

## **Roger Freebairn 1936-2022**

The Rugby Fives Association is sad to report the death at the age of 86 of Old Oundelian Roger Freebairn. A long-standing member of the RFA and a life-long Jester, Roger was National Schools Singles and Doubles champion in 1954 and, 30 years later, National Veterans Champion with Alastair Mackenzie in 1984. He attended Oxford University, where, as a freshman in 1959, he played at Number One in the Varsity Match side beating Cambridge captain Simon Langdale in his Singles. He played again in 1961. Injury prevented him playing for Oxford in 1960 as it had prevented him successfully defending his Schools title in 1955.

Schoolmaster, poet, motorcyclist and fitness fanatic Roger was known to generations of players as skilled, powerful, durable and remarkably nimble for a big man. It was his impressive fitness -- he spoke of doing a thousand skips a day -- that enabled him to win the Vintage Singles in 1992. He was the last of that generation of great Oundle schoolboy players of the 40s and 50s -- Chris Reichwald, John Holroyd, Mike Allen, Mike Skliros, among others -- and an inspiration to countless players at his old school where he taught for over 30 years as Head of English and Housemaster. Previous to his arrival at Oundle to teach in 1966 Roger had had a stint at St Andrew's College, Grahamstown, making him one of that small band of UK Fives-players to have played the game in South Africa.

President of Oxford, Dick Warner, remembers him as "a super, hard hitting, intelligent player; a lot of fun to be on court with. And a lovely, gentle, thoughtful man, off-court, absolutely adored by all the Oundelians I ever talked to. Not just Oundelians - all Fives players enjoyed his company, his insights, his wisdom."

David Barnes writes: "Roger was a great schoolmaster. It was typical of him to play down his own achievements in Fives, which he played with great skill and tenacity. He kindly agreed to write an article about Oundle's Fives history for the RFA Handbook in 2003/04; and the few lines describing his singles and doubles wins as a schoolboy -- and, much later, in the Veteran and Vintage arenas -- are full of modesty and perceptive humour."

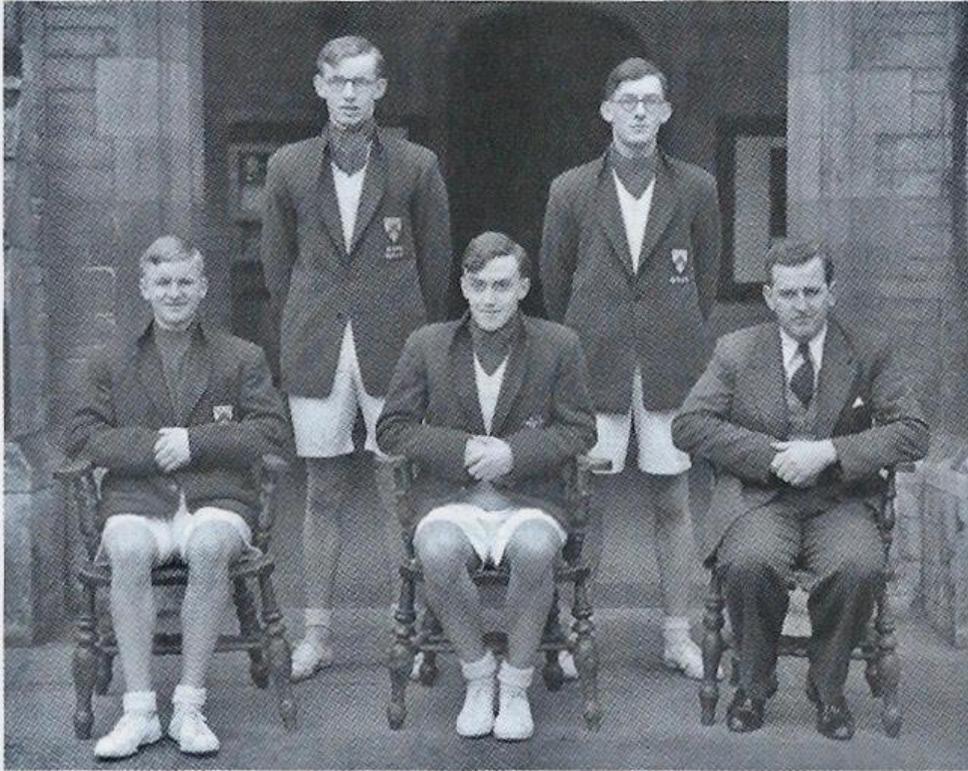
David Parlbly remembers: "Roger was house tutor at Laundimer when I was at school in the late 60's. Laundimer was one of the furthest houses from the Fives courts, so was never renowned for being good at Fives. Roger, however used to give us lifts up to the courts in his, I think, old Ford Escort, to encourage us to play. In time not only did our House IV win the House Fives trophy for several years on the trot, but it also provided the School 1st IV in its entirety.

I remember him hitting the ball with a tennis racket in the already fast old Oundle courts to help me deal with fast shots coming out of the back left hand corner. Not something Fives coaches can do in these days perhaps, but highly effective! Roger was a classic example of how a passionately enthusiastic Fives teacher can raise the standard of schoolboy Fives to very high levels. I owe him a huge amount, as do many other generations of Oundle Fives players."

The following words from the Old Oundelian Society give an idea of Roger's huge contribution to Oundle: "Roger's time at Oundle as a pupil, prefect, schoolmaster, Housemaster, Head of English and fundraiser was nothing short of remarkable, and he is remembered with great fondness. During his time at School he was captain of Fives, becoming National Schools singles and doubles champion, captain of swimming, and he took on a prominent role instructing others in the CCF, the latter of which inspired him to teach.

Roger returned to Oundle in 1966 as a teacher of English, which he taught with passion until his retirement in 1999, also later serving as Head of Department and running the Clare Society through his love of poetry. In addition to this, Roger was Housemaster of New House between 1970 and 1985; running the House with total commitment to those in his care. Roger's dedication to the School extends even further to include fundraising for the 1986 Appeal which raised £1,250,000 and enabled the building of the Sports Hall (now named The Acre) and the Needham building, as well as the conversion of the old gym into the Cripps Library -- a truly lasting legacy to all Oundelians."

Picture supplied by Roger Freebairn



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.



Roger (left, holding glass tankard) at the Od Dunstonians' Dinner in 1959



Runner-up in the Vintage Singles in 1995 – he won it in 1992



As many would remember Roger, cycling round the campus, here with Jerry Cooper in 2006