

The Rugby Fives Association
98th Annual General Meeting
Thursday 19th September 2024
General Secretary's Report

As the RFA approaches its 100th Anniversary of its foundation in 1927, there is no question that the very survival of Fives is under serious threat. The game is hanging on by a thread in several schools, and is in decline in others. The situation in London, where about half of all active players live, is particularly worrying. University College School, the alma mater of Edgar Cyriax, a founder member of the RFA, is planning to knock down its two courts in 2027 to make way for a major site development, and have, so far, resist even talking about replacements, though I understand that discussion about the scope of sports provision is likely. Whitgift's (1934) courts are in need of repairs which the school seems unwilling to fund, or to allow the RFA/Old Whitgiftians to fund, and they have turned down the offer of a coach next term, suggesting that they intend to let the sport die out. St Dunstan's seems to be pulling back from their intention to replace the courts demolished several years ago. Even St Paul's has considered turning two of its six courts into "bouldering" facilities, which would leave us without our only indoor 6 court facility. WE will find out in the coming term whether this proposal will go forward. The recent change in Government with the planned imposition of VAT on school fees has made the schools very nervous about spending money, and the development at Alleyn's which included plans for additional courts seems to have been postponed. Elsewhere, Clifton does its best to drive the West of England club out. Three of our Winchester Fives schools, Radley, Bradfield and Malvern, have little Fives activity, though Winchester have bucked the trend by building 6 courts (4 Winchester, 2 Rugby) into their new sports centre. This simply highlights our fundamental problem – Fives is a schools-based game, and there is no structure outside schools, and most school leavers have trouble finding somewhere to play even if they want to.

Last autumn, at the meeting held at Missenden, we recognised these threats, and the need to spend money, to prevent further decline. But how should this be spent? The overall financial situation of the RFA is quite healthy, but £100k in the bank can quickly disappear if not carefully managed and additional income has to be generated. We have made progress to modernise our offering to members, and our use of streaming of tournaments and better communications seems to be appreciated. This will hopefully lead increased membership (up to ~475) and players staying in the game. So, what more can be done?

Firstly, we must recognise that we can no longer simply rely on the private schools with courts to maintain them. Their focus is on major sports which they must offer, and not on secondary sports which they can get away without offering. There is pressure to provide more "modern" sports seen on the Olympics, such a bouldering, skateboarding etc. Their courts have to be seen by the Bursars as a source of revenue, not a drain. This means we,

the RFA, must be prepared to help fund the maintenance of the courts by offering an income, which is obtained from those playing on them. This is the basis of our proposal to St Paul's to allow them to keep 6 courts. We will have to pay to play. We need to engage parents paying for their children to attend these schools to understand the value of the sport. Now we have a group who have volunteered to be Regional Development Officers, we will be planning to meet with school officials to try to develop a collaborative relationship with them.

Secondly, we must increase the number of players and the demand for and awareness of the game. This cannot be achieved without widening the number of courts available. The only short-term solution to this is squash court Fives, and not just in schools, though they, and Universities, should be part of the plan. Part of the problem, despite the development of the squash court Fives ball, is that this isn't ideal for beginners, and requires the wearing of padded Fives gloves. This is OK for those who have played before, and those being supported to take up the game at schools, but to get other players to start we need to develop a cheap rubber ball with appropriate bounce that can be used with easily and cheaply available gloves (like those for cycling and weightlifting which are around £10 rather than £35). We are in discussion with Price's of Bath, the company which makes Eton Fives balls, to produce such a ball. We need to get Fives players out into squash clubs playing the game so that others can see it, and hopefully join in, eventually graduating to "proper" Fives courts. As there is an over-abundance of squash courts throughout the country, this shouldn't be impossible.

Thirdly, we have to continue to publicise the sport, particularly as we move forward with the squash court version, and let a wider audience know what it is. As our 100th Anniversary gets closer we have the perfect excuse to tell everyone about the game. The RFA is always looking for ideas on how to get our message across, not just the sport's virtues, but what it actually is – 4-wall handball. Anyone reading this with marketing experience and some ideas about how to do this, please get in touch

Fourthly, coaching. It is obvious that where a school (or club) has an enthusiastic member of staff prepared to lead the sport that pupils engage, and if they leave the game goes into rapid decline. You need look no further than St Paul's, Alleyn's, Winchester or Stamford to see that in action, and how the game fell off a cliff at Whitgift and Oundle when Nick Morgan and Tony Burrows retired. Current Fives players can contribute to this, and we are trying to encourage recent school leavers to contribute one or two afternoons a week where they are studying. The EFA have a similar problem, and we are working with them to try to find those looking to become coaches of other sports to learn the game and take it with them into schools.

As always, the analysis of the problem is clear, and we are not short of imagination or ideas to improve the situation. What we are desperately short of are people with time to implement the necessary steps. Anyone willing to give an occasional afternoon or weekend to help will be welcomed with open arms.

Chris Blakeley, General Secretary. September 2024