

A bunch of fives

Fives can trace its roots back centuries, doesn't require an umpire, tests the brain and is enjoying continuing popularity, as Lucy Higginson explains

SIMPLE and ingenious, Eton Fives is at least 175 years old, although variations of the game can be traced back to the Middle Ages. An Eton Fives court famously replicates the bay on the wall of Eton Chapel where it was first played, right down to its buttresses, stone ledges and drain. This bay is replicated 16 times over at the Fives courts down the lane, still used regularly by pairs of boys.

'It's a cerebral game, which is all about using your loaf to hit the ball where your opponent isn't and moving your feet,' says Mark Williams, who was Master in Charge of Fives at Eton for 18 years. 'It's highly tactical and naturally develops ambidexterity because of the position of the buttress.'


As it requires only four players, a glove apiece and a hollow ball, it's cheap, easy to pick up and, with matches lasting anything between 40 minutes and four hours, it's a great option when the pitches are waterlogged.

Eton Fives is played by some 40 or so schools nationwide, with a similar number playing Rugby Fives, which can also be played by singles and uses a slightly larger, ledge- and buttress-free court.

The Rugby Fives Association website seems at pains to avoid using the E word, so is there much rivalry between the two forms, I ask its president, Bob Dolby. 'Less and less,' he assures me, 'and representatives of the two games meet to discuss Fives each year.' Another variant is Winchester Fives, with a ledge on just one wall, but Winchester and Rugby Fives players happily swap between the two, says Mr Dolby.

Common to all, however, is the absence of a referee. 'The game is unique in this regard,' says Mr Williams. 'The players sort out disputes for themselves and, as such, it's a training for life way beyond sport.'

Indeed, arguing the point can be as much fun as playing it, if Eton sixth former Barnaby Harrison is to be believed. 'You know any argument is going to end up in a let, but you still argue, partly because it's fun. The game is very underrated. It's fast-paced if you play it at a decent standard and I find it exhilarating and much more exciting than tennis.'



High five: two lower-school students enjoy an Eton Fives taster session at Shrewsbury, one of a number of schools to introduce girls to the game



As any Fives court is pretty small, much of the physical workout is vertical, stretching and bending to reach the ball. 'You can have a great game with someone in their late forties or fifties, because although we may be fitter, they might be more skilful,' reflects fellow Etonian Oliver Rowse, who has played with success alongside his identical twin, Max. Oli was nevertheless relieved that a game against his former prep-school headmaster went his way, 'although he's demanding a rematch'.

Fives has been carried round the globe by Old Etonians, Rugbeians and others as far afield as Darjeeling in India and Geelong in Australia. The Eton boarding house I call home has certainly hosted players from Switzerland and Malaysia, with a clutch of new Fives gloves sometimes a very apt thank-you gift. And a number of co-ed schools have introduced girls to the game, including leading Fives schools Highgate and Shrewsbury (Eton Fives) and Marlborough and Malvern (Rugby Fives).

Not that Fives is entirely the preserve of the private sector. St Bartholomew's School near Newbury, an academy of 1,650 children, installed three new courts in 2013. 'Our present school was formed by the amalgamation of very old boys' and girls' schools and we have new buildings,' explains Assistant Head Paul Turner. The old school had Fives courts, although he has no idea why, and it was decided to replace them on the new school site. 'About 10% of each year group plays it and they love it,' he says. 'Some of our girls have been particularly successful at the National Schools Championships.'

This 10-day event, supported by Marsh, is the annual highlight, involving 11 categories and more than 1,000 players, but there are matches most weekends of the winter season for university players, under 21s, veterans and so on.

For a game with ancient roots, Fives seems to tick a lot of today's boxes, welcoming players of any sex and age and testing fitness, friendship and resilience. As Oli puts it: 'You don't mind taking a bit of criticism on a Fives court—but you learn how to get the best out of your partner, too.'