale of a Rugby Fives court. The wooden floor, however, does not allow as much bounce off the floor as the Eton Fives ball would usually display - indeed, it is just like a Rugby Fives ball in this respect. The red leather covering makes the ball highly visible and produces an excellent contact and sound with the floor. The Squash Association have run tests on the balls and have officially approved them, whilst giving the obvious warning not to use them on courts that are in a bad state of repair and that are laminating, with the plaster breaking away from the solid wall behind it. Due to the smooth floors and walls, the balls last a very long time indeed! As far as the ledge is concerned, you can either play above the Squash court "tin", or for a "pure" Rugby Fives ledge, a rubber board that clips together across the court is being developed; it requires no fixing but is simply leant up against the front wall. The balls and ledge are available from the Hand Ball Supplies Company.

Anyone going to a University that does not already have a Fives club should contact Howard Wiseman at REFCA to discuss how to set up a club at their University. Warwick University already have a thriving Fives club, based on their Squash courts. They recruit for the sport at each year's Freshers' Ball, as "Rugby and Eton Fives". Players from both codes happily participate, and half the club members have never played Fives at all before joining Warwick. It should be possible for any student to easily set up and run such a club at any University. There may well be sponsorship available to help with any setting-up costs in the first year. This is the way forward at University level, if the 18-22-year-old bracket are to keep hold of the feeling that they are still Fives players, having left school. This game can be played at any sports centre with friends who may then become interested in playing Fives on a "pure" court!

For further information, contact Howard Wiseman on 0208 778 0752
or The Hand Ball Supplies Company on 0208 325 1287 / www.glovesandballs.com