

PORTRAIT OF A PLAYER: PHIL ATKINSON

Most people who watch him play would agree that Phil Atkinson is left-handed. They would never guess one of his best-kept secrets: he actually started the game as a right-hander. Andy Curtis, the master-in-charge at Bedford Modern School, where Phil learnt the game, may simply not have noticed at the time, and Phil himself says modestly: 'I didn't really think about it, but I played cricket and golf right-handed, so I supposed you played fives that way too. Gradually I realised that you could be left-handed at fives, so my left hand sort of took over!'

Through a strange coincidence, Dave Webb, the boy who came on court that day in 1969 to learn the game with Phil, became his fives partner throughout his school career. Bedford Modern was a sporty school, and although rugby dominated the autumn term, smaller sports like fives came into their own in the spring term. All 6 courts were in regular use, with two sports afternoons a week and a match on Saturday.

Phil remembers his first match. 'I was twelve and my father came to watch. I lost 15-1 in my single to Charlie Pattison from Bedford School. My father didn't come again! Bedford were the strongest school at fives in those days, and although we played matches against Almeyn's, Oundle, Rutlish, Felsted, Denstone and Merchant Taylors', I enjoyed at least one aspect of playing away at Bedford: we got a hot tea afterwards, with beans on toast!'

The National Schools' Championships were held at Whitgift, and Phil had another formative experience when it came to his turn to represent his school. 'I wasn't actually in the top IV, someone was unavailable. I played Ian Mount from Sedbergh, who impressed me deeply by spraying his hands with something before going on court. I reckoned I couldn't possibly beat a player who took his fives so seriously. I was right!'

After school, there was a fives-less interlude at Hull University. 'I read History at Hull – I'm a bit of a History anorak! I played squash, five-a-side football and golf. I also sang in Gilbert and Sullivan and got involved in student politics, as an independent. They were three good years.'

In 1978, Phil went to Leeds Poly to do a postgraduate diploma in personnel management. He went to the Leeds University freshers' fair, and there was a fives stand there. 'I was signed up by a chap called Andy Kafel, who was the captain – other players were Ian Prescott, Martin Monickendam, Simon

Powell and Nick Turner. The Leeds courts were at one of the halls of residence – three in a line, standard colour, quite nice courts – we had a decent team, and it got me back into fives. We didn't travel much, but I remember playing in the third pair in the BUSF Championships at Manchester on those rubbery University courts. We lost.'

After Leeds, Phil got a job in Cockfosters and moved to live in Winchmore Hill. 'Geoff Prigmore gave me the names of Tom Wood, Bill Pett and Clive Orpen as contacts for fives in London. Bill said I couldn't play for the Clove Club as I wasn't an old boy of Hackney Downs, but Tom and Clive signed me up for the RFA Club and UCS Old Boys respectively. I felt I'd arrived!'

The UCS Old Boys was a flourishing club with a massive fixture list in the 1980s, and Phil remembers playing 18 matches a year in successive seasons just for that one club. Then there were RFA Club matches as well, so not surprisingly there was no time for tournaments. It wasn't until the mid 80s that Phil started on the tournament circuit, partnering first Yoav Ben Schlomo, then Jason Nyilas and finally in the late 80s embarking on his most profitable fives partnership, the one with Nick Austin – Nick's attacking qualities combining effectively with Phil's more defensive style.

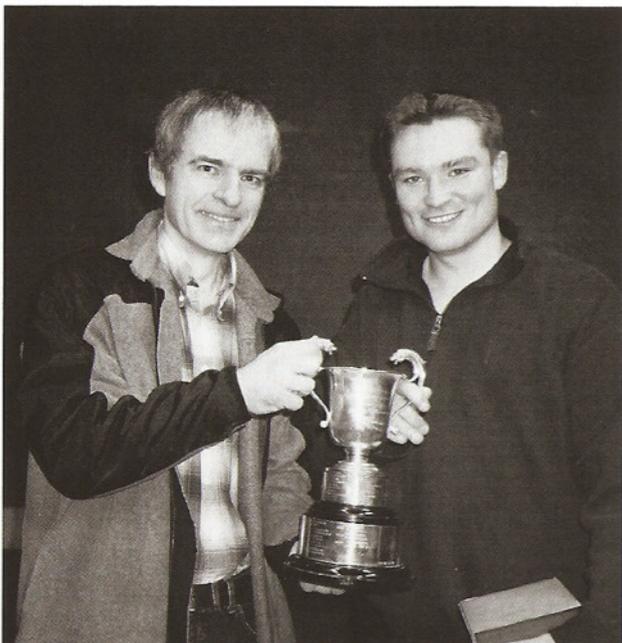
A non-fives partnership also started in the late 80s when Phil met and married Lesley, having moved back to Bedfordshire in 1988. He rejoined the Old Bedford Modernians Fives club, reducing the average age by a dozen years or so, and continued to play tournaments with Nick as partner. In 1994 they reached the final of the Halifax doubles, and three years later the finals of both the Halifax and Manchester doubles, losing in both to John Beswick and Neil Roberts.

Phil and Nick have had a long rivalry with other pairs, too – in particular the old-established duo of Paddy d'Ancona and Ben Taberner. As Phil puts it: 'There have been at least ten marathons with Nick against Paddy and Ben, all bar one going to three games. Two West of England quarter-finals spring to mind – one involving a 15 minute break in the third game, during which Nick sought a supply of salt following a bad attack of cramp. A packet of crisps did the trick, although we eventually lost. The other was the infamous match lasting nearly three hours, when players and spectators lost the will to live. Nick and I eventually won 12-11 in the third game.'

As readers may have noticed by now, Phil Atkinson has a self-deprecating attitude to his achievements. Asked why he thinks his games go on so long, Phil is liable to reply: 'Because I last played a winner in 1994!' Questioned about his attitude to fashion, he will say: 'You can tell that by my tracksuit!' Here is a man who admits he got into flairs when flairs were starting to go out, whose favourite TV programme is Dr Who, and whose first ever prize was for coming second in the sack race at primary school. 'Phil Atkinson – Man of the Seventies' is a d'Anconian jibe he quotes with apparent relish, and he seems quite unafraid to sport a T-shirt with 'Theakston's Old Peculier' on it.

Phil's fives is still a force to be reckoned with, even though he is now officially a Veteran. In 2002 he reached the semi-finals of the Vets' doubles as the youngest entrant, partnering the oldest, Geoff Prigmore. This season, he went one better and made the final with a new young partner, Dave Hebden! Last December, he had a hand in winning the President's Cup for the first time, partnering Iain de Weymarn.

So there's life in the old dog yet, and he reckons his two young children will keep him on his toes for a bit longer. Just don't ask him about the 'Try Your Strength' machine at Euro Disney – he might hit you (although you probably wouldn't notice!).



Phil Atkinson (left) with Iain de Weymarn: President's Cup Winners.

David Barnes