

Palatinate – Durham University's Official Student Newspaper

Sport in Spotlight: Fives

November 7, 2025

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From a sport played against the walls of churches and bell-towers by the masses to a generally private-school centred game, fives has taken on a real evolution throughout its extensive lifespan. To find out more about its history, I sat down with DU Fives club captain, Stuart Scott, to discuss what it's like to play the sport and how its many traditions continue to manifest themselves today.

In short, fives is a quick-fire English handball sport derived from the French game *jeu de paume* requiring both all-body fitness and use of both sides of the body. At its origins, it was known as widely accessible since all that was needed to play was a ball and a wall. Think wall ball with a football played in the school playground but instead hitting a ball against the wall with your hands.

With the popularisation of the game (and the damage to church windows) fives courts began being produced with the first being built in 1813, at the base of the church tower in West Pennard, Somerset. Then, in the beginning of the 19th century, fives became a popular pub sport, with courts built just outside and crowds gathering to watch matches. Towards the end of the same century, the sport then made its transition to private schools, where it remains most popular today.

Stuart explained that as the game was spread across the country “it got taken to different schools and villages who all developed their own rules”, and the most popular sets of rules today are Eton and Rugby fives, the latter of which is played by the DU team: “The rugby variety was originally codified at Rugby School and the court is similar to a squash court, just smaller. I believe that it's the most physical version of the game and needs a more precise shot with the style of game changing between the singles and doubles format”.

How Stuart got into the sport is also an interesting story. He described that he was not naturally good, or particularly interested in the more popular contact sports, specifically football and, at eleven years old, a friend invited him to fives, which he immediately took to. He explained that he enjoyed the “social aspect” (a central part of the sport) and he laughed as he joked that “suddenly the nerdy group were becoming fit” when regularly playing fives.

With regards to the game itself, Stuart emphasised the intensity of the sport and stated, “I have played a lot of sports, but none have got me more exhausted than fives.” The game is based around precise shot-making, making quick decisions to play the right shot at the right time and even spinning the ball “to curve it into the corners and make it difficult for the opponents”. Furthermore, high-level fives comes with its challenges as Stuart described playing “mentally-straining, 45-minute-long matches” and also, as a hard hitter of the ball, acquiring bruises that went through to the other side of his hand, despite wearing padded leather gloves.

And yet, although the sport is largely strenuous and demanding, Stuart was keen to emphasise the importance of sportsmanship in fives: “It is all about how you conduct yourself. Honesty is valued

highly, hence why the social side of fives is key, leading to the creation of a nice, positive environment.”

Stuart also added that many cross-discipline skills could be applied to fives, certifying the most important one as hand-eye coordination. When asked about a sport with similar characteristics (other than the obvious squash) he interestingly gave the example of ultimate frisbee, and specifically the forehand, asserting that the technique is “actually pretty similar” to that of fives.

However, despite the many attractions of fives, the amateur sport is suffering in popularity nowadays. “The main issue is the distribution of courts as many have been knocked down. Nonetheless, if you live near a fives court, the sport remains accessible. Equipment is minimal (simply gloves and a ball) and there’s no need to splash £100 on a racket for example.”

As DU Fives captain, Stuart seemed proud of the club’s commitment to this accessibility, welcoming new players while also giving those more experienced the opportunity to compete in university tournaments and challenge cups. DU Fives’ most recent victory came just a few weeks ago, winning silver in the National U25s Doubles competition at St Paul’s School in London.

While Stuart recognised “the sad truth that the player base is getting smaller”, there has been a revival of the sport in the local community with both Durham City Club and DU promoting fives in local schools and teaching kids how to play. A sport with such rich history and tradition is right on your doorstep here at Durham, with DU fives open to players of all levels, so, in the words of Stuart, and ones that I share myself, “give it a go!”
