



The Rugby Fives Association
100th Annual General Meeting
Thursday 17th September 2026
General Secretary's Report

As James Tilston will outline in his report, the RFA is in good financial shape despite one unexpected major expenditure and three substantial grants this year. We approach our 100th Anniversary as a dynamic and active supporter of what is inevitably a niche sport. We have over 500 members, of whom 10% are women and 40% are 30 or younger. This year will see a major drive to spread Squash Fives, initially as a way of keeping existing players in the sport, and later as a way to introduce players new to it.

Starting with issues mentioned in my report from last year I would like to point to the number of players I see using the new Killshot gloves and the generally favourable comments I have received on them. My own pair, the last prototype rather than a “production” model, has now been in use for the best part of two seasons and is still in good shape though the Velcro wrist strap is beginning to get a bit tired. The new Zulaika balls from Spain are now also on sale with Killshot in packs of three, at a similar price per ball as the Wiseman, which also continues in production. They are not exactly the same but, as with any handmade product, it's very hard to be entirely consistent. The manufacturer is open to making small adjustments if we can provide consistent feedback on the change we would like.

Mount Kelly are renovating their third court with the help of a £6K contribution from the RFA, and the complete renovation of the Bedford School courts, work on which is expected to be completed around the end of this month, has been assisted by a £10K RFA grant, though the bulk of the funds has come from alumni, encouraged by Peter Mellor. The renovation of five courts at Stoke Newington was completed successfully, and the RFA contributed £17.5K, £10K from available funds, and the rest from personal contributions. Work started to upgrade the Edinburgh Academy courts, but came to an abrupt halt when structural problems were discovered. We have recently received the extremely heartening news that the school will invest an anticipated £80K to make the courts safe and useable, though funding for the planned improvements will have to come from elsewhere. The President has written to the Rector and COO of the Academy to express our thanks for their commitment to the sport.

Although it has been widely commented on before, I should also record the very special National Schools tournament at St Paul's this year at which Freddie Hammond Giles became only the second player in history (after Peter Mellor 1960-62) to win the National Schools singles title 3 times. He added a triple in the doubles (with Josh Ferro), and his younger brother Joey added singles and double titles in the U16s. All this was recorded by a professional photographer and is now available on-line on the RFA YouTube channel, and if you ever wanted evidence of how much these pupils enjoy themselves at these events, watch that video. In the last few days, we have also received the news that Shrewsbury House a preparatory school in Surbiton has renovated its two courts and plans to offer Fives again for the first time in many years.

The worst setback this year has been the loss of the Manchester YMCA courts. Nothing to do with the flooding last year, after which the courts were eventually repaired and reopened, but a decision by the Y Club that they wanted the space for other things. Fives at the YMCA started in 1911. There were two narrow, non-standard courts at the old YMCA building on Peter Street. When this building was sold in 1990 as part of the move to the current Castlefield site, the RFA worked with the Y Club management to obtain a Sports Council grant of (originally) £71.5K. to pay for two extra courts with the intention of creating a 4 court NW hub for Fives. There were issues with the construction of the first two courts which weren't "tanked" properly and therefore leaked, the YMCA got into financial difficulties and, with the complicity of the Sports Council, the grant money was swallowed into the general costs of completing the Y Club, and the extra two courts were never started. Unfortunately, as we recently discovered, obtaining the grant did not give us any long term right of use over the courts. The Manchester Fives club received a letter in late April telling them that the courts were to be closed to Fives at the end of June and repurposed for additional gym space. Their argument was that the space was underused and their gym membership has increased. They would not consider any discussion of ways to share the space, and dismissed arguments about charitable purpose, these being the only currently useable courts in Manchester. Despite a vigorous local campaign including a petition, letters to local MPs and councillors and around £15k of legal costs, the RFA was unable to find a way to save the courts for Fives. We believe that Manchester is a crucial link between north and south, and we will be looking to see if we can either find some disused courts or consider building some at or near schools which could use them. The lesson of this sad story, and other closures of Fives courts over the last decades, is that they need to be very well used and have insiders who are supportive – the management of the Y Club was clearly not interested.

As I reported last year, we are still making painfully slow progress with on Squash Fives, still mainly due to the very poor service that we have had from Price's of Bath. They did eventually come up with a subsequent prototype, but on testing at this year's Jesters Tour, the conclusion was that it was still too bouncy, and didn't have enough forward momentum. On advice from Stuart Kirby we have proposed copying the size and bounce characteristics of the current hand-made ball which is based on a traditional ball but coated in "plastidip" rather than leather. Peter Grant has looked for another company with such specialist knowledge to work with but has so far not found any interest.

We are still looking for an archivist to succeed David Barnes. The physical archive is currently in the loft of the General Secretary.

Chris Blakeley September 2026