

The Long-Term Future of Fives

Stuart Kirby reflects on the vital role that courts play in the promotion of Fives

A great deal of effort is quite rightly put into preserving Fives at its existing locations. This means worrying about the state of the courts and the coaching together with much else. But even with such activity, we are looking at an inevitable if slow decline as courts are converted for other uses and demolished to make way for the new. Against this background we need a plan of how to build new courts in new locations, which will be treasured by the institutions that control them and so be both used and maintained.

What, where and how to build

The first question is **what type of organisation** should control the courts and **how do we get people playing?** There has been some talk of building courts within sports centres, but these generally work on a ‘build it and they will come’ basis and convincing a developer of the viability of including Fives does not seem practical. A part-time coach would be required on a permanent basis as part of a comprehensive programme to recruit new players.

My conclusion is that a better option is to build within schools where there is a plentiful supply of children, and to ensure that the school will do the coaching for which they already have a budget – both the recruitment and ongoing finances can be guaranteed. Many schools, particularly state schools, open their estate to the public after school hours and so the essential public access would not be too difficult if planned from the start.

The second question is **what to build?** A big problem with the old courts was that there were often only one or perhaps two built which can be used to occupy no more than a dozen children. This was OK in my day when as a 14 year-old I was taught the basics and pointed at our one court.

Today’s safeguarding rules mean that the children must be supervised at all times and so a single coach dealing with a small class is required, which is not

practical on financial grounds. Hence the requirement is for four or even six courts to occupy typical PE class sizes of 24 to 30 pupils.

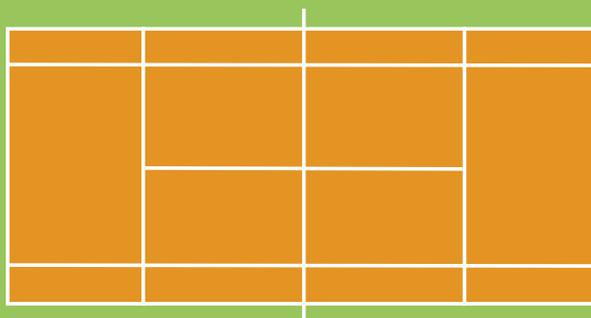
The third question is **how to build** the courts? Typically, courts were brick-built with concrete floors, rendered walls and solid back-walls. This is very expensive due to the high skill levels required, the specialist nature of the processes, and the fact that the 300mm thick walls are massive. Howard Wiseman, John Reynolds and myself flew to Cologne several years ago to visit a sports exhibition and particularly to talk to a producer of squash courts. The squash world has long since converted to using a modular construction in which 100mm

hollow-wall panels are factory-made, transported to site and assembled into a court. The walls are then filled with dry sand to provide solidity and glass backs come as standard.

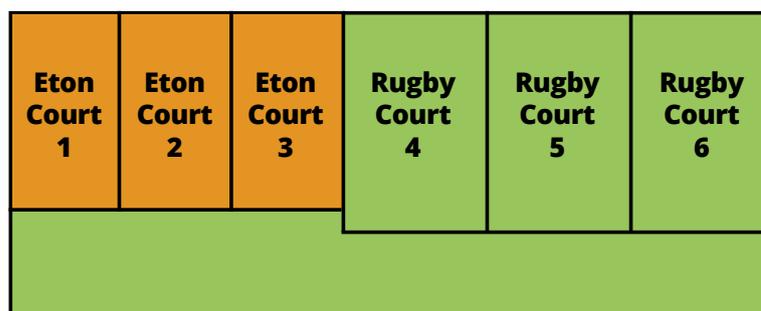
Hollow-wall courts need to be located inside a building which protects them from the elements. The best and least expensive option for this is to follow standard practice for similar tall but single-storey buildings such as industrial units or supermarkets, being a metal-framed building with panels and perhaps a single-skin brick wall around the outside. There are many competing companies that provide all of these services and so prices are competitive.

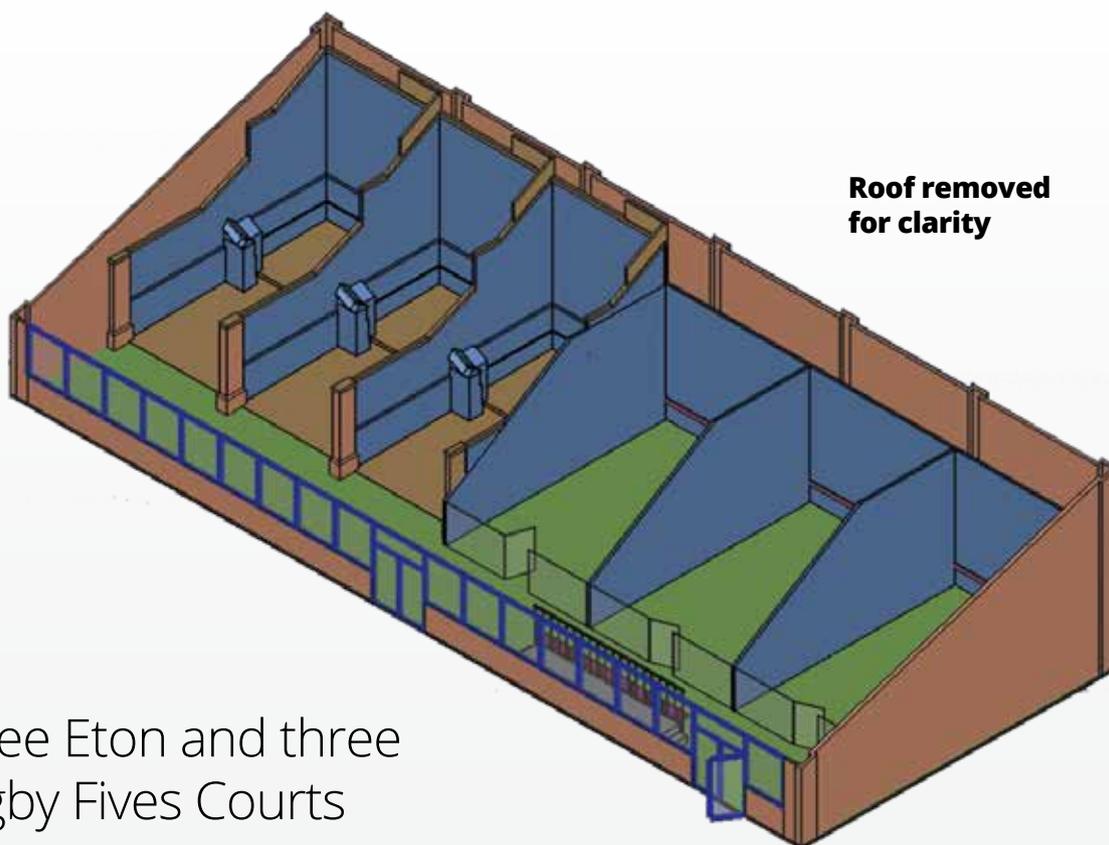
Space requirements of Fives versus Tennis

One Tennis Court



18.3 by 36.6 metres versus 12.5 by 31.1 metres





**Roof removed
for clarity**

Three Eton and three Rugby Fives Courts

Picking the perfect spot

The next part of the puzzle is to decide **in which schools would such a facility be successful?** The problem with most schools, including many independent ones, is that they have an excess of sports facilities and so it becomes a political issue as to which sports are promoted and which are ignored.

When the new director of sport decides that everyone is going to play hockey then Fives suffers and the courts are eventually demolished or re-purposed. We must place the facilities within schools that would value them, leading to the obvious conclusion that candidate schools must have a shortage of sports facilities, perhaps having to bus children to and from outside venues. This is a typical situation for inner-city schools with no room for playing fields and a requirement for compact local facilities. This plays to the strength of Fives, in which a sufficient number of courts can be fitted within the footprint of a single tennis court.

Howard Wiseman attended an RFA conference on the future of Rugby Fives at Great Missenden last year and proposed that the best facility would

consist of three Rugby Fives courts and three Eton courts all placed within an inner-city school. Howard emphasised that the building of fives courts needs to solve a problem for a school in order that they value and cherish the courts. This proposal was well received by all but particularly by the Derby representatives, who regularly play Rugby Fives on our Derby courts and Eton Fives on the newly refurbished courts at Repton.

Weather protection

An aspect of the design which greatly enhances the value of the facility is that the courts are enclosed so as to protect the players and spectators from the weather but are open to being viewed from outside the building through the use of glass. This advertises the activity within and allows the courts to be used during break times without the presence of a supervisor within the building. Thus Fives is returned as a playground activity while meeting the requirements of safeguarding.

This facility can be used to make Fives available in locations where it is now absent, with the first potential location being an inner-city school within Brixton.

It is also attractive for use at universities where Fives is currently absent, through placing the facility within an accessible local inner-city school.

The question of money

The final part of the problem is **how to finance?** It will probably be possible to access some grants, but the bulk of the money would have to come from donors to cover the estimated cost of £600k per facility – perhaps a little more for the first one. It's intended that the buildings will be standardised with the only variation being of the foundations and external appearance to fit in with local conditions. Thus much of the architectural work would not need to be repeated on subsequent builds.

Such a facility, if donated to a school, would require the school to meet strict requirements as part of a contract. This would include training their professional PE staff to play both Rugby and Eton Fives. They already have six Inset days set aside per year for such training with budgets to pay for them and so this proposal solves the problem of finding suitable coaches.