

Edward Llewellyn Bailey, always known as 'Bill', was one of the best players in the Alleyn Old Boys Club before and after the War. He was in the winning Cyriax Cup pair on six occasions, with three different partners, two of whom, PA Malt and JF Pretlove, were singles champions as well. Bill never won the singles, but reached the final in 1949. The following is based on an article published in the 1977/78 RFA Club newsletter, when Bill was 71, with some details added from a taped interview five years later.

A septuagenarian remembers ...

I remember ... the first ball I ever got up from the back wall at Alleyn's. I was 13, the year 1919. In those austere days we wore any old woollen or kid gloves stuffed with a handkerchief. Bruises were frequent, chiropodist's felt was unknown. I myself never resorted to raw meat; the eventual bloody pulp was too revolting and smelly. In my schooldays you hit hard all the time, up and down. To do a gentle shot out of reach was considered dirty play. If you accidentally did one, you apologised and offered a let. Being no gentleman myself, I took a share in changing all that, so I can claim to have invented and exploited what we called the 'cross-shot', a nicely controlled gentle shot off the opposite side wall that skimmed the board to die away under it.

I remember ... certain old rules of the game. For instance, to start the rally the player who was 'up' always threw the ball up for his opponent to strike. Gradually this changed, and all the players came to throw the ball up for themselves ... except die-hard me! A local rule (I think it was at Haileybury) was that if you were 'down' and facing game-ball, you could serve straight at the front wall, wherever you liked. In doubles, any one player could receive all the opponents' services himself, with Rabbit, his partner, keeping out of the way in a corner and only emerging to hit his obligatory service. In the Cyriax final of 1930 my partner, Jack Scott, the Cambridge don, and I were winning when he went lame, so I went on to play virtually a single, to a losing end.

I remember ... being on the winning side, too! I have won the Cyriax six times: three with 'Pussy' Malt, two with Mitchell and once with Pretlove, losing the final twice. Malt won the Jesters' Cup three times. He and I once appeared in the press as Malt and Barley ... a joke or a misprint? I never knew. I remember Jock Burnet organising the first Jesters' Rugby Fives Singles. Freddie Vogler, on learning that the rounds were to be played on weekday mornings, commented: 'Ha! It's for the Aristos!'

I remember ... the stimulating diversity of the courts of yore, those Gilbertian courts with eccentric buttresses, no roofs, no back walls. Whitgift Middle's courts were enormous unroofed pits. The possibility of the following shot always fascinated me: you could wait for the right ball near the front wall and then hit it with all your might at an acute angle up the wall into the sky so that it plummeted down at the back of the court. Somewhere, I forget where, they had prismatic buttresses. The Hackney Downs School court backed right onto the main railway line. I remember playing there to the accompaniment of the ear-splitting hiss of engines that had halted hard by. Then there were the courts at Queen Mary College. The bottom of the door, not being flush with the floor, left a gap of some inches which naturally attracted the play – but there were no bonus points for holing out. St Mark's Chelsea had a narrow gap at the back in the party wall which led from one court to the other. Inevitably, the ball found its way through that gap.

Now I put this problem to you. I once saw Roy Birmingham hit this service: the ball hit the side wall, flew to the other side wall and then onto the front wall above the board. What would you, as umpire, have ruled?

For me, the Golden Age was the period between the wars. Clubs really flourished then. My own Old Boys' Club had some 60 members, and there was play every night – and on Christmas morning. I remember our automatic ball dispenser. You inserted a coin, pulled a knob, and out of its maw came a veritable 'objet d'art' – not the travesty of today. And what coin did we insert? Guess ... a sixpence! The crisp crack of that ball on the wall was as exhilarating as the crack of leather on willow.

I remember ... our legendary Dr Cyriax. There must be few left who, like me, not only saw him play but played in the same court with him. He already seemed a septuagenarian. He was quick and slightly nervous of speech, but quite static with age. His venerable bulk with its comely paunch remains clear in my mind's eye. Put a beard and a cricket cap on him, and there was Dr Grace. His hands seemed as large as frying pans, exercising magnetic attraction on the ball. His shorts hung low, threatening to reveal all. He would invite a friend to stand at the back of that corridor-like University College School court to watch him play. He brought lets to a fine art. One learnt to give him plenty of swinging room. To concede him a let was an honour, to offer him a let on the least occasion or none was a privilege and duty. After a game, he would strip, go at once under a cold shower, and, still dripping, dress and cycle off on his famous bike into a freezing winter night back to Welbeck Street. It was that same bike on which he would cycle beyond the Arctic Circle. He was a talented musician and composed operas for the local society. We held our AGMs at his prestigious Welbeck rooms. There was charisma for you. No, that word is now outworn: it was Gravitas that presided there.

I remember ... Philip Malt, my Cyriax Cup partner, whom I equate with Jack Hobbs. At school, we dubbed him 'Pussy'. Of slight build and fair-haired, his style of play was indeed feline: not robust, his skill lay in accurate placing and lightning reaction, and his left hand was as deft and deadly as a cat's paw. Where he was, no company could remain serious. He was ready to go anywhere, anytime, to play anyone. He had the disarming knack of doing and saying the outrageous: he would enter the portals of the Home Office munching an apple, and he even presumed to beat the Doctor on his own court! I remember the time when in the Jesters' Cup, after a hard game, I lost to Jack Davies (you know, the man who bowled Bradman for a duck). Pussy cried to the spectators: 'It's alright, chaps, there's still me!' As the prototype Muhammad Ali, he went on to prove himself the mostest, bestest of them all. But then, 'Whom the gods love ...'. At 30, on the crest of his wave, mortality overtook him. I remember he turned up to watch me play. With one lung deflated, he pleaded: could he come in to play just one shot. It was his last. I can't help comparing this with Robin Hood's last shot from his bow. But much as Pussy would have liked it, we hardly could have buried him under the court floor. You couldn't keep this good man down!

From the gallery of my memory I limit myself to only a few more notables. I remember the Oundjian brothers: dour, tough, tenacious, with the Test Match attitude to the game. But for the 1939 war, they would have gone far. A game with the Old Paulines always left us fully extended – but we had luscious buttered toast and rich cakes afterwards at the genteel tea-shop at Baron's Court. I salute Rimmer, a dignified, phlegmatic, tall eminence; Griffiths, the paragon of gentlemanly modesty and tact; Puckle and Pett, a congenial Tweedle-dum and -dee; John Nye, the perfect committee man and repository of Fives lore, who sometimes played bare-handed, the crack of the ball on his bare palm being exquisitely excruciating. And, pre-eminently, John Armitage, with his shy, wry smile. He was the

Neville Cardus of Rugby Fives: a scholar, cultured, once a winner of the Jesters' Cup, a dedicated advocate of our game who devoted his journalist's expertise and deep research into Fives and Squash for the production of his magazine and the foundation of our archives. He elevated all this with his gift for fine writing. What about a cup in his memory? A Ladies' Cup? If not for play, then for service to our cause? Let that idea germinate... We lost a great man when he departed to join the Doctor, Pussy Malt and John Nye. Finally, I must mention Vogler again. For me, he was quintessential Beery Four, with its vast outgive of sweat and vast intake of alcohol. I can see him still as a jolly monk, astride a barrel, waving a tankard, his face beaming with bonhomie.

In my time I have suffered my humiliations. Once, when we were leaving the courts at Tonbridge School, a boy asked me whether I played much. You will appreciate my shame, for my partner, Mitchell, and I were shortly to win the Cyriax Cup. In the final of the Jesters' Cup, Barry Trapnell beat me, one game being to love. Then, at Cambridge, my tutor, hearing I was in the Varsity team, invited me to partner him against two of his colleagues on the Eton courts at Christ's. At that time, I was one of the hardest hitters in the Rugby game. In my vanity I thought I would show them a thing or two. So I smote away with all the lusty zeal of my twenty years ... to no avail. The ball flew full volley out of court at the back, or like a rocket from the ridges. My unplayable shots slammed at the pepper-box were deftly patted back into play. Thus I helped my partner to lose every game; and I was never invited again.

To you sexagenarians, quinquagenarians and other young fry, this present time may be an age tinted (or tainted?) with gold. Professional football, with its triumphant corybantics, its kissings and embracings, has invaded the cricket field. In his recent Test Match interview, Larwood, of the body-line, now a septuagenarian, commented that in his time, they calmly 'sat down on the grass and waited to get on with the job'.

Heaven and St. Cyriax forbend that these phenomena should ever invade our courts! But there is danger ahead: RFA beware! I see with my prophetic eye the final of your mixed doubles, for the John Armitage Cup. The winning shot has just been made. Temptation rears her pretty, siren head. Gentlemen, you fall! Ladies, you have been libertarianly admitted to a gentleman's game, where we are all gentlemen ... and may we preserve it so!

But what of me, Bill Bailey? My nondescript 5ft 6ins is compensated by a loud, gruff voice. Although in the court in my early years, I was much to the aggressive fore, I hovered diffidently on the social fringe of fives. My regret is that I did not contribute more to our game. It has been flattering to hear someone say: 'Bill Bailey? Oh yes, weren't you the Fives player?' My name appeared once in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, through the kindly mediation of the editor, to wit John Armitage ... there's fame for you!

I have been very lucky to have rubbed shoulders with so many good types and personalities. I have a precious fund of memories to wallow in. We ancients of course dwell much on the past. But Fancy turns to the future. I like to think that, if there is a Sweet By and By, then there is up there an institution called the Old Terrestrials Rugby Fives Club. It would be nice to have a knock-up with the Doctor, Pussy Malt and the two Johns, wouldn't it?