

History of the Formation of the Rugby Fives Association by Geoffrey Rimmer

This account is the transcript of a tape made by Geoffrey Rimmer in December 1980 at the request of the President of the RFA, Ron Colville. Geoffrey Rimmer served on the Rugby Fives Association as a committee member from the first Annual General Meeting in 1928 until he became President in 1960.

I first played Fives at Dulwich College in 1918, nine years before the formation of the Rugby Fives Association. I have been asked to record some of the early history of the game, leading to the formation of the Association in 1927. It is difficult today to envisage the conditions of those early days when, of course, there was no artificial lighting in any court and play was therefore confined to the daylight hours; there are records in school magazines of bad light stopping play. There was very little chance of ever playing Fives after one had left school or university, unless you became a schoolmaster or a doctor at a teaching hospital which happened to have Fives courts. There were no clubs as we know them today, only certain schools had matches with their old boys. At school, no one taught or coached the game: one learnt to play by finding another boy who had played with his brother or some elder boy and from him you learnt how to play and how to score. It is quite extraordinary that there were no official rules, for the game had been played for decades at public schools and grammar schools all over the country. Some of the earliest games were played before 1890, although at Dulwich our first fixture was against St. Paul's in 1894. However, St. Paul's as well as Bedford Modern, Whitgift and Merchant Taylors', to name a few, were playing inter-school matches before 1890.

The basic rules, one of which was that your opponent threw up the ball for you to start a rally, were observed by most of the schools which we played. However, there were differences of opinion on the scoring and what happened at game ball and changing over in the doubles and at the end of a rally, etc., etc. Standardisation of the rules was, therefore, one of the main reasons for forming an Association. My knowledge of the courts at this time was confined to those in and around London, but every court was a different size. All of them were bigger than the six small courts we had at the College, the largest being those at Christ's Hospital in Horsham. In between were courts longer and narrower, with and without hazards, covered and uncovered; some with low back walls, some with higher back walls and some with no back wall at all. The height of the board was also considerably different in various courts. I have in mind the following: St. Paul's and Alleyn's original courts, University College School, the College of St. Mark and St. John, University College School, Bart's Hospital, Hackney Downs, Sir Walter St. John's, King's School at Rochester, Epsom College, the old Merchant Taylors' courts in London, and mid-Whitgift school, Croydon. As a matter of interest, fifty years before the Rugby Fives Association was founded, Eton Fives players formed their Association and standardised their courts and rules. If only a Rugby Fives Association had been formed then this mixture of courts would not have occurred. Eton, incidentally, also had an Eton Fives song, of which I have the music and words.

Apart from standardisation of the rules and courts, I think the greatest desire of all of those of us who wanted to form an Association was to encourage the game and create opportunities to continue to play Fives after leaving school. It was rather remarkable that, in and about 1923, there were a number of devoted players who had the same ideas. V.E.A. Bowley and H.D. Beevers, two Old Sinjuns, had permission to use their school courts on Saturday afternoons, and they formed the Old Sinjuns Club. Bowley, a schoolmaster, arranged one or two fixtures with schools. About the same time, a famous school pair, P.A. Malt and E.L. Bailey, left school and became schoolmasters and soon, with John Nye and others, formed the Alleyn Old Boys Fives Club. Also, another well-known

pair, K.W.Millage and C.R.Black, had left school and with another school master, A.H.Buck, were having occasional games of Fives at Christ's Hospital, Horsham. At University College School in Hampstead, the famous Dr. Cyriax and his old friend L.L.Marsden had been playing for more than thirty years with other members of the U.C.S Old Boys. In 1923 I got permission to play on our school courts at Dulwich on Sunday mornings with a friend of mine. And we were soon joined by others who lived near the school. It was a couple of years before I knew about the clubs I have mentioned. It happened that two of my Fives-playing friends were fellow gymnasts and in 1925 the Old Alleynian Gymnastic Club had a competition against another gymnastic club, a section of an athletic club. After this competition one of my friends, Willy Schlund, accepted the challenge of a Fives match, as this club was about to form a Fives section. The club in question was the Clove Club. The following year, although we were not an official club, I took an O.A. Fives IV to Hackney Downs, three-quarters of the team being gymnasts: Willy Schlund, Harry Hicks and myself, and the fourth was J.H.White. This was our first Fives fixture, and also one of the first fixtures of the Clove Club. It was here that I met W.H.Pett and his well-known partner Puckle, and it was through Bill Pett that I was introduced to Dr. Cyriax, who invited an O.A. team to play University College School Old Boys. It was then that I learnt about the newly formed clubs I have mentioned and Dr. Cyriax's idea of forming an Association.

In 1924 a meeting had been held at Queen's Club with a view to forming an Association for Fives and some other ball games. However, nothing came of this as far as Rugby Fives was concerned. Dr. Cyriax had attended this meeting. In 1926 the Old Sinjuns were playing Alleyn Old Boys and after the match discussed the question of forming an Association and decided to advise Dr. Cyriax that they would back him in this venture. On the June 15, 1927 representatives of just four clubs met at King's College. Of these, Old Sinjuns provided an Honorary Secretary and an Honorary Treasurer, namely Bowley and Beevers; U.C.S. Old Boys provided a Chairman, Dr. Cyriax; Alleyn Old Boys and Clove Club – Malt, Nye and Pett – completed the committee, with L.L.Marsden, who, being in the legal profession, assisted with the Constitution. The wording of the objects of the Association was "to act as a control authority to formulate, alter and add to the rules governing the game of Fives". The first Annual General Meeting was held at 41 Welbeck Street in October 1927, the home of Dr. Cyriax, as reported in the Association Handbook. At that meeting I was elected onto the committee, although Old Alleynians had no official club.

In 1929 I heard that Dulwich College were proposing to build squash courts and three new Fives courts. F.A.Vogler, who had joined our Sunday morning games, accompanied me to a meeting with the Master of Dulwich College, at which we asked whether we might form an O.A. Club and play in the evenings when the new courts were built. I also begged for the old Fives courts to have electric light put in. The Master was most cooperative and assured us that this would be done and that the courts would be built to the specifications of the Association; we were working on the dimensions at that time. The lighting of the old courts was done very soon afterwards, so that I had a fixture list going before the Club was officially formed in 1930. I am pretty certain that our Fives courts were the first to be built to the specifications of the Association because they were built in 1930, although the Association's specifications were not publicised until 1931. The club soon had over 100 members and was pretty successful. In fact, it produced all four finalists in the Cyriax Cup in 1936. What a tragedy that all these courts were destroyed by bombing in the war. The advance in Fives in the 1930s was terrific. The purpose of the Association was fulfilled. The rules and court dimensions had been standardised. The Association had a big fixture list, including tours to the Midlands, county games and hospital games. There were even inter-bank matches. At the time we were forming the Association J.F. Burnet was busy organising a nomadic Fives club which he had established while still at St. Paul's School. This club, the Jesters, was becoming one of the greatest clubs in the United Kingdom. The desire in all of us in the Association was to provide Fives for players after leaving

school. In 1930 if you belonged to your own club or to the Jesters or to the Association, you had plenty of opportunity of keeping up your Fives. Three factors in the progress of Rugby fives were Dr. Cyriax, electricity providing lighting, and schoolmasters. At some time, the Association had three headmasters on the list of vice-presidents.

A few words about Dr. Cyriax. He was really a remarkable character. Being beaten at school by a Bedford Modern boy in 1890, he was not beaten again for 37 years when he came up against Pussy Malt in 1927. He loved Fives and he wanted everyone else to enjoy the game. He had great charm and was a most hospitable man. He was also a great cyclist and twice cycled to the Arctic Circle. I recall one cold winter's night, when he was over 70, he cycled to Dulwich from Welbeck Street, played a Fives match, took a cold shower, put on his clothes without drying himself, then cycled back to the West End. When he was seventy-five, we gave him a dinner at the Savoy Hotel and he arrived on his bicycle from 41 Welbeck Street. He also spoke several languages, including Swedish. He had spent some time in Sweden and was a great believer in what we used to call Swedish exercises. This was a form of PT, and he was a very powerfully built man. Amongst other things he composed music and had in fact produced and written the music for a complete opera, which was performed. Although he was thirty years older than any of us who formed the Association, he treated us all as equals and over the years we had many happy meetings at 41 Welbeck Street. On one occasion when I was passing this address, he was hailing a taxi and more or less pushed me in, saying "Come on, I'm taking you out to tea". It transpired that he had written a waltz and having cured a saxophonist in the Savoy Orpheians of some pain in his back, the patient had offered to have Dr. Cyriax's waltz played by the band at the Savoy. I felt a little embarrassed sitting at a table at the Savoy Hotel with this elderly gentleman. However, the band eventually played the waltz and Cyriax rose to his feet and bowed to the rest of the people in the room. I am indebted to H.A.Cocking, who was the last of Dr. Cyriax's Fives partners, for some information about the U.C.S. and about Dr. Cyriax. The first Fives match recorded against U.C.S. was in 1879 against a team from Christ's College, Finchley. Apparently the Christ's College Fives court was an open court and very different from University College School's court in Gower Street, so that they played two fixtures, one on each other's courts, before they totalled up the score to determine who were the winners. The U.C.S. Old Boys formed their club in 1912, but their only fixture was with the school twice a year. On the occasion in 1912 when the old boys played the school Cyriax was the star player and was witnessed by his father and mother.

I have mentioned light stopping play. Well, on one occasion, in a match between U.C.S. and Christ College, Finchley, they had a lost ball. Apparently it went down a drainpipe. Dr. Cyriax, of course, had played all his Fives in the early days at University College School when they were in Gower Street. They moved out to Hampstead in 1907. Dr. Spencer, who was the Headmaster, built the original University College School courts and he was very keen on the singles game. And for this reason, those courts were very much on the narrow side. In the meantime, new courts have been built with some money left by Dr. Cyriax to the school. Although I was not a great player myself, I was fortunate enough to have played with or against most of the great players in these early years. I remember one happy occasion when I played with Pussy Malt in an exhibition game at the opening of some new courts at St. Dunstan's in Catford; Dr. Cyriax also played on this occasion. Another was an RFA match for a team of eight against Sutton Valence soon after their courts were built. Three of the members of this team of eight became Presidents of the Association many years later [John Armitage, Brian Griffiths and Geoffrey Rimmer]. Another occasion was a tour to Halifax and Leeds, where I played with John Battersby at Heath School and Dr. Cyriax played in the team against Leeds University. The highlight of my club's fixtures was an annual Boxing Day event at Dulwich College against the Old Blues of twelve-a-side, followed by a roast pork lunch at the Railway Tavern in Brixton. Another annual event was our supper in London, which consisted of three courses and cost

today's equivalent of 17½ new pence. The feature of this supper was the sing-song with Ken Millage at the piano.

Fives balls were purchased from a firm of Jeffreys Malings, which had been established in 1852. The original owner, Henry Malings, had become adept at winding balls when confined to the debtors' prison in Fleet Street, the chief occupation of the prisoners being rackets or handball, which was, in fact, a form of Fives. Ball-making was a handicraft. No machinery was involved other than hand presses. Strips of wool were wound round a small piece of cork. The wool was wet and periodically shaped in a press until a certain size, then it was wound with reels of worsted by hand. This required great skill to attain the shape. In fact, an apprenticeship of at least two years was necessary to learn this craft. Finally, a cover of thin leather like kid was stitched by women working at home in Woolwich. The wool being used when I visited the factory was offcuts from Belgian Army greatcoats from the Great War. Balls were made in the factory for rounders, rackets, Eton Fives and Rugby Fives. The workpeople knew 'Fives balls' as those made specially for the Eton game – Rugby Fives balls were referred to as 'bench balls', this being a reference to the King's Bench in which the original Mr. Malings had been confined. These balls, made by hand, were retailed at 6 pence, the equivalent of 2½ pence today. I used to buy them by the gross from the factory considerably cheaper, but promised not to divulge this. When the cover started wearing, a penny was allowed for the return of the old ball.

This concludes the first recording I have ever made. I only hope it gives some impression of the pre-war game of Rugby Fives and, in fact, the pre-Great War period as well.

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