

The sixth article in this series is about Oundle School and is written by Roger Freebairn, National Schools Singles and Doubles Champion in 1954, Veterans Doubles Champion in 1984 and Vintage Singles Champion in 1992, who taught English at Oundle for 33 years.

6. Oundle

The earliest reference to Fives at Oundle is in W.G.Walker's History of Oundle Schools when he mentions a single court in May 1860: '... the School Fives court was paved with York flagstones.' The accompanying photograph shows two courts on the site, just before they were demolished in 1898. We have no evidence yet to suggest when they were built, but they stood in the area that later became the Staff Common Room and is now the Sculpture Studio.



Oundle in 1898, with two early courts (right).

These courts had no real chance of survival, once the School had planned to create in their place the Cloisters, which became the central area of work for classrooms and workshops, and is still geographically the meeting-place for pupils in break. Walker comments that in 1873 'the School had at any rate one fives-court ... but walks and rambles seem to have been popular'. In 1876, the Headmaster, Reade, a good cricketer, 'was asking for a fives-court to his own design in each House'.

Over the years, many concrete courts at Oundle have risen and fallen: unfortunately, there are few past records to document them in detail. Indeed, almost all the observations in this article have been taken from the pupils' comments in the School magazine, *The Laxtonian*, which began only in 1876. Some of the reflections will show what further research has confirmed: that the School has always had an affection and respect for Fives players, and that the players themselves have loved the game with a natural enthusiasm. Fives seems to create a camaraderie that is the gentle envy of others. The rites of initiation into the game are written in water, but somehow you know when you are a Fives player. It's a proud and puzzling experience.

Reade's two courts were built in 1877 and were named after the Houses for which they were built, Dryden and Laxton, though neither House is now where it was. The Dryden court

was then in what is now Old Dryden, and the Laxton court was behind Cottesmore, later to be part of the New House. (Even Oundelians can be thrown by this sort of detail!) A comment on the *Laxtonian* House Fives matches, from *The Laxtonian* of April 1887: 'During the last five years, Fives, as a game, has been on the wane at Laxton, we are sorry to say, for from no game can so much healthy exercise be derived in a short time as from Fives. ... We should like to see a fillip given to Fives by the establishment of School courts and inter-House matches: we hope that the powers that be will interest themselves in encouraging so excellent a game as Fives.' And from December of the same year: 'Nearly every afternoon when the courts were dry they have been occupied, and the play all round has wonderfully improved.' The same need for good quality courts appears again in a comment from 1889: 'Owing to new buildings and the demolishing of the old Fives-court, the game was neglected last summer. But we now have a new court, and the game is once more beginning to flourish.'

In 1889/90 two more House courts were built – at Laxton House and Crosby – and in 1905 four new concrete courts were constructed close to the site of the present four enclosed courts.



The 1905 courts, photographed in c.1920.

They were for the new Houses of Grafton and Sidney. A rather disenchanting comment appeared in *The Laxtonian* of 1904: 'We hear the foundations of the new Houses are being laid, and we hope the British workman will spend his dinner interval in repairing the Fives-court.' I hope the writer was not a Fives player: he doesn't sound like one.

In April 1905 a report reads: 'Fives this term were (sic) played under considerable difficulties, architectural and climatic. But as soon as it was realised that large gaps in the wall were a legitimate bunker, games became keener.' (Another form of Winchester Fives, possibly?) The comment ends: 'The juniors in particular ... were willing to face any difficulties rather than go for a run.' Nothing new there, then.

Hazards in Fives courts perhaps call for a separate study. When your correspondent was teaching in 1961 at St. Andrew's College in Grahamstown, South Africa, Chris Reichwald, a celebrated Old Oundelian Fives player who had taught at the same school, wrote asking for photographs of the three St.



March 1917. In the Fives' Court.
Ridleyi. Renton Woodeson Booth.

A game in progress in March 1917.

Andrew's courts for an article he was putting together. Each court was open, and the side walls stopped about half a metre short of the back wall. The intention was to make the swilling-out of rainwater less arduous. It was difficult to place the ball through the quite tightly-angled gap, but for describing how one felt when the ball did go through, few words in a family magazine are appropriate. It also caused hysterics among the watching boys. And watching boys there were: for the best part of three years, an ex-Mill Hill teacher and your correspondent played a weekly Test Match. Their opponents on the staff were Anton Murray, who had opened the bowling for South Africa, and Eric Norton, a past Springbok Rugby player, whose inevitable cricket cap for South Africa was prevented by the war.

Returning now to the even more distant past, the boost given by Oundle's four new concrete courts prompted the following comment in the December 1906 Laxtonian: 'Never before has so much keenness been shown in Fives ... as many as 64 fellows have played on one afternoon.'



1921 Doubles match with spectators on three sides.
(With grateful acknowledgement to the photographer, K.J.P.Barraclough.)

The four new covered and recently enclosed courts were built in 1930: 'The erection of four covered courts, begun in February, will be a great gain to the School Fives as a whole.' This appeared at a time when Oundle had just convincingly beaten Oxford University, two Cambridge Colleges (Trinity Hall and Caius) and the Oxford Old Oundelians. 'The new Fives courts were opened for play at the beginning of October (1930) and the quality of the courts has reached the highest expectations.' The makers were the Bickley Company – 'one of the leading concerns in the country for this class of work.' The Laxtonian also comments: 'It might be urged that the price of the courts is high – excessive almost – but it must be realised that even the slightest defect in a Fives court might ruin its playing value.' It is difficult to locate the actual cost, but subscriptions given by 50 donors amounted to £134.18.0, and the final total proved insufficient to roof the old concrete courts as well as to build the

four new courts. The result: 'The erection of the new covered courts has been of enormous benefit. The weather was such that, without them, we could not have carried through more than half our programme. They have enabled us to arrange fixtures with far stronger sides than heretofore. Oxford University were beaten, but Cambridge narrowly defeated us. This last game was perhaps the best performance of the team.' (From the 1931 Commemoration Book.)

The new courts certainly paid off in terms of results. From 1935-1954, Oundle had six Singles winners in the Schools' Championships and eleven Doubles winners. Nine of the Doubles were achieved in a sequence broken only by the 1940-45 War years. Not surprisingly in view of this record, it is in the Schools' Championships that Oundle has had the most success, with 21 titles since their inception in 1930.

It was in 1935 that J.M. (Jimmy) Reichwald won the Schools' Singles, and with J.C.Pearson the Doubles. It was the start of that Oundle sequence that lasted nine years. In 1938, Eric Conradi won the Singles, and the Doubles with H.J.Hague. He went on to win the National Doubles with L.A.B.Pilkington in 1947, and he was runner-up in the National Singles in 1951, losing to Tony Dawes.

Chris Reichwald (J.M.'s younger brother) won the Schools' Doubles with D.J.Forbes in 1939. Chris, who later taught at Blundell's for many years, was badly wounded in the War. The citation for his Military Cross mentions 'his cool courage and untiring devotion to duty', and The Blundellian finds even in this courage the lighter touch that all who knew him will recognise: 'Severe as the shattering of his leg was, Chris and his friends never ceased to appreciate the irony of Fate which had Chris standing on top of a barrel of wine when the shell hit him, thereby saving his head and life....' Later he went on to become, with W.A.Gluck, a losing National Doubles finalist in 1947, and in 1948 the winner with the same partner, beating John Armitage and Brian Griffiths in the final.

In 1946 and 1947, the Schools' Singles cup was won by John Holroyd; he also in the same years won the Doubles, first with G.Muller and secondly with J.F.Warburg. Your correspondent can confirm John's patience and good humour. Twice John rang on successive Saturday mornings before he left home in Surrey to check that the courts were not sweating. And on the same successive Saturdays the then master-in-charge of Fives had to explain that the courts, having begun to sweat about 11.30 a.m., were dangerously unplayable. John was very understanding; as was David Gardner on the morning of the commencement of the BUSF competition some years ago. Oundle dried the courts with industrial-sized heaters. Splendid – until play was further delayed by the hundreds of large spiders absailing to the floor, thinking a summer heat wave had arrived.

The master-in-charge during the very successful early years was Frank Spragg. He also coached the Rugby XV. It was not uncommon in those days to play more than one sport in an afternoon; as a result, the same excellent sportsmen tended to succeed at a variety of games. (One boy in the 1950s gained five School Colours.)

Michael Mills took over Fives very successfully in the late Forties. After the Swan twins had won the Schools' Doubles in 1948, J.R.Nicol and J.M.(now Sir Michael) Pickard won in 1949, as did M.P.Skliros in 1952, partnered by P.Granger. In the same year, Skliros also won the Singles. Two years later, your correspondent won the Singles final against J.P.Granger, who was also his partner for the winning Doubles final on the same afternoon. That match was against Clifton. At what all the players considered to be the end of that competition, and with Oundle having congratulated Clifton, the referee called the match a tie and sent the players back for the best of three points. Clifton were understandably the side more shaken, and Oundle nipped through at the very end.



School team 1954, with J.P.Granger (sitting left) and R.G.Freebairn (standing left): winners of Schools' Singles and Doubles. Master-in-charge: Michael Mills.

It is satisfying to know that almost all the players mentioned in this article have learned their Fives at Oundle on the four new courts. Curiously, two distinguished exceptions became consecutive Headmasters of Oundle School, and on one occasion played as a pair against the School's top players. Dick Knight, an Old Alleynian (Oundle Headmaster 1956-1968), had won the National Singles Championship in 1948, beating Chris Reichwald in the final. And in the very next year, Barry Trapnell, a UCS Old Boy (Oundle Headmaster 1968-1984), won the same title, beating E.L. Bailey. On the day in 1968 that the newly-appointed Headmaster, Barry Trapnell, came over from Denstone to meet the Oundle Staff, he and Dick Knight offered a challenge to the School's top pair, Chris Nicholls and Michael Ghersie. It was a curious game – both Headmasters stood tall and tended to compete for the many volleys, though it is probably best remembered by the winning boys. (It was the same pair, Nicholls and Ghersie, that called their own shot narrowly down at a very significant moment in a long Schools' Doubles semi-final against Merchiston Castle in 1969: it remains one of the most honest moments your correspondent can recall in school sport.)

Also in 1969, Oundle had high hopes of a Schools' Singles victory. Earlier that year, some of the Manchester YMCA players asked your correspondent if he would keep an eye on their entry for the Singles. He was delighted to do so, but felt sorry that their player would coincide with a very strong Oundle player, Chris Nicholls. Nicholls didn't win, but the unexpected protégé from Manchester did. His name was Wayne Enstone. Your correspondent still likes to think it was the wisdom of his last-minute coaching. It wasn't. Wayne knew everything intuitively. He did, many years later and unforgettably, take a Sunday Fives master-class for us at Oundle.

The latest Oundelian to win the Schools' Singles, E.J.R.Farrow, won the cup in both 1972 and 1973, beating in each final V.J.Marks of Blundell's. Your correspondent mentioned to Chris Reichwald how sportingly Marks had played. Chris said: 'Don't worry too much for him: he will soon be playing cricket for England.' And, of course, he was.

Our most successful Doubles player of recent years has been D.S.Parlby. He was a formidable player at school, and all who saw him felt that if only he could eliminate the occasional unforced error after a long rally of near-winners, he should be a partner much sought after. In the 1980s and 1990s he won, mostly in partnership with J.S.Schroeter, ten of the regional Doubles titles contested round the country, and he and Schroeter were runners-up in the National Doubles in 1987, 1988 and 1989.

To complete the adult records, your correspondent won the Veterans' Doubles with A.I.F.Mackenzie in 1984 and the Vintage Singles in 1992. Aficionados of statistics will see that the Veterans' Doubles cup was won almost consistently by D.M.Hebblethwaite and G.E.Prigmore between 1979 and 1985. True consistency was prevented in the 1984 final by a tactical decision of A.I.F.Mackenzie and your correspondent. Although they calculated they had between them the combined experience of about seventy years of playing and coaching the game, it was only at the end of the interval, having lost the first game of the final, that it occurred to them, slowly, that an important change of approach might be to keep the ball away from the dominating Prigmore and more on Hebblethwaite, whose ankle was in plaster. This tactical acumen worked, and that is why their names appear, just once.

During the best years of Oundle's Fives, the school was the making, incredibly, of 16 Blues at Oxford and 35 at Cambridge. The later decline began for several reasons: other sports were proliferating, such as in the introduction of first-year Hockey; Squash became more prominent, and academic pressures worked against boys spending their sports' afternoons playing a variety of games. The number of players dwindled, as the courts deteriorated. Kevin Cobb took over the Fives and played several times a week: he did everything successfully to maintain the game. This included the potency of his Special Brew, employed often against adult sides, leaving several with no abiding recollection of why they had gone to Oundle in the first place.

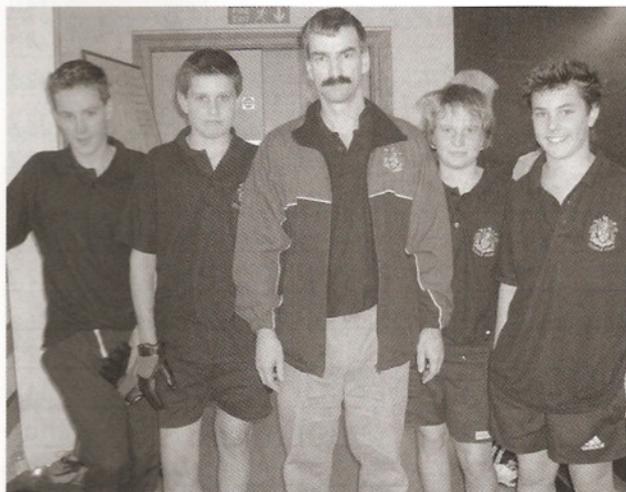
In 1993, your correspondent had to cancel home matches, because of the leaking glass roofs. These became so bad that something had to be done: though ironically the new roof materials were harmfully stored in the courts, under the dripping roofs they were to replace. Eventually, with the new roofs and when the courts were enclosed, Fives at Oundle began to burgeon again. Luckily, the courts were at one end of the Two Acre, the main Rugby pitch. Ten years ago, the two new Girls' Houses were built at the further end of the Two Acre. To complete the refurbishment of the whole area, the Fives courts were finally enclosed and heated.

The most recent outstanding player has been Will Jefferson. He came to your correspondent as a Third Former. 'Please, Sir,' he said, 'my father has asked if you would teach me to play Fives.' Your correspondent had been hoping that his father, Richard, had long forgotten his name. He remembered only too well. It was in the late Fifties that your correspondent had taken a strong Oxford four over to Winchester to show them how you play Winchester Fives properly. They were abjectly thrashed, and deserved to be. Their tormentor was Richard Jefferson, Will's father; he went on, unsurprisingly to them, to bowl for Surrey from 1961-1966. In 1998, Will won the West of England Schools' Singles, and the Doubles with T.C.Boardman. He could have gone on to play Fives wonderfully well, but he was already becoming an outstanding cricketer. He is playing now for Essex and has been scoring centuries in both one-day cricket and the County Championship.

During the delay in repairs to the courts and in place of competition, there was an outbreak of social Fives, particularly among the Staff. Several resumed the game, or learned it very quickly. Martin Collier, present Director of Studies, started to play to a good standard after coming to Oundle and finds Fives one of the highlights of the week. Mark Turner is another good example: an Oxford Hockey Blue, he developed his Fives at Oundle, having begun to play at Rossall. He is now Headmaster of Abingdon School. His Common Room contemporary, Mark Steed, a Cambridge Athletics Blue and now Headmaster of Kelly College, also developed his Fives skills. Both became fine players, as did Anthony Burrows, now the very effective master-in-charge, who learned the game to a formidable level after coming to Oundle in 1998.

In 1993, Alex Aldous joined the Staff and promoted Fives at Oundle in a remarkable way. He had the names of Oundle's Oxford and Cambridge Blues and Schools' winners placed on very impressive boards in the courts; and with Kevin Cobb and Roger Page, who learned his Fives as a boy at Oundle and is currently Director of Art and a Housemaster, encouraged many boys and some girls to play, as well as members of Staff. Alex also helped especially with the development of school fixtures.

In 2001/2, the school played eight matches. The school captain in 2002/3 began his report: 'What a stonking year it has been for Oundle Fives: numbers shooting up each term ...'. And Anthony Burrows wrote in late 2003: 'Fives has maintained the momentum of last year in the quest to be a major Fives-playing school once again ... over one hundred pupils have played Fives during the last academic year ... we have had a few girls beginning to play a good standard of Fives.'



The Oundle team at the Under 14 Schools: (from left) C Burrows, T Ransom, Anthony Burrows (master-in-charge), F Hodgson, H Fray.

Fives is now one of the voluntary sports for the Third form, so that Oundle can again introduce the game to pupils of thirteen. Anthony Burrows comments: 'Numbers have been growing and we have had over 80 boys and girls playing during the last three years. The problem has been that most start playing in the sixth form. This year we have had a junior society where about 12 boys have been playing once a week for about an hour.' He is planning for next year some possible Sunday fixtures, hosted at Oundle, with three or four teams from the north and south. He asks any school interested in the idea to contact him at Oundle (abb@oundle.northants.sch.uk).

The Headmaster (Dr R.Townsend) said in his end-of-year report in 2004: 'There are now large groups of Seniors playing regular matches with considerable success. Through the Voluntaries system the younger years are now able to experience the game and, as a result, four Third form boys were entered in the Under 14 National Schools' Championships. The boys competed extremely well, with two winning the early rounds and another losing in the semi-final of the plate competition. This was an outstanding achievement after such a short introduction to the game.' (One boy was Christopher, son of Mr Burrows.)

For the future, what better incentive than to know that St. Dunstan's and St. Paul's are only one Schools' Championship behind Oundle. Oundle has refurbished courts, a group of talented Staff players who engage in funny but blue-touch-paper pecking-order battles, a large group of pupils eager to learn and enthusiastic members of the Common Room actively willing to share their experience on the courts ... and the rest, Oundle hopes, will be history!

Roger Freebairn

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