

A TALE OF TWO PLAYERS: DENISE HALL-WILTON & PAULA SMITH

There is evidence of Ladies' Fives being played as long ago as 1885, but what we might call the modern era (for Rugby and Winchester Fives, at least) began in 1978 when Denise Hall-Wilton, the Bradfield Bursar's Secretary, asked Eddie Vinelott, Bradfield's secretary of Fives at the time, to demonstrate the game. The master-in-charge, despite some chauvinistic thoughts, was persuaded to lend some gloves and a ball, and Denise recruited Angela Marshall to play regularly with her, but Angela, after a promising but all too brief career, became pregnant and had to stop playing.

Denise, never one to be put off by a little local difficulty, looked around in the School Dining Hall for anyone who might be interested and spotted Paula Smith, then employed as a lab assistant in the Biology Department. Paula, a gifted netball player, took to Fives immediately, and soon she and Denise were involved in a lengthy series of Sunday games, keeping a running total from week to week just like a couple of fourteen-year-olds.

A few other players, including Paula's sister Trish, were recruited, and Sunday evenings became the regular time for the Bradfield Club to meet and play social fives. Husbands, boy-friends and people met in pubs were encouraged to come along as well, and soon the fives courts were a hive of activity most Sundays until late in the evening, with Reading University students joining in whenever they could get transport. The standard of play improved, and Paula, the outstanding player, even won herself a course of driving lessons as a result of a bet with a driving instructor who thought he could 'beat any woman at any game'!

The Bradfield courts are of the Winchester type, but before long Denise and Paula were also involved in playing both the Eton and the Rugby varieties. The chance to play Eton Fives came through Tom and Joan Wood, who told Denise there were ladies playing at Eton with the Thorn-EMI Club, organised by Richard Black. Denise and Paula were made most welcome there, and almost immediately they were playing in competitions as well as in club nights. They managed to win the plate on many occasions, and one year they even reached the semi-finals of the ladies' main competition. This adventure lasted for five or six years, until Paula's knee injury, sustained some years earlier, began to make the bending and leaping intolerable.

In 1985, the macho world of Rugby Fives was agog. Alastair Mackenzie, President of the RFA, had offered to run a Ladies' Singles Championship at St. Paul's School! Five or six players entered, and Paula duly became the first champion, beating Denise in the final. Although there was no competition the next season, the event was subsequently held without interruption until 1997, with Paula winning every year she entered. She was injured in 1993, and that year's title was won by Tom and Joan Wood's daughter Cherry, who beat Mary Love (one of the original participants in Ladies' Fives) in the final. In 1999, Paula was finally defeated by the brilliant Claire Knowles from Manchester, who has held the title since then.

One of the first Reading students who came to play at Bradfield was Melanie Haslam, whose father Michael ran the Men's Winchester Fives Doubles for its first dozen years. In 1988, Michael gave a cup for a Ladies' Singles Championship for Winchester Fives, and the first year was at Sedbergh, his old school, where the men's competition was also being played. Five doughty contenders made the trek from Berkshire to play each other, and Paula Smith became the champion in this branch of the sport as well! She was to win the competition every year it was held between 1988 and 2003, finally losing in 2004 to

Dominique Redmond, a talented young Eton Fives player who took a decided liking to the Malvern buttress.

Paula, whose competitiveness has seen her continue to play Winchester and Rugby Fives despite a dysfunctional knee and increasingly arthritic hands, has therefore won 26 National Singles titles (11 Rugby, 15 Winchester) since she started the game back around 1979. But that's only part of the story, for with her faithful sidekick Denise, a further 18 Doubles Championships have been won (5 Rugby, 13 Winchester). The same pattern applies as in the Singles: the victories in the Rugby came to an end when Claire Knowles, first with Jo Chenhall and now with Melanie Whitehead (née Haslam) as partner, came on the scene; and in the Winchester, Paula was sadly unable to enter in 2005, when the Redmond sisters were victorious.

So Ladies' Rugby and Winchester Fives tournaments have been running now for twenty years or so. If the outstanding player during that period has been Paula Smith, the organiser par excellence has been Denise Hall-Wilton. She has always seen to it that, however many (or few) entered, all were tested to near-exhaustion, with competitions rarely lasting less than five hours in all; singles and doubles events were played on the same day and, whatever the preliminary format, finals were invariably best of three games to fifteen points. The spirit of Tom Wood lives on!

Fives is about more than winning, especially for these two, who have put so much into the game. Paula has done it by her example as a player; by her encouragement of countless beginners (including the recruitment of Vodafone employees in the days when she worked for that company); and by her enthusiastic running of the Mixed Doubles competition, which she started in 1997 – and also won a couple of times with her son, Sean. Denise has done it by showing typical determination both on and off court; by taking on the RFA Club newsletter and pocket-book in 1989 and making the pocket-book the Fives player's companion; by running ladies' competitions and encouraging schools to start girls playing (something she herself pioneered at Bradfield); by becoming Hon. Sec. of the RFA Club in 1995 and then Club Manager on the amalgamation with the RFA; by keeping the RFA database going; by travelling hundreds of miles to take photos for the Handbook and website; and by being a long-serving member of the RFA Committee and Board.

Girls' Fives is now up and running in five schools on the Rugby/Winchester circuit – Allyn's, Blundell's, Marlborough, Malvern and Oundle – and with more and more such schools going fully co-ed, this must be the future of Ladies' Fives. But it might not have got going at all without the pioneering spirit of Denise Hall-Wilton and Paula Smith.

David Barnes

Early Days: (from left) Henrietta Chapman, Denise Hall-Wilton, Melanie Haslam, Paula Smith, Erica Patten, Mary Love.

