

The History of Fives at Bloxham School by Simon Batten

Bloxham has been playing Fives since shortly after its foundation by the Revd. Philip Reginald Egerton in 1860. Although Egerton introduced the strange form of football played at his old school, Winchester, to Bloxham, he did not bring Winchester's version of Fives with him. Bloxham plays Rugby Fives, which is the most commonly played variant of the game (probably because the court, a plain rectangle with no buttress or step, was easier to construct). There have been three locations for the playing of Fives since the school was founded.

The first court was located in the building known as Botany Bay (now the Art School). When built in 1868 the part downstairs was open to the air – the building was not enclosed until converted to a laboratory in 1898. No photographs exist of this court, but it obviously had a ceiling, and the Editor of *The Bloxhamist* observed in November 1880 that it “was hardly a success as a Fives Court, on account of the frequent interruptions from the Box-room frequenters, and also the limited height and the darkness of the place”. In 1879 a new court was built on the end of the Pavilion with the money left over from a memorial fund for the Matron, Mrs Arkell, who died in 1875 – for this reason it was known as the Arkell Fives Court. This court was open to the sky and had a back wall which was stepped down from right to left thanks to the slope of the land; it was in use until it collapsed in 1929.



Fives Courts at Bloxham School 1890 with the Arkell court left

The earliest set of rules we have, set out in the *Bloxhamist* magazine in October 1881 [and reproduced at the end of this article], makes it clear that this was a Rugby Fives court. These rules are thought to be among the earliest anywhere in existence – indeed, they may be **the** oldest. The rules of Rugby Fives would not be codified until the establishment of the RFA in

the late 1920s, and even then some schools would persist with their own variations. The last vestige of the serving system described in the Bloxham rules, the ability of the server (as we would call him) to request the receiver to throw the ball up to him, was only removed from the official Rules in 1995.



Fives being played at Bloxham School 1891

The game was run by the Fives Club, set up in 1875 with a termly subscription of 1 shilling, with annual singles and doubles tournaments (between 1881 and 1898 there was a bat Fives tournament as well as hand Fives) as well as matches between the dormitories (forerunners of the boarding houses). Boys were fined 3d if caught playing in boots or in wet weather and 2d if caught sitting on the wall of the court, and a Lower School boy was exempted from compulsory football in order to sweep the court. Perhaps the outstanding player of this period was EA Ostrehan, champion in 1888 at singles (winning the final 15-8 15-6) and doubles with his partner Wilkinson (15-6 15-6 in the final). Although undated, the photograph showing a game in progress on this court must date from 1891 – Fives was played in the Lent Term, and of the four boys shown, William Stowell only arrived at Bloxham in September 1890 and John Selfe left the school in July 1891. The Bloxhamist shows that all four players – the other two were Arthur Rye and Charles Smith – were involved in the school doubles competition in 1891 but all with different partners (Smith reached the semi-finals). Selfe would go on to fight in both the Boer War and Great War, Rye was wounded on the Western Front and Stowell ended up as a newspaper editor in Bulawayo.

In 1909 two new Fives courts were constructed next to the school's new Gymnasium (now the Music School), and they are still there to this day. They are Rugby Fives courts and are said to be on the large side ("airy and suitable for lobbing", according to the Rugby Fives Association) with a high ceiling. With three courts now in operation, the game received a new impetus, but interest fluctuated, with the Bloxhamist for 1922 commenting that "Fives as a sport is gradually taking its place among the School games, but enthusiasts are still few and far between". This was not uncommon – at Rugby School, the game was said to be "very popular" in 1868, but by 1883 a writer in the Meteor could claim that "not above 20 fellows in the School play Fives." Bloxham's first school match was played in 1909 – against an invitational team organised by a Dr Wilson of Hook Norton – and the first match against another school in 1922, when Warwick School were beaten 7-3. For the next five decades House matches provided the main focus of the season along with a small number of fixtures against the RFA (from 1951) and the likes of King's School, Worcester and Eastbourne College.



With away fixtures came the challenge of adjusting to strange courts very unlike Bloxham's own large ones, especially when Winchester or Eton Fives courts were encountered – against Eastbourne in 1943, "we were hindered greatly by the presence of a buttress in the middle of the back wall". War time shortages affected fixtures in 1944, when the Bloxhamist reported that "owing to the shortage of Fives balls, we have been unable to bring off any School matches this season." In the next decade the fixture list was expanded with the addition of Denstone College (1955) and Radley College (1956) and from 1948 the school sent players to the Public Schools tournament. The captain in 1954, CJ Hanbury, reached the third round at Whitgift and lost to the eventual champion.



Fives at Bloxham in the 1960s

Standards were raised in the late 1960s by the arrival of a new member of staff, Philip Howard, an Oxford Fives Blue, who announced his arrival by the introduction of circuit training for the players. It was under Howard's successor as Master-in-charge of Fives that Bloxham reached the peak of its success as a Fives-playing school. Colin Stewart, who himself represented Great Britain at Rugby Fives, presided over a strengthening of the fixture list, which by the mid-1970s included three of the strongest schools in the country, Denstone, St. Dunstan's College and Bedford Modern School.



One of the two Bloxham courts from 1909

The peak of Bloxham's success was reached in 1976, when the 1st IV went unbeaten through a season of 13 fixtures against schools as far afield as Blundell's, Merchant Taylors' and Sherborne. For the first time, success was achieved on an individual level, with as many as eight Bloxham players heading to Whitgift or St Paul's each year for the annual schools championships. In 1975 David Bell and Stuart Smart reached the quarter-finals of the Nationals at Colts (Under 16) level, with Jolyon Griffiths getting to the semi-finals in 1977. The next year Ian Davenport (later to become Headmaster of an illustrious Fives school, Blundell's) reached the quarter-finals of both the senior doubles (with Griffiths) and singles at the Nationals, as did Mike Thompson in the Colts singles. Griffiths' finest hour came in 1979, when he reached the semi-finals of the senior singles; in what the RFA described as "the outstanding match of the whole week", he came back from 6-10 in the first game to win it 12-10 and lead 6-2 in the second, before Kemp of St Paul's rallied to win 10-12, 11-7, 11-1 (Kemp would go on to win the final 11-3, 11-0).



One court in 2018

The 1979 1st IV won 8 out of 9 fixtures and in 1982 Bloxham still had a strong fixture list against the likes of Loretto and Denstone, but the first warning signs can be detected in Stewart's report in the 1983 Bloxhamist, which lamented the unavailability of many of the better players due to hockey commitments. By 1986 he was admitting that "Fives is rather in the doldrums at present. This is perhaps more a reflection of the strength of the hockey than the weakness of Fives, for there is a lot of good Fives played and when hockey players are available the junior teams, in particular, are quite strong".



2000 - 1st IV, captained by Matthias Lentz

Bloxham continued to produce some talented individuals – Wahab Adejumo won the Plate at the 1990 National Schools Championships and reached the quarter-finals of the main competition the following year, while Matthias Lentz, surely Luxembourg's leading exponent of the game, reached two finals in 2000. Although the 1999 side went without a win in seven matches, the captain, Tor Humpherston, enjoyed excellent singles wins in the fixtures against Blundell's and St Paul's. The outstanding player of recent years was probably Iain de Weymarn (St John's College, Cambridge), a Blue in Rugby Fives in 1999 and 2000.



Iain de Weymarn wins the President's Cup 2003; playing for Cambridge Past in 2009

The 1996 Bloxhamist identified the central problem for a small school with limited numbers of players – “we do have difficulty in putting out competitive teams at all levels as other sports make increasing demands on the talent available”. Following the retirement of Colin Stewart in 2012 after a remarkable 41 years of teaching Economics and running Bloxham Fives, the last few years have seen something of a resurgence of interest in the game with as many as 104 pupils, a quarter of the school, playing the game at some point in the week in 2017, the bulk of them opting for Fives as an activity rather than a games option. Faced with the fact that our best seniors tended also to be in demand as hockey and rugby sevens players, we took the decision to rebuild from the bottom up, and so have focused on boys and girls in the youngest years, and with plans to change the fixture day for minor sports – always a key issue in a school with limited playing resources – as well as to renovate the courts, which are in need of some TLC, we are hopeful of getting a proper list of home and away fixtures up and running once more. Already we have been fortunate to secure good fixtures with the likes of Malvern, Blundell’s and Pilgrims’ in recent years, and an important step was taken in 2017 with a promising group of Under 13 players attending the National Schools for the first time. Another very hopeful sign has been the recruitment of Bertie Matthew onto the staff from Blundell’s.



Bloxham versus Rugby (a) 2015

The game of Fives, one of the most historic and iconic of the games given to the world by the Victorian public school, continues to be an important part of Bloxham School life over 150 years after it was first played here.

I am grateful to Mike Fenn of the EFA and to Ian Fuller and the late Ian Roberts of the RFA for their assistance, to Bob Dolby for his encouragement and especially to Colin Stewart for introducing me to this wonderful game many years ago.

Simon Batten, Master-in-Charge of Fives
June 2018



Simon Batten and Colin Stewart on court July 2018

**RULES FOR THE GAME OF FIVES
(suiting Bloxham Courts)
The Bloxhamist Vol. VII, no. 68 (1881)**

1. Each game shall consist of 14 and a game ball; if both sides are at 13, the game may be set at 5, at the option of the outside, and if both sides are at 14, the game may be set at 3, provided that the inside at the time of setting shall only take one hand the first innings after setting, and also that no false return of the game ball shall be allowed.
2. The first innings of the first game to be by lot, afterwards the winner of the preceding game to go in first.
3. The side going in can only take one hand the first innings.

4. In serving the server must stand on the left-hand side of the Court, the player who returns the server standing in a line with him; the out-playing partner of the server stands behind the returner, and the out-playing partner of the returner stands behind the server.
5. The ball must be served to the front and right wall, and returned on one of the side walls, and then on the front wall; but if a ball be falsely served it is at the option of the adversary to return it.
6. The player who has to return the ball may under no circumstances change places with his partner.
7. If a ball after having been struck by a player touch his partner or himself it is an ace, or hand-out against him.
8. If a ball after having been struck by a player touch one of the opposite side before it has touched the wall, it be counted a let.
9. If a player strike at and miss a ball, his partner may play it; but he cannot claim a let if his adversary is in the way.
10. If the ball strike the roof, it is a hand-out (*old court*).
11. Under no circumstances may kicking the ball be allowed.
12. In returning the game-ball the third successive false return counts against the striker.
13. Only on the first occasion of game-ball being served game-ball need be called.
14. In all disputed cases the decision of the marker shall be final.
15. If the ball strike anything but the bare court it be counted an ace or hand-out against the striker.
16. If the ball *pitch* out of court it be counted an ace or hand-out against the striker.
17. The above rules apply to single as well as double Fives.
18. The above rules also apply to Bat Fives, except—
 - (i.) The ball must be served to the front wall,
 - (ii.) If the ball be falsely served it counts against the server.