

WHAT THE HECK IS... FIVES?

by [Henry Pritchard](#)

There are a number of games claiming the name “Fives”, and the Tab’s current series on lesser-known sports tries to clear this mess up.

Not to be confused with the version of Fives which is played instead of ‘Rock, Scissors, Paper’ when there are more than two players, Rugby or Eton Fives are two versions of a sport played in specialised courts, using small, hard balls and gloves, and traditionally played by men (though that’s changing).



Where it all started for Eton Fives

This may sound initially disconcerting, but it’s actually a popular game with some historically successful Cambridge teams. On the other hand, the kind of drinking Fives played by students – when two or more people stretch out their hands, trying to predict who will open and close their fingers at a particular point – is used to decide who will do a challenge of some sort. It is probably best illustrated by the annual Exeter Hockey Club [‘Edinburgh Fives’](#) where one unlucky fresher has to get the 8-hour train up to Scotland’s capital and back over a weekend, with various unfortunate tasks along the way.



The other kind of Fives

There is also a version of this called “F***-off Fives”, often played at parties or on nights out, where the loser has to go up to a person of the victor’s choice and tell them to “f*** off”. A recent example is of an interloper at a Pitt Club event who had to tell the president exactly where to go. The Prez reportedly looked at him coldly and, after a long silence, evicted him from the illustrious pizza restaurant. Our interloper has apparently been sobbing into his Cheerios for a week about it.



I recommend the Sloppy Giuseppe

Eton and Rugby Fives, however, are generally less offensive. Eton Fives (EFs) is a doubles game, while Rugby Fives can be played as a singles or doubles sport. Moreover, EF’s has a less weighty ball, and thinner gloves to match than RF’s. EF’s courts may be modelled on part of Eton College’s chapel, but do not let that put you off. It is not dissimilar to a squash court, except that you get a load of “hazards” thrown in to make it more exciting. There’s a court inside Magdalene if you’re curious. But if buttresses and steps aren’t your deal, then there is of course an alternative: Rugby School’s version involves a four wall court, much more like squash, and lacks the “hazards”.



Eton Fives: A faster game?

Indeed, Rugby Fives also lacked a home in Cambridge for many years, having had its Portugal Street courts re-developed in the late 1990s by the college that owned the building. However, the new sports centre in West Cambridge now has courts for Rugby and Eton Fives alike. Reportedly the Freshers' Fair sign-up was a huge improvement, and the clubs look set to go from strength to strength. Even though the sports are very much associated with public schools, there are reportedly courts at some state schools too, with the advantage being the relatively low demands of space and money (apart from initial building costs), what with one only needing gloves and balls. St Bartholomew's School in Berkshire, a state secondary that has around 1,700 pupils, set up a flat-pack Fives court made of concrete slabs that slotted together.



Cambridge's Rugby Fives Squad, with players from St. Paul's

Meanwhile, at Cambridge, you do not have to have played before if you want join the clubs, and beginners are encouraged. It is a game for hand-eye coordination and speed, more than just gym-molded brawn, which should appeal to many.

The EF's teams, the Blues and the Penguins, play three to five matches a term, and the sport has Half Blue status. The RF's team (The Sparrows) is now just getting back into its stride after a quiet decade, but looks set to grow in the coming years, with the sports centre having really revitalised the whole club.



The dream

Playing Eton or Rugby Fives will get you in less trouble than drinking Fives, and you can have the fun of perpetuating the rivalry between the two versions, based on some slight differences in court-design. Also, if the thought of a Half Blue gets your blood up, then these could be sports for you. With their new facilities, one would be safe in assuming that both iterations of the game will become increasingly popular in the coming years.