

A Brief History of Fives

Owen Toller, former Master-in-Charge of Fives, looks back at the recent history of the sport at Merchant Taylors'

I can't remember when Peter Ingram took over Fives but he was Merchant Taylors' Fives ever since I first played there and I'm sure that others would say the same. He brought an unflappable mixture of down-to-earth sense and plain niceness to the game. For many years there was a feeling that it was always pleasant to play against Merchant Taylors' and this was largely due to Peter. He was an Old Bedfordian and he and his friend Jerry Cooper set up a friendly rivalry, with a trophy awarded for the winner of the annual match between the two schools. In the 1970s Bedford was the game's powerhouse at school level, but over the years things changed and by 1990 it was unusual for Merchant Taylors' to lose in that fixture.

During Peter's incumbency Taylors' Fives was also threatened by other sports and ever since the game has had to rely on scraps - an enthusiastic youngster or two who can encourage some friends to take it up, a committed master-in-charge, lunchtime sessions. The fact that Taylors' continued to produce good players and to compete at national level is testimony to Peter's mixture of tact and enthusiasm. In the 1980s two pairs won the National Schools' Doubles, Simon Burrows and Neil Eckert in 1980 and Anthony Morris and Howard Thompson in 1984. John Hampel won the Colts Singles in 1986 and Simon Mee and Anthony Morris the Colts Doubles in 1983. At the West of England Championships

Simon Brown won the Colts singles in 1972 and, with Geoff Bunting the open doubles the next year; Howard Thompson won the Colts singles in 1982 and Simon Mee and Anthony Morris the Colts doubles in 1983. After that there were many occasions in which bits of plateware came to Sandy Lodge, but the disadvantages under which the sport laboured meant that no national championships were won for 13 years.

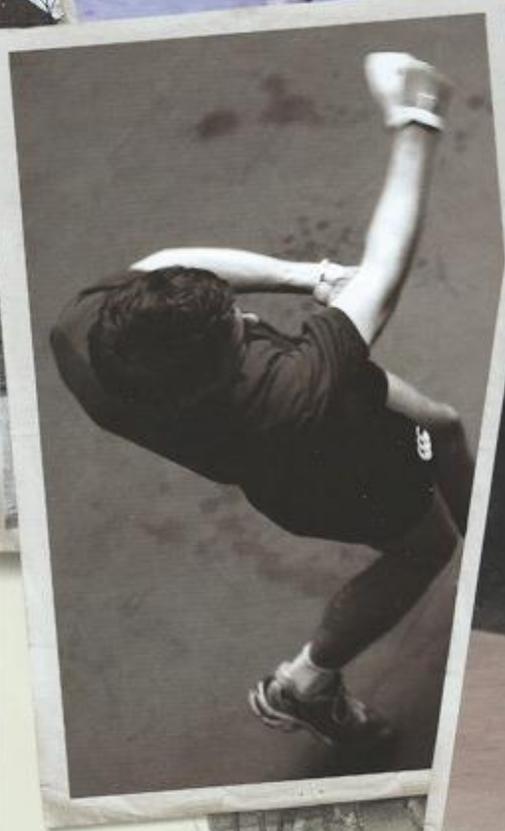
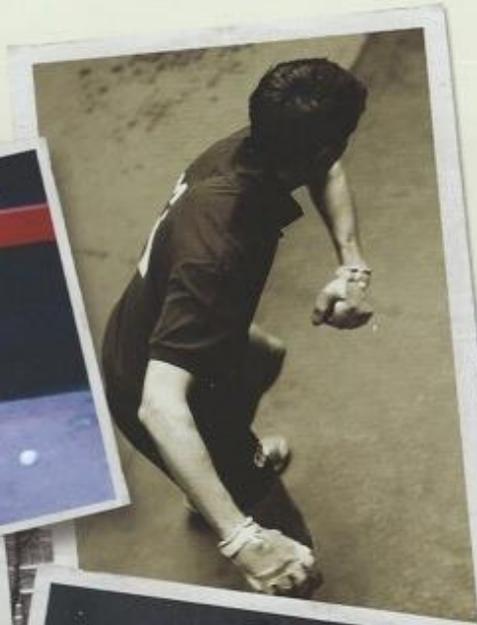
Nevertheless, the school continued to produce good individual players and, in particular, pairs. Charlie Marsh was an open semi-finalist in 1994. The Chopra brothers, Aditya and Prashant, were both good

captains; Ed Hikmet and James Harrison, James Hamman and Jonathan Davies, and perhaps best of all Richard Price and Christian Hale were all pairs who could challenge the best in the country. But the cupboard remained bare of major trophies until 1997, when Steffan James won the National Under-13 singles, and, with Asheesh Kaul, the doubles, conceding very few points in the process. By now Peter had retired; he was replaced by myself as Master-in-Charge but with essential assistance from Simon Stott and Crispin Collier. It was Crispin who taught Steffan and Asheesh the game and although both were required for hockey



THE FIVES TEAM (West of England Doubles Champions)
F. M. Ingram, Cap. S. M. Burrows
A. M. Morris (Colts, 1st) C. E. Bunting (Colts)
S. M. Burrows, Cap. S. M. Burrows, Cap.
S. M. Burrows, Cap. S. M. Burrows, Cap.

> Concordia Merchant Taylors' School



Fives photography by Jonah Surkes (4ths)



MERCHANT TAYLORS' SCHOOL



FIVES TOUR OF U.S.A. 1986

C. Bennett J. P. Heath S. Bunn G. Thomas A. Breen
 S. L. Russell (Captain) P. M. Ingram (Ist) D. N. E. Wiles (Secretary) D. B. Cohen

(Steffan in particular being one of the most outstanding all-round sportsmen produced by Merchant Taylors'), both kept playing fives when they could, not least in house matches where they were always impressive. They won the National Under-14 Doubles in 1998, Steffan losing in the singles final, and they ended their school careers by winning the Open Doubles Plate in 2002, beating the 2nd IV pair of Jonathan Pinkus and Daniel Bartlett in the final. Jonathan and Dan, with a combined height of about 13 feet, must be one of the tallest regular pairs ever.

That year I suggested that the National Schools' Championships were played at Sandy Lodge. The organisation was widely held to have been a success, but the fact that there are only four courts meant that timings were too compressed and the championships subsequently returned to the six courts at St Paul's. However, there was an augury for the next year in that Daniel Grant, in the Lower Sixth, was the only non-Pauline in the Open Singles semi-finals, and the next year he duly fulfilled the huge promise he had shown even as a Fourth former by becoming the first Taylorian to win the Open Singles in 2003. He was a classic example of an individual who inspired those around him, and he and his team-mates of Sam Sandford, John Livesey and Kiran Karia formed one of the

best 1st IVs that Merchant Taylors' has ever had. Dan has gone on to be one of the leading adult players and at the time of writing has a national ranking of 7th in singles and doubles well as being the current BUCS Singles Champion.

By now several things had changed. The Fives courts had been repainted and central heating installed, to the huge gratitude of the players and, particularly, the supporters who had regularly frozen on the first Sunday of December each year in the President's Cup. Peter Ingram's retirement in 1996 was marked by a dinner at which many former pupils and colleagues from the world of Fives paid tribute to Peter's warm-heartedness. It was hugely sad that Peter was able to enjoy only a couple of years of retirement. Good players continued to be produced: Ian Roberts and John Martin, who won the Doubles plate in 1997; Will Carter (Open Singles plate in 1998); Jamie Lillywhite and David Sims, and the splendid trio of Richard Wise, Nick Faith and Ravi Shah who graced the courts with fine play and outstanding sportsmanship in 1999 and 2000.

My apprenticeship as a coach at St Paul's had served me well and I was also especially grateful to Crispin Collier and Simon Stott. I handed over the reins to James Clifford in 2003, and when James moved on, the

appointment of the former Oxford captain Nick Hillier provided an injection of new blood and expertise at exactly the right time. Tribute must be paid to Simon Stott who took up the game from scratch when he arrived at Sandy Lodge and rapidly proved invaluable not least as driver for the many away matches and championships. Neither he nor his team will forget the time when they set off to drive to Clifton for the West of England Championships and got halfway down the East Drive before discovering that the minibus had no brakes.

Several OMTs have featured prominently in adult Fives. Guy Whiting won the BUSF Doubles championships in 1972 and 1973. David Richmond, subsequently I believe HM Ambassador in Baghdad, was Secretary of Cambridge in 1974 or thereabouts. I remember the Varsity Match being played at MTS in 1975 (I captained the Sparrows and lost 15-0; avenged the next year I'm glad to say). Lots of players have won Blues and Dan Grant has won the U-25s Doubles for the past two years.

A full history of Fives will appear in this year's Taylorian in July. Please go to www.mtsn.org.uk/publications if you would like to read it when it is published.

Fives

Nick Hillier has been Master-in-Charge of Fives since 2005. A former captain of the Oxford University 1st VIII, he looks at Fives' current progress at Merchant Taylors' and explains his continued enjoyment of the sport

My enjoyment of Rugby Fives stems in part from the game itself, a fine mixture of all-round physical challenge and skillful pursuit, but almost more from the sport's genteel nature. By this I don't mean that Fives is in any way an easy or soft sport. The ball flies around the court at high speed and I have been on the receiving end of both ball and player on many occasions. What I mean is that those who play Fives are almost invariably of a generous disposition as it seems the sport either attracts those I would describe as gentlemen or it somehow produces them. Indeed, the atmosphere at any Fives event is always one of good cheer and camaraderie. I have now personally played Fives for almost two thirds of my life. I started playing when my Geography teacher in the equivalent of the Upper Thirds at Whitgift School, Nick Morgan, encouraged my group of friends to take it up. I represented the school throughout the rest of time there, although as is often the case this was alongside rugby and hockey. I was lucky to go up to Oxford where the courts are easily accessible to the students and I enjoyed my time representing and captaining both the Beavers team and the 1st VIII. I must admit that one of my criteria when looking for my first

teaching position was that the school played some form of Fives and I was lucky when Merchant Taylors' was my first interview.

Fives has always been popular at Merchant Taylors' and this has been due to a number of staff who have helped promote the sport. Peter Ingram was an incredibly committed Fives master and his legacy is a similarly committed Old Boys' club who still have the enthusiasm that he instilled in them many years ago. More recently, and immediately before I arrived, Owen Toller helped many boys

improve their technique and to enjoy the game through his enthusiasm and deep understanding of Fives. He was also a great help to me as I took over the role of Master-in-Charge and made the transition an easy one.

During my time at Merchant Taylors' many boys have made their way onto the courts and I hope have enjoyed their time there. Fives has always seemed to me a natural game for boys to play. Around every school in the country there will be someone hitting a ball against a wall somewhere and Fives is merely the organised expression of this. In my first few years at Taylors' picking a 1st IV was always made easier as the first name on the list would always be Keir Sloan. Keir remains the most natural player of Fives I have coached as he seemed to have an innate understanding of the length a ball should be hit. When boys start playing, Fives rallies take place only in the front third of the court and you exhort them to strike it harder. Once they improve and get older they continue to try to hit the ball harder and harder which just leads to the ball bouncing invitingly off the back wall and you have to try to train them to aim for a better length. Keir, as well as being incredibly athletic and possessing fine hand-eye coordination, understood this and his shots invariably faded into the back corner.

It was also in these first couple of years that I encouraged as many as possible of the younger boys to take up





the sport. Players such as Peter Judge, who now plays at Cambridge, Cory Percival, Zach Smith and Daniel Hooker all came on board and have been almost permanent fixtures on the courts during my time at the school. One of the great things about Fives is that players can do well in different ways. Some excel in singles where fitness and a good "weak" hand are important. Others are much better in a game of doubles where a strong hit, particularly if on the left hand, helps considerably. Curran Choudhry was one of the latter who could boom the ball around a court and was tricky to break down if playing with a solid right-hander. Other talented players during my time included Nick Hemming-Brown, Shaun Miller and also Chris Cox, Mike Laming and Ashish Patani. The last three of these made up, along with Keir, the 1st IV in my first year at Taylors' and were an extremely keen bunch who had an excellent record that year of only losing two games out of eight, and those against St Paul's and Alleyn's who are generally the strongest teams on the circuit. They were also extremely welcoming to a new teacher and indeed did turn out on the occasional Wednesday night with the OMTs.

I have tried to make sure that Fives has been as accessible as possible. Being a minor sport always means that you are battling for the attention of boys who will already be down for rugby or, during the Fives term, hockey. Therefore I have always run extra clubs after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays and encouraged the boys to come down at lunchtimes as well. Fives is also now a three term sport as a games option, something that has opened it up to more participation. I have always been a firm believer that getting boys on court is the most important thing and that once that is achieved many will stay on with the game.

The OMT club has seemed to go from strength to strength during the last few years. The numbers that play on a Wednesday night have increased and in particular Dan Grant and Gareth Price have been busy entering tournaments both of the Fives variety and now of Handball. Indeed the two of them have been the driving force behind the building of the four handball courts in the sportshall and Gareth is now to be found coaching the boys on a Friday during the hour. The Old Boys also demonstrated the fondness Fives is held in by organising a Rugby Fives OMT

dinner in 2007. This brought together OMTs both young and old for a very enjoyable evening at Durrants.

Fives continues to be a sport that the boys seem to get a real sense of enjoyment from and it continues to be the case at Taylors' that the boys who take it up are invariably good sorts. Currently the 1st IV is made up of a group of Lower Sixth boys who have played the game since joining in the Fourth Form and already have a fine record this year. Next year should prove to be a good one for the school if these boys, including at number one seed a very talented Rushil Patel ably supported by Vivek Patel, Nick Finney, Anujay Shah and, when he can be dragged away from hockey, Russell Lamb, continue to improve as they have. Further down the school it also looks promising with a number of new boys having taken up the sport including Elliot Tebboth who won the Singles Plate competition at this year's Under 14 Nationals only about a month after having started playing. It continues to be a pleasure to introduce these boys, with the assistance of colleagues Simon Stott and Berta Broncano, to the mysteries of a game I feel has so much to offer.



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*Manchester open singles and doubles champions. Cornwall open singles champion.

D. B. Cole

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