

“Fives Bats, No 2. English Willow 3/- each”. This entry towards the top of a full-page advert from Spalding was the most surprising thing to see when, many years ago, I first came across a copy of a fabulous old Fives Book from the 1920's: “Eton and Rugby Fives” by Egerton and Armitage. I understood everything else in the advert – the range of balls for Rugby or Eton Fives, and clearly the range of different gloves too. I had no understanding of what Bat Fives was,

or had been, and neither did anyone else that I knew from the world of Fives. Any further thought of Bat Fives soon vanished, but I had never forgotten the reference to it.

Twenty five years later, my coaching Agency is asked to bring Fives back to life at Sutton Valence school; even though they have lost their Rugby Fives courts, two old courts from the 1860's still remain – what could we do for them? The courts have three walls only, with no buttresses,

steps or hazards. They are 20 feet in each direction – effectively a cube with an open end. Having recently seen photographs of Bat-Fives being played at Aldenham on the EFA website, it seemed likely that these were old Bat Fives courts. As far as coaching at Sutton Valence is concerned, we are playing hand Fives and aim to play fixtures against all three established codes. However, if these are indeed Bat Fives courts, then surely we should be looking for the Bats also? Old bats were found to be held in the archives at Winchester College – an appointment was soon made to visit.

Bat Fives, it turned out, was widespread before Eton, Rugby and Winchester Fives emerged. At many schools there were specific Bat Fives courts that were all converted or demolished by the 1930's – often converted into hand Fives courts or squash court. In many other schools, such as Winchester College, specific suitable areas against existing buildings became known as the Bat Fives courts. Indeed, two different styles of bat (one of these in two different sizes) were in regular use for very many years at Winchester. Bat Fives continued to be played at Winchester on bespoke hand fives (Winchester Fives) courts that were built in the 1870s, as well as the traditional old Bat Fives walls around the College.

It was the willow bat that Spalding made that had become the “standard” Bat, generally in use, by the 1890s. Bat Fives was especially popular with cricketers at the various schools – a fantastic way of wielding willow in the winter months without needing a large team or huge space. Bat Fives lay, effectively, somewhere between cricket, fives, rackets, squash and stoolball!

Armed with tracings and accurate measurements, the first modern willow Fives bat was crafted, lovingly given four coats of raw linseed oil, bound with a leather handle and knocked in ready for use. There is a magic feeling to striking the ball well with this Bat – similar to the execution of



Future Bat Fives Doubles Champions Howard and Gwydion Wiseman.

a good stroke in cricket. Production of Fives Bats is to start in September 2007, and the game will be re-launched as a squash-court and Rugby/Winchester Fives courts game for the following 2008 season. There may also, for historical fun, be a Bat Fives contest held in the summer of 2009 at Sutton Valence School. The bats and balls (squash court Rugby Fives ball) will be available from the Hand Ball Supplies Company from September 2008 – orders can be placed in readiness before that date.

It is an interesting footnote that Pelota in the Basque region is still played with three versions – i.e. Pelota with the scoop, or with the bats (very similar shape to Bat Fives), or indeed with the hands. All three codes are very popular and share the same courts.

If you have any special interest in the prospect of experiencing Bat Fives, then please do contact Howard Wiseman on 020 8778 0752.

Howard Wiseman