

Steve Ashton 1959-2026



Steve Ashton (centre) with Wayne Enstone, Geoff Sherratt, Brian Jones, Bob Holland and Mick Ayres at the Wood Cup on the Bank of England courts, March 1987

When Steve Ashton came down to London to begin his Fives journey, playing in the National Schools U16 competition at St Paul's in 1975, little did his host Dave Hebden expect that in future years Steve and one of his partners from the Manchester YMCA Club -- Wayne Enstone or Tony Wynn -- would regularly form opponents in the later stages of tournaments national and regional.

Young Steve's appearance in what was in those days known as the Colts Singles, representing Greatstone Secondary Modern School, was warmly welcomed in the RFA's report, but his draw in the first round was not so kind, a match against the Paul's number one and second seed. Steve did well to get 4 points in the second game. He may not have noticed that the report listed him as G.Ashton.

A year later, in 1976, Steve was back with his mentor Wayne, this time reaching the quarter-final of the U18 Singles representing South Trafford College. The following year Steve won the West of England Schools U18 Singles, so it was no surprise to Dave Hebden that in the same year, in his third appearance at the National Schools Championships, Steve reached the final of the U18 Singles, losing in three hard-fought games to Kim Smith of Bradfield College.

Progress was rapid thereafter. In 1978 Steve and Tony Wynn won the Universities Doubles title representing Manchester University. Together they then won the North of England Doubles in 1978 and 1979, Steve's first regional successes. Changing partner, Steve won the West of England Doubles with Wayne Enstone three years running (1981-83) and in 1983 the Yorkshire Doubles with Wayne. Steve also picked up the South West Doubles title with Tony Wynn in 1985 and the North West Doubles in 1987, on his home courts, playing with Wayne.

The most sought-after title is, of course, the National Doubles, played since 1926 for the Cyriax Cup. Twice Wayne & Steve were runners-up, in 1983 and 1984. In 1985 Wayne paired up with Tony Wynn, but came second once more, all three times losing to Ian Fuller & Dave Hebden. In 1986 Steve & Wayne won at their third attempt, finally beating Fuller & Hebden 11-15, 15-8, 15-6. Of Steve Dave Hebden says "Yes, I have some very vivid memories of Steve. What a talented player! He was a member of six Wood Cup winning YMCA teams - 1983-1987, and 1992. Only five players have played in more winning finals. The so-called 'World Championships' were only held for three years from 1983 to 1985. The Singles was won each year by Wayne, and the Doubles by Wayne with Steve. I remember Steve as a real character, and he will be greatly missed. But he will live on in our memories. He had a diving retrieve shot at the front of the court that was truly unique to him!"

John Beswick, whose father Fred recruited Steve, writes with similar great affection: "At the YM we knew him simply as "Ashy". Great company, full of fun, he was a brilliant, flamboyant player who loved to entertain, a true natural two-handed player, who volleyed with both of them. He had three trademarks: the full length dive to the front of the court, both feet off the floor; the shot down the line but his head would go the opposite way, the no-look shot; and he loved to chase back to the back wall when lobbed and the blast the ball back to the front wall off the back wall. He had a cheeky side to him: he always loved that on a trophy the engraving read Ashton then Enstone!"

Peter Woods totally agrees: "Steve was well loved by all the Y Club for being a genuine character. I shall miss that cheeky smile. Never arrogant on court, even though he had the ability to make our game look simple, and in his time could have been number one."

Wayne too has only good memories: "Fabulous to be on court with, so exhilarating with such a variety of angle and short spin shots, very difficult to read, Dave and Ian would agree for sure. I was only thinking of him when I played with John East at the Grand Masters recently, I had the best spectator position watching their brilliant shot play, a real privilege."

For Ian Fuller "Steve was a player of fantastic natural ability who could play any shot in the book -- and more! Playing against him was always a case of expecting the unexpected!"

Though never a winner of a senior Singles title, Steve was a very good singles player who, in the 1984-85 National Singles Rankings, achieved a high point of #5, this after Enstone, Fuller, Hebden, and Wynn. The fact that this was achieved at age 24 demonstrates his status in the game at that point. With him winning the National Doubles in 1986 it is clear that Steve was at his Fives-playing peak in the mid-eighties. Sadly he rather drifted away from mainstream Fives after this point, although he did continue to play at a high level for a period, e.g. winning the Wood Cup in 1992.


