

FIVES AT BEDFORD SCHOOL and THE RFA

by Peter Mellor

A rainy day in September 1957, aged 13, a long way from the Isle of Wight, saw me arriving at Burnaby House with a label attached 'Keen on sport'. Not long after, I am on a strange court, four bare walls, no racquet like squash or tennis, just gloves and a hard ball. My coaches and mentors were housemaster Owen Bevan, who scurried round the court getting everything back, and his son, Simon, whose elegance, style and effortless ease told me what a beautiful sport this was. The challenge of no racquet, just me versus the other guy, was quite humbling. As was my way, at 4 o'clock after school, I booked a court and practised until I had mastered all that I had been taught. At 14, I joined the 1st IV, and at 15 had the good fortune to win the National Schools. Two years later, the Rugby Fives Association (RFA), which I had never heard of, handed me a bronze replica of a Fives Glove (see photo) and told me that I had broken a record of three wins in a row. Today, I look at the bronze, here in my office, trying to recall how or indeed why it wasn't until many years later did I realise that it was my school that gave me the time, the courts, the equipment, the mentors and the coaches. Fives was a significant sport, with around 80 players around the school, and standards were high. This was the background that gave birth to the 'golden time' when the school dominated the National Championships for most of the 60s and 70s.

Around 10 years ago, Michael Croker, art master extraordinaire, then Master i/c Fives, felt that the sport needed a boost. He proposed two cups, one in the name of Tony Dawes, a top player in his time about 25 years before me, for the best player in the school, and another cup, in my name, for the best junior fives player, which I was very proud to support, knowing what 'young' was.

I try and go back to the school each year, now to see Harry Vann, the current M/i/c, to taste the culinary delights of the canteen and give a talk to the boys, telling them about practice, key shots and where to hit the ball. I thoroughly enjoy this opportunity, especially now that the Prep School has started to play, an inspirational move, knowing that from the young will spring the best future for this special and unique game.

A year or so ago, the RFA asked if I would be able to lend a hand. Again, I readily accepted, hoping that my financial experience could be usefully applied. I shared some serious thoughts about strategy, communications, market positioning, building new courts, merchandising and sponsorship. What is high on their agenda is Funds to support what is! However, I have to say, despite a few bumpy passages, much change is at hand in the RFA. Most importantly, there is clear understanding that Fives is a unique sport with special values and qualities, available all the year round, easy to play, resource-light, for the young a 'gateway' sport, either in its own right or as a way on to other sports. A recent reward for the RFA was the commissioning of 6 courts by a London Secondary School, a first in the state sector. For sure, the RFA needs help, particularly financial help which will come from an expansion of its membership, charitable donations and from the wider community of philanthropists and sponsors, willing to support youth education in all its constituent parts.

Floreat Quinque Iterum

Peter Mellor (at Bedford School 1957-62)

Fives at Bedford School and the RFA



The RFA awarded Peter this bronze replica of a fives glove as a 3 times winner of National Schools Fives Championships - the record which still stands today!

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Recent National Fives Championship which took place at the Cambridge University courts



(l-r) Jerry Cooper (Master in charge of fives at Bedford, 1963-1993), Chris Patten (64-74), Peter Mellor, Tony Dawes (37-49) and Julian Dalzell (55-67)

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