

History of the Universities Championships

Oxford and Cambridge first played each other at Rugby Fives in 1925, but it was to be another 35 years before the British Universities Championships saw the light of day. Universities generally were poorly provided with courts, although the few that existed were well-used. In his 'Survey of Rugby Fives in Great Britain' in 1961, David Gardner records the existence of six at Leeds (including three at a Training College), four at Cambridge (including one College court), four at Manchester (including two in Halls of Residence), two at Bristol, two at Durham, two at Oxford (both of them College courts), two at Sheffield and one at Glasgow. To these should be added two courts at Exeter.

The spark for an Inter-Universities competition was struck in the season of 1958/59, when a Fives Club was started at Loughborough Colleges by two Old Dunstonians, David Gardner and Stan Holt. They discovered an ancient court at Quorn Hall, one of the Halls of Residence at Loughborough, which was being used for squash at the time. Although good for practice, this one court was not enough for matches, so they also made arrangements to use the courts at Denstone College, some forty miles away. Fixtures were played against other universities, including Sheffield, Bristol, Leeds, Durham, Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester.

From these beginnings, David Gardner, already a committee member of the R.F.A., formed the idea of the British Universities Championships, which were first held in the season of 1960/61. Loughborough Colleges were a member of the Universities Athletic Union (U.A.U.) and so were permitted to play as a University. It was hoped initially that the championships could be held under the auspices of U.A.U., but they were unwilling to allow this until it had proved to be a viable event – so the first tournament was organised totally independently by David Gardner. As it proved to be very successful, it was taken over by U.A.U. the following year and was held under the auspices of one University organisation or another – U.A.U., B.U.S.F. (British Universities Sports Federation), B.U.S.A. (British Universities Sports Association), and B.U.C.S. (British Universities and Colleges Sport) – every year until 2013. The Rugby Fives Association took over as the responsible organisation in 2014, with David still in charge of the championships, now rechristened B.U.S.F. (British Universities and Student Fives).

The initial event was held over four days and consisted of a team contest followed by singles and doubles competitions. The first two days were taken up by the team event, played in two leagues, with semi-finals and a final to follow. Each encounter was a full match with teams of four, and all the games were played up to 15 points, so a great deal of fives had already been played by the time the individual competitions started on day three! Bedford Modern School were the hosts, and accommodation was arranged at the Swan Hotel, Bedford, and R.A.F. Cardington, not far away. The Cardington group were particularly impressed by the allocation of a batman to see to their every need. A black-tie dinner was held in the Swan on the Saturday night, the guest of honour being Clinton Sayer, the Deputy Principal and Head of Physical Education at Loughborough.

The balls used for the championships were the then new Cliff's – solid and liable to leave their mark on the hands – which caused a certain amount of complaint. In fact, in order to forget their bruises, some of the players staying at Cardington made over-enthusiastic use of the bar facilities and ran them clean out of vodka and blackcurrant, a popular narcotic of the day. In his speech at the dinner, it is reported that the organiser went so far as to misquote a well-known English playwright: 'Oh, that this too, too solid ball would melt – thaw and resolve itself into a vodka and blackcurrant!'

An indicator of the strength of the entry for the initial championships is the fact that the participants included the 1960 National Singles winner, Eric Marsh, and the 1960 National Doubles champions, David Gardner and Stan Holt. Other distinguished players present at the event were Jack Slater, U.A.U. Singles finalist three years running; Peter Carlile, who with Jack was to win the U.A.U. Doubles in 1962; and Rick Wilson, a future President of the R.F.A. The 1961 R.F.A. Handbook records the event without fanfare: 'An Inter-Universities Tournament was held this season for the first time. It took place at Bedford Modern School. The following entered: Bristol, Durham, Edinburgh, Leeds, London and Sheffield Universities, and Loughborough Training College. Loughborough won the team match, beating Bristol 117-72 in the final. The winners of the doubles were Bristol I (E. Marsh and S. Tovey), and the finalists in the singles were E. Marsh and J. A. Slater (Leeds), Marsh being victorious by 15-2, 15-11.'

The success of the first event, however lengthy and exhausting it had proved to be with its two-day team competition to add to singles and doubles, meant that there was support for the continuation of all three elements of the championships. The next year, however, in order to curtail matters a little, preliminary rounds of the singles and doubles were held in Oxford and Manchester, while the later rounds, plus the team element, were held at Bedford. Year three saw a further attempt to solve the problem by holding regional team competitions, producing divisional champions who then played off on the finals weekend.

The record in the team event up to 1965 shows victories for London (captained by a future R.F.A. President, Frank Akerman, although he denies all knowledge of it!), Oxford, Durham and Leeds. Eventually, however, the extra time and costs involved led to the demise of this element of the championships. It has featured again (unofficially) in recent years through Dave Hebden's rankings programme based on singles and doubles results rather than a set team event. The original trophy, made in the workshops of Loughborough by a student, has long since disappeared, so no actual award is made for team performance.

Although Bedford Modern, with its block of six courts and good geographical position, was an excellent venue for the first two competitions, David then embarked upon visits to various university cities in order to bring variety to the event and encourage a wider range of entry. Thus London, Sheffield, Bristol, Durham, Cambridge and Edinburgh had all played host by 1970; Manchester followed soon after, and the policy continued with a further broadening, to include schools such as Oundle, Merchant Taylors', Blundell's, St. Dunstan's, Sherborne and Sutton Valence. In some years the venues had to be split to provide at least four courts: for example Durham (University and School); Manchester (University and Y.M.C.A.); three Edinburgh schools (Fettes, Loretto and the Academy); or Allyn's and the Bank of England.

Following a period of U.A.U. control, Fives passed into the hands of B.U.S.F., which incorporated all the major Universities, some of which were not officially in U.A.U. but were specially invited to take part. Cambridge, for example, which so far boasts the proudest record of success in the championships, only attended once in the first six years – although this may also have reflected a then prevalent attitude towards inter-university sport other than fixtures against the old foe, Oxford.

By the time the Championships were ten years old, players from eight different Universities – Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Leeds, London, Loughborough and Oxford – had won a title in Singles or Doubles. Since then, a further five – Exeter, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Southampton – have provided champions at some stage. Cambridge had a long run of dominance in the 1970s, picking up 12 out of 18 Doubles titles between 1967 and 1982, with their Singles players adding another 7 titles in the same period. More recent years have seen a resurgence of Oxford since the construction of courts at Iffley Road in 1990: 16 titles have been won by Oxford players in that time. A feature of the Singles event has been the number of quadruple winners – Tony Wynn (Manchester), Simon Kemp (Cambridge & London), Ian Purvis (Liverpool) and Dan Grant (U.C.L.) have all won the title four times; while in the Doubles, Brian Elfick (Oxford & Cambridge!) and Charlie Brooks (Cambridge) have both recorded four victories. Another remarkable record is that of the late David Arnold (Cambridge), who reached the Doubles final six years running, losing the first three and winning the rest. In 1976, the year of his last win, David generously donated a trophy for the Doubles, to go alongside the B.U.S.F. Singles Cup, given by the R.F.A. in the same year.

Where did all the Universities title winners learn their fives? In Singles, 18 schools are represented, with St. Paul's (11 wins), Bristol Grammar (5), Merchant Taylors' (5) St. Dunstan's (4), Bradfield (4), Loretto (4) and Tonbridge (4) being the most successful. The Doubles provides a wider spectrum of schools, 24 in all, with St. Paul's again at the top of the list, followed by St. Dunstan's, Bedford, Alleyn's, Bradfield, Clifton and Eastbourne. Steve Ashton, a Doubles winner in 1978, entered the Schools from South Trafford College but learnt his fives at the Manchester YMCA, while James Toop, twice winner of Singles and Doubles, attended St. Olave's, where Eton is the code.

Surprisingly, only five players have their names on both the National and the Universities Singles trophies. Eric Marsh (Bristol), the first champion, held both titles simultaneously (1960/1); ten years later, Andrew Cowie (Cambridge) managed the same feat (1970/1). John Watkinson (Oxford) won his first National Singles title two seasons after being Universities champion in 1962/3. Amazingly, Universities Singles winners didn't get a look in at the National Singles between 1973 and 1995: Wayne Enstone – and, in 1979, Dave Hebden – made sure of that! And since then, James Toop and Dan Tristao (both Oxford) have been the only other Universities Singles champions to have won the National Singles title. In Doubles, no Universities winning pair has ever come together to win the Cyriax Cup, although Jerry Mytton and Phil Moger, who lost in the 1968 final of the Universities, actually won the Cyriax later that same season. So there's a target for future winners of the British Universities Doubles!

Over the fifty-seven years of the Universities competition, the disappearance of some of the courts initially available for the event has restricted the choice of venue. In the early days, for example, Durham – still a vibrant centre of student fives – was a natural choice for the competition; but the closure of the two Durham School courts in the early 1990s prevented any further visits, four courts being the minimum requirement for such an event. The same thing happened a few years later in Manchester, when the McDougall Centre courts were closed, and the Y.M.C.A.'s projected four courts materialised as only two. This has sadly led to the absence of the North of England from the British Universities schedule – a matter for great regret.

A word now on a perennial subject of conversation in Britain – the weather. November is not an ideal time to hold a fives competition on courts which are affected by sudden changes in temperature, and many competitors remember David Gardner for his determination to make unplayable courts acceptable for play. Two striking examples of this were in 1971 at Oundle and in 1983 at Bedford. Here is David's modest account in the R.F.A. Handbook of events at Oundle when the courts were found too damp for play: 'Quick action by the Headmaster, Dr. B. Trapnell, saved the day and within an hour we had the extraordinary sight (and sound) of four huge gas heaters blasting hot air around the courts.' (Later) 'The bats and spiders which had been woken from their winter slumbers by an early summer were once again smitten with the realities of winter. The fives was quite dull by comparison with all this...' In 1983, the courts at Bedford Modern were so wet with condensation that more radical action was needed: some of the competitors were sent to Merchant Taylors' School, 35 miles away, while the Bedford Modern courts were dried by space heaters, remaining unplayable until 4 p.m. on the Friday. Not surprisingly, play on the Saturday and Sunday meant a very late finish to both days; but the Championships were eventually completed. David typically noted in his report not only the willingness of competitors to help but also the fact that 'normally a number of competitors fail to turn up – of course, this year, with the courts unfit, everyone appeared on time!'

In an effort to encourage Northern universities to enter, and in recognition of the city's importance as a fives-playing centre, Edinburgh has featured twice as a venue comparatively recently – in 2004 and 2008. The University has no courts of its own, but Fettes, Loretto and the Academy have variously combined to host the competition, and despite the logistical problems of moving between sites, both visits were very successful. Other attractive venues over the years have been Sherborne (eleven times), Durham and Oundle (seven each), Bedford (six) and Clifton (five). London itself, despite its plentiful choice of venues and a considerable number of University players mainly from U.C.L. and Imperial, has been largely omitted from the list, for two good reasons: first, that so many other events are held in the capital; and second, that in the big city players tend to disperse after their matches rather than socialize with their opponents. 2016 sees a reversal of this policy in the first-ever visit by the Championships to St. Paul's, the school which has provided so many of the University players in recent years. This is a fitting acknowledgement of the school's massive contribution to Rugby Fives, particularly since the six courts built in 1968 have enabled so many competitions and so much club fives to be played on them – as well as their being the nursery of so much youthful talent.

The social side of fives tournaments is a great attraction to many people, and the Universities event has certainly been no exception to this! University squads will contain some players who are not going to reach the later stages of the main competitions, and yet they contribute greatly to the event. In the remoter locations, the squad will stay together as long as they have a representative involved, and this is where the plate competitions run since 1976 by David and his associates make a difference. The team event which was initially a feature of the Championships has given way to these plates, which are less time-consuming but can be just as involving. As for the main competitions, David insists on the matches being best of three up to fifteen – proper form for a National Championship – so there are plenty of tired limbs by the end of days one and two. But such trivial ailments have never prevented fives players from enjoying their ‘après-fives’, and most students need no second invitation, even when they are due on court at nine the next morning! I have asked a number of people what they remember of their British Universities competitions, and the reply usually goes something like this: ‘Well, the fives was good fun, but the pubs in Bedford / Bristol / Durham / Edinburgh / Sherborne / Oundle etc. are fantastic!’

The number of educational institutions represented in the British Universities Championships has averaged around ten over the years, which is respectable considering the paucity of courts. Records of entry are incomplete, but the best attendances have been from Cambridge (at least 46 times), Durham (at least 43) and Oxford (at least 42). London (various Colleges), Bristol, Edinburgh, Exeter, Leeds and Manchester have also provided regular entries, while less frequent, but no less welcome, entries have come from Liverpool, Loughborough, Sheffield, Southampton, Warwick and York. Individual entries, which are a tribute to the enthusiasm of the players concerned, have also come from Bath, Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow, Hull, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Open, Oxford Brookes, R.A.C. Cirencester, Roehampton, Sussex and Yeovil, while there have been ‘National Students’ entries (see next paragraph) from Fettes, Loretto, St. Paul’s, Sherborne, Oundle and Winchester.

In 2001 the potential entry was expanded further by creating a ‘National Students’ eligibility, entitling anyone over sixteen in full-time education to participate. Although there were a few entries on this basis, the players tended to come only from host schools or their immediate rivals, so the decision was taken by the R.F.A. in 2014 to limit the eligibility to those aged 18 and over in Higher Education.

From 1967 on, a British Universities team (initially consisting of 4, then of 6 players) has been selected each year to play the Rugby Fives Association. Of these 49 matches so far, 45 have been won by the R.F.A., one tied and only three (including a historic and convincing win in 2016) won by the Universities. This may sound like a mismatch, but the bald statistics can be misleading. First, the R.F.A. side has almost always contained three or four of the best players in the country; second, the outcome of the match has often depended on the last couple of games to finish; and third, the Universities team has sometimes been weakened by the unavailability of top players. Regardless of the outcome, however, to be selected for the ‘Representative Match’, as it has come to be called, is still a mark of distinction.

In 1985, as a complement to the British Universities event in November, the R.F.A. decided to introduce an Under 23s competition, to be held in the New Year. The idea was to encourage young players, whether at University or not, to continue with their fives. After the initial competition, three seasons passed until in 1989 the event re-emerged as the Under 25s Championships. In the 22 years of competition, the singles has often produced the same champion as the Universities, but the doubles, with its wide choice of pairs, has only been won four times so far by that season's Universities champions.

David Gardner has been at the helm of the British Universities Rugby Fives Championships since their inception. He has always been present to set the standard and ensure the smooth progress of the various competitions – including plates for those entrants who lose in an early round of the main contests. He would like to thank all the local club members, schoolmasters, committee and board members, Deputy Presidents and Presidents of the R.F.A. who have helped him over the years, many of them expert practitioners of the game, all of them typical of the volunteers and enthusiasts without whom amateur sport cannot run. The support David has had from U.A.U., B.U.S.F., B.U.S.A. and B.U.C.S. has been essential to the administration and financing of the competition, and unsurprisingly the R.F.A. are just as co-operative!

So although these Championships have been played under a variety of banners, the event has been uniquely fortunate in having one unifying factor: the continuous presence of its founder. It is an extraordinary personal achievement to have been responsible for organising a national sports event for 57 unbroken years, and hundreds of young fives players have benefited from David's firm but friendly administrative skills. There have been good years and lean years, ideal venues and less-than-ideal venues, and weather conditions varying from the positively balmy to the absolutely barmy, but a glance at the list of past winners of the British Universities titles confirms that the event has always attracted the best university players of the day.

David Barnes.

Revised in 2016.