

A sporting life

Rugby fives

Interview **Becky Allen**

Before they were demolished in 1995, the three Rugby fives courts on Portugal Place had echoed to the sound of ball and footfall for more than 100 years. They were built in 1892, and their passing was marked by a series of fives matches – of both the Eton and Rugby variety – and a speech by the Cambridge badminton coach Peter Ridgeon.

Ridgeon recalled his lifelong friendship with Sid Tabor, the rose-growing, chain-smoking squash pro who, despite having a leg and lung ulcerated by mustard gas, regularly beat undergraduates while wearing a long black overcoat, flannels and brown trilby – even after giving them a head start.

Today's players, who travel to Oundle School to train, miss having courts closer to hand. "There are 12 players at Cambridge," says Rugby fives captain Ed Kay. "Because we don't have courts, only people who played at school tend to play here. It's tough to advertise to newcomers when you don't have facilities and there's nothing you can show them unless they travel to Oundle, which is 50 minutes away. Some have come along but they don't keep it up. It's a big time commitment because of the travelling."

Kay, whose Rugby fives career began at the age of 13, took to the sport for its physical and social buzz. "It's not everyone's cup of tea, but I really enjoy it and the atmosphere around it," he explains. "At most tournaments you get the same players turning up, so it's like meeting old friends."

"It's physically very demanding, more so than squash. It's hard to play if you're not fit. It's hard to finish off a rally and games can be very long."

If you've never seen a game of fives, think of it as squash minus the racket. "It's played with a squash-sized baseball, and you wear padded leather gloves to save your hands from getting bruised. It's only possible to win points when you're returning serve, and the tactics are also similar to squash – you try to wear your opponent down by making them run as much as possible, while running as little as possible yourself."

Despite being variants of the same game, Rugby and Eton fives have a number of differences – most notably in the make-up of the court. A Rugby fives court is a relatively straightforward affair: four-sided and smaller than a squash court, with lines on its usually black walls. The three-sided Eton fives court strongly echoes the game's



Marcus Gims With thanks to Oundle School.

origins. Before the advent of courts, boys played fives against the walls of Eton's 15th-century chapel, and elements of its architecture – most notably a small buttress – are reflected in the Eton fives court.

"Really, the only similarity is hitting the ball with your hands," says Kay. "I've only played Eton fives once but I found it really odd, all those strange bits of the court and odd angles because of the edges and the buttress. And the rules are bit different, too."

Although the Eton fives club at Cambridge still has access to a court in the grounds of

Magdalene College, help is at hand for both games in the shape of the new University sports centre. Work began at the West Cambridge site in May 2012, and the fives community raised sufficient funds for Rugby and Eton fives courts to be included in the new centre, for the enjoyment of future generations.

"In the past we've struggled to get a team out for the Varsity match," says Kay. "New courts will help get the sport out there, and encourage people from other sports to learn fives. We need to get more people playing."