

NATIONAL CLUB KNOCKOUT 1996

This year fifteen teams entered and the finals weekend was played at St. Paul's on 20/21 April. In the first round proper Old Dunstonians pushed Manchester YMCA with an exciting singles between John Beswick and.....

Enough. Watching fives is tedious and writing about it can be equally dull. The results tell their own story and there were not too many sub-plots. Basically Manchester were easily the best team. And so they won.

That's out of the way, then. Leaving a bit of a gap to fill with something interesting. Bring on the dancing girls etc. A fresh start:-

RFA Newsletter Summer 1996

WHICH IS THE BEST SHOT IN FIVES?

Success in sport is easily measured. That is the point. You play within whatever the rules are, you get runs/goals/wickets/ to the finishing line first and the resulting statistics tell the story. We know that Michael Johnson is a better 400 metre runner than Roger Black because we saw it with our own eyes. Over the season, Man U. are the best Premiership side, and so on.

But for sports fans, mostly obsessives, statistics are not enough. They like to debate the unprovable. For instance, by comparing players from different eras; was Laver a better player than McEnroe? (I say no, but would because I never saw Laver play. Also, I reckon that most people think that the golden era of all sport was when they themselves were between 12 and 20 (and of course that is when there were all the characters)).

Or they compare the incomparable; is Brian Lara a better cricketer than Shane Warne? Even worse is the recent TV series comparing people from different sports. Is Nick Faldo greater than Barry John, I think was one.

There is no "right" answer. The sport here is in the debate. In fives there is less scope for this essentially pointless exercise than in most sport. First, because it is not a team sport a whole facet of the pastime is denied us. The real passion-killer, though, is Mr. Enstone. He is the best now and I suspect there are not too many who would argue that he was not the best ever. The number who can claim to have seen contenders at their peak is diminishing all the time, too.

But a suitably vague question to while away the pints is "what is the best fives shot?"

I don't mean in the abstract i.e whether a cross-court is better than a lob. Nor are we talking one-offs. The shot with which I left Messrs. Carr and Roberts flat-footed in the doubles last year at Bristol looked a pretty special disguised drop shot into the nick from the back of the court. But the fact that it was an intended drive which came off the thumb detracted a touch from its innate quality. The breathtaking shots are generally mishits or better than the player - if he is honest - intended. The test is: could he do it again? If not, it doesn't count for our purposes. So what is in the frame is a Hebden right hand drive, an East boast and so on.

What do we mean by best? That is where the fun starts. Put Robin Perry mid right-hand court with a reasonably quick ball coming at him at a good height and slowish pace and he can hit it back harder than anybody, albeit not particularly low. At least half the time it will be a winner - either hitting the back wall on the full or the opponent on the full. Not subtle but effective. But it requires him to be set, detracting from the quality. A solid opening contender but nothing more.

Put Neil Roberts in the same position and he won't hit the ball quite as hard (I know you don't believe me but it is true) but move him three feet back, have the ball come at him faster and lower - in other words, make the conditions less ideal - and he'll hit the ball virtually as hard and much lower and closer to the deep side wall nick. He can play the shot equally well with his left. Doesn't help in this context, though; versatility counts for nothing - this is a one shot challenge. That's a pretty good shot though.

Both these shots rely predominantly on strength. The best shot must have more to it than just that, surely. A bit of guile, perhaps. Deception, even. Put Jerry Schroeter in the same position and he can play the shot almost as well as Neil, but with a little more lift off the front wall (more top spin because he takes the ball early with a straight arm). But, as his opponent is rocking back on his heels in preparation, Jerry can turn his wrist out, cut the pace down marginally and boast the ball into the side wall. Loaded with spin it brushes the front wall and skews into the other side wall. Lots of people can do it but Jerry does it best, turning his wrist that little bit later and getting more spin. A good shot. But a bit risky; if it catches the nick, end of rally. If not, it sets up a relatively easy kill.

But enough of power shots. The best shots involve changes of pace and touch. Wayne's block volley (with either hand) into the nick for instance. Especially the one away from, rather than across, his body with the wrist turned outwards.

Then there's the Ian Fuller cross-court (or reverse angle as some people call it). He can play it from anywhere on the court

with either hand but the most effective is the volleyed one with the left hand. But it is a suspect shot under pressure and it is not a shot for all courts. Only on the Alleyn's courts, where it hugs the front wall, is it an odds-on rally winner. Elsewhere the extra foot from the front wall gives the opponent time.

But these are all shots played by lots of players, albeit these are the best exponents. Ideally the best shot should be unique to one player. And it has to have flair and be good to watch. Though I am perhaps guilty of writing the spec. to fit the target, the Layton hanging drop volley at the front of the court fulfills all these requirements. Difficult to describe but if you've seen it you'll know the one I mean. It has imitators but only one master.

So, this week that is what I reckon is the best shot in fives. Having said that, there is the Enson left hand drive volley, the Roberts short serve, the Buchanan "cut" drop shot etc. etc..

Hours of endless fun.

BJH