

The History of Fives at Sedbergh School

David Barnes looks at Fives at the Cumbrian school

Sedbergh has always taken sport seriously, yet it took a while for the school to decide which variety of Fives to play. In the 1880s, Fives challenges and ties were played within and between houses, and in 1880 there was a challenge match between housemasters Mr Wilson and Mr Hutt, and two schoolboys, C Toppin and RA Shepherd. Surprisingly, the result is not recorded, nor the court on which the match was played.

Soon, school singles competitions were arranged for seniors and juniors, and HG Hart, headmaster from 1880, gave a Challenge Cup, won in 1882 by School House. Soon Old Sedberghians were playing competitive Fives, too: in 1896 AG Wilkins won the Fives Challenge Cup at Owen's College, Manchester.

But the issue of which courts were the right ones for Sedbergh persisted. We have been unable to establish whether the covered court built in 1903, and reserved for the use of masters and members of Mr. Lemarchand's house, had a buttress or

BELOW Cambridge University 1958 - JNH Smith (back right) and BWJG Wilson (to his right)



a back wall. It was certainly popular with its users since play was possible come rain or snow, but the only possible hint of its shape comes from the fact that CW Gooch, an Old Blundellian cricketer and assistant master at Sedbergh, was the moving force behind its construction.

Two of the Blundell's three-walled courts built in 1885 during his time at the Devon school had since acquired a back wall and were probably closer to the Rugby pattern than the Eton – despite the ledge round the walls.

Winchester courts in the 1920s

Finally, in 1922, two new courts were built “on the Winchester pattern”. The *Sedberghian* reported in its March 1923 editorial: “An innovation has been made in the shape of a Fives match between the Staff and the School. The Staff won by seven games to two. This is another step in the direction started by the New Fives Courts and the House Cups. In a few years we shall have Fives Colours and School matches.”

Incomplete records

The four present covered Winchester



ABOVE An unidentified Fives player poses on the Evans House court in the early 1920s

Fives courts, were built in 1925. This was the time when Fives was waking up nationally: the RFA was founded in 1927 and the circulation of approved court dimensions and rules was approved in 1930.

It is hard, however, to establish how long the various house courts lasted at Sedbergh alongside the school ones. Sedgwick, School, Hart and Evans Houses certainly invested some energy and money in improving their courts in the early 1920s, but there is no mention in *The Sedberghian* of their eventual passing. The one at Evans House is suspected to be the last one standing in 2016.

It is difficult, also, to determine the identities of the masters-in-charge in the early days. Masters at Sedbergh were certainly involved in umpiring inter-house matches, and one name mentioned is GH Todd, who retired in 1929. The *Sedberghian* wrote in tribute that he was “a prime mover in all the improvements and additions to our Fives-courts” and Todd himself had >>

written in his 1918 tribute to another master, Brian 'Puggy' Harrison, that he had been his Fives partner for 15 years.

Soon, Sedberghians were making their mark at University. AMcA Robertson and JA Steven were in the Fives VIII at Glasgow as early as 1925, while GA Bell played for Cambridge in the 1927 and 1929 Varsity Matches. The first time Sedbergh took on a University was in a Rugby Fives match at Leeds in 1930, an encounter which became a regular fixture despite the differing codes.

Remoteness a barrier

In the 1930s, a period when Rugby Fives was expanding in schools, Sedbergh's remote location inevitably meant that almost all of its Fives was played within the School. The Senior and Junior knock-out doubles competitions were keenly fought each year, with Sedgwick winning the Senior trophy every year between 1932 and

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT Dick Lyon (tallest of the three) discussing matters with Tom Wood and Chris Heron 1970; Laurence Catlow at St. Paul's in 2009, the year of his retirement; Ed Hickey and James Brown (right), National Schools finalists 1993



'The school had a long way to go before they could master doubles'

1938. In 1939, The Sedberghian reported: "The two old courts near Lupton House have been pulled down and are being rebuilt on more modern lines." The work was completed by November, costing £550.

Apart from matches versus Leeds, where three Rugby Fives courts had been built in 1930, the occasional encounter with the Common Room was the only opportunity to play adult opposition. When the Masters were played in 1940, the School lost but gave a good account of themselves.

Post-war revival

The Senior Fives competition was revived only in 1948, but The Sedberghian said in 1949: "Interest in the game is spreading, and Houses are beginning to take considerable trouble over the training of their Fives teams." The Junior competition was revived in 1950 after an interval of eight years.



Strong brotherhood

Sedberghians began to make a mark in National competitions during the 1950s, as brothers, JNH and D Smith, emerged as top-class singles players. In 1955, D Smith won the Public Schools' Singles Championship at Whitgift. JNH Smith, who had left Sedbergh the previous autumn, won the 1955 Scottish Open and went on to win the North of England Open in 1956 and 1958. In 1959 he became the first (and so far only) Sedberghian to win the National Singles title. In the meantime, his brother had repeated his Public Schools triumph in 1956. You would have thought that between them they might have won a Doubles title, but it wasn't to be.

Despite the achievements of Sedberghians in the later 1950s, the school had a long way to go before they could master Rugby Fives Doubles, and this is where Dick Lyon's coaching came in.

"Mr. Lyon is patiently teaching us the rudiments of Rugby Fives," read one captain's' report. It was a slow process, as there were few suitable schools to play against, Giggleswick being the only relatively reachable one. Leeds University were useful opponents, but



the other regular school opponents were Rossall, with their open-backed Winchester-style courts.

The concentration on Rugby Fives brought success for Sedberghians at University. SP Berry played for winning Cambridge sides in 1969, 1970 and 1972, while AF Rees represented Oxford in 1971. Such was the desire for success at Rugby Fives at Sedbergh that it led to the unusual practice of playing a let on the buttress when visiting sides were unused to it. It was well-meant, but it looked like a vote of no confidence in Winchester Fives. Fortunately, Winchester Fives was still played internally in House matches and other competitions.

A focus on Rugby

1970 saw visits from Durham University, the White Rose Club from Halifax and the UCS Old Boys. The School team that year was the best for several years, but none of them came to the Nationals. The next year, three of the best players were back, and the team was undefeated in all matches, beating not only the RFA and the UCS Old Boys, but also the Masters. The top Sedbergh pair (AWA Outhwaite and MTD Budge) won the North Of England Schools' Doubles at Durham School that year, and four players went to Whitgift, where Outhwaite and FJM Carr reached the Doubles semi-final, losing narrowly to Merchant Taylors', the top seeds.



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT Headmaster Chris Hirst, a former Cambridge captain of Fives, thanking John Guthrie for his generosity in 2008; Courts enclosed in 2007-08; Dave Fox (with Dave Hebden) serving to John Minta (with Hamish Buchanan) 2012

The policy of training the top players for Rugby Fives meant that a wider range of teams featured on Sedbergh's fixture list in the 1970s: Merchiston Castle, Durham School and the Manchester YMCA all provided good opposition. The middle of the decade saw the rise of RN Barr, who went increasingly far in the National Schools Singles, reaching the semi-final in 1975 and the final in 1976. He and DHW Mount also got to the Doubles semi-finals in 1975. Barr and his fellow Old Sedberghian JJ Rogers went on to play Fives at Oxford and were both selected for the Varsity Matches in 1978, 1979 and 1980, with Rogers staying on for a fourth half-blue in 1981.

The last five years of RJ Lyon's long stint as master-in-charge continued to produce good players.

RD Middleton won the Senior Singles plate at the National Schools in 1982. An impressive player, he was selected for Oxford from 1985-87, while his Sedbergh contemporary, WH Stoddart, was in the Cambridge side for the first two of those years. DA Fox, Sedbergh captain in 1984, was later to become a stalwart of the Rugby Fives scene and a

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Winchester Fives Doubles champion. He is still playing to a high standard 30 years later and co-founded the Executioners Rugby Fives Club with AG Wilson. The name was derived from Exeter University, which Fox attended. Despite some mutterings from the RFA, it stuck.

Varsity success

1986/87 was the year when Sedbergh's name was again inscribed on the National Schools' Singles trophy. MA Mellor had reached the National Colts' Singles semi-finals in 1985 and the fourth round of the 1986 Senior Singles, but nobody expected him to perform quite as well as he did in the 1987 Singles, where he lost only 12 points in five matches. Mellor sadly made no further mark upon the game, but another Sedberghian, JW Gribble, who was captain of Fives the next year, certainly did at Cambridge. He hit the ground running in 1990, playing good singles and top-pair doubles in a narrow victory for the Light Blues, repeated the act in 1991 and then, as captain in 1992, led the last Cambridge side to win the Varsity match for a decade. He also had a hand in winning the British Universities Doubles title >>



‘2007 saw the four courts enclosed, with heaters installed’

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Ben Lawry and Jonathan Lidiard with the Barnes Bridge plate in 2013 at Malvern; Sedbergh Girls at the Ladies Winchester Fives championships 2016; Taylor Maguire 2015

in 1991 with his partner PD d’Ancona.

Fives continued to flourish under the next master-in-charge, LW Catlow. In 1990, J Lamb and F Stoddart were reported to be the best first pair for some time, with Lamb making it to the semi-final of the Schools Singles. S Lewis and J Brown, the top Sedbergh pair, reached the final of the National Winchester Doubles (at Sedbergh) and the final of the National Schools.

In 1993, it was Sedbergh’s turn to win the National Schools Doubles title – for the first time in the school’s history – when Brown and J Lancaster confirmed their quality and resilience. They had also played beautifully to reach the National Winchester Doubles final three weeks earlier at Malvern. The next year, JM Edington became the third Sedberghian to win the National Schools Singles title, and had he not sustained a serious bruise in doing so, he and his partner T Barraclough would have had a chance of winning the Doubles final against Sherborne.

By now, the only ‘local’ school opponents for Sedbergh were Giggleswick and Merchiston Castle and Loretto of Edinburgh, Durham School having given up the game in 1993. The visiting clubs, containing

many top players, thus became an ever more important part of the fixture list if Sedbergh were to keep up its challenge for National Schools honours. 1996 proved that this was the case, when Sedbergh’s top pair, J Lofthouse and I McKerrow, won the National Schools Doubles, defeating Bradfield in the final.

Court enclosure

In the early to mid-1990s the courts at Sedbergh seemed increasingly prone to sweating, and the younger players suffered from a lack of suitable school matches to give them experience.

In 2007, a generous gift from John Guthrie saw the four Sedbergh courts enclosed, with heaters installed in an effort to reduce the sweating. This has not been entirely successful, alas, as the interruptions to play in subsequent competitions have shown.

No doubt partly in response to the enclosure of the courts, the numbers of Sedberghians playing Fives increased in 2008. No school matches were lost to the weather, and there were no periods when practice was impossible due to sweating courts. More players came to persevere with the game, and the fixture with Rossall was reinstated after many years.

In 2008/09, A Elletson and M Pimlott won the Winchester Fives Northern Doubles, the first schoolboy pair to do so; Elletson went on to win the Singles plate at the National

Schools Championships. These achievements were important given the number of relatively fallow years after the heady days of the 1990s. Fittingly, Laurence Catlow bowed out at the end of the season to hand on the Fives to his former pupil Jonathan Lidiard. Since 1964, there had only been two men in charge of Fives at Sedbergh, and in their very different ways they had served the game and the School magnificently.

Present day promise

In the last six years, Lidiard has already made his mark. He has brought good players to the Schools Winchester Fives Doubles and to the National Schools, and Sedbergh girls have entered their Nationals and the Ladies Winchester Fives event. The senior girls are now in the new National Women’s Rankings.

In 2015, Taylor McGuire won the National Schools U14 Boys’ Singles title, a fine achievement for a player brought up on a Winchester court.

Fives at Sedbergh is in good hands. This coming season sees the Winchester National Doubles return to the school, which will give Sedberghians a chance to play against or watch top players. For all schools planning a Fives tour, Sedbergh is a leading contender by virtue of the quality of its Fives and its hospitality.

A full version of this history is to be found at: <http://bit.ly/2bfJz1b>