



## **Annual General Meeting of the Rugby Fives Association**

**21st September 2023**

### **Report of the General Secretary**

The past season was quite successful in terms of competitions completed and the emergence of some new challengers to the “Big Three” top ranked players, representing a strong return to normality; on the other hand, the relatively low numbers of completed Club Matches was something of a disappointment, and only one Challenger tournament took place.

Membership (31st August) has grown to 451 members with 52 new members since the date of the last AGM. 123 members are under 25, but more than 200 are over 45, emphasizing the need to bring a consistent stream of new players into the RFA. We have continued the efforts outlined in last year’s report to focus on identifying school leavers and seeking to retain them and to this end have extended free membership to 19 to make joining very easy as they leave school and are finding their places at university.

The current relatively good financial position of the RFA does not disguise the fact that our annual income is relatively low and, although sufficient to maintain our essential baseline activities and the running of tournaments, that we don’t have the resources, human or financial, to achieve what we need to maintain the sport in a healthy state. The work done to create a strategy for the RFA has not been backed up with enough activity to really move the RFA forward, and it seems inevitable that if members don’t have enough time to undertake these tasks voluntarily, we will have to employ people. As a first, very modest, step on this path, we have employed a contract Administrator to undertake the more repetitive tasks of the General Secretary to free up his time to work on the wider goals of the RFA.

On the same theme, a full day meeting will be held on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2023, sponsored by RFA Member and former three-time National Schools Champion Peter Mellor, to discuss the “Future of Fives”, at which it is hoped that we can identify the key actions required to ensure the continued health of our sport and how these actions can be resourced, so they do not simply remain as good ideas.

The place of women in Fives has strengthened again. We currently have 44 women members (just under 10%) and in addition to the Ladies tournaments, a new Open Mixed Doubles tournament,

inspired by two prominent women players, successfully drew top male as well as female players. This event, held at Cambridge, was also the first to be filmed by a professional photographer, and excerpts from the resulting video were circulated to members as well as through social media.

Playing of squash court fives has started to pick up with Fives being successfully taught on squash courts at Stamford and Strathallan schools, and efforts being made at Warwick University to re-establish a Fives Club there on the squash courts.

Stoke Newington community club (The Stoke Newington Swifts), has made reasonable progress in its first year, with 1 pupil entering the National Schools U13 where he reached the last 16, and 2 pupils playing in the U14s. Evening sessions have been attended by a mixture of pupils, their parents and established players, but we have yet to make the breakthrough in attracting complete outsiders. We have now obtained the agreement of the school to operate outside school terms, avoiding public holidays and with a break in August. This is an important step forward, and Matt Hale has also agreed to continue to run the Swifts for another year.

Two events in the last 12 months have emphasized the fragility of the Fives “estate” and the risk that the courts being owned by someone else poses. The University of Durham announced that they were considering repurposing their two courts as an arena for a boxing ring. After a concerted campaign mounted by the RFA (and maybe because that’s what they wanted all along) they moved to a 3-year agreement to allow the City of Durham Club to continue to use the courts, on what is essentially a “pay for play” basis, with the courts remaining free for the University club. Similarly, Clifton College has started to charge the West of England club for the use of the one court that they are still prepared to leave for Fives (the other three being used for weight training). They would not consider a proposal for leasing the entire building so we could set up a regional Fives hub.

As mentioned in last year’s Report, “pay for play”, or some other form of financial contribution to Fives at schools seems increasingly likely to be required, especially at those venues where the school is not an enthusiastic supporter of Fives. Coaching might be one alternative contribution, and I recently put out a request for possible coaches which received several positive responses. Another interesting suggestion (following the model used as Fettes) would be to have Fives offered as a “activity” rather than (or as well as) a sport thus meaning it would not be in direct competition with major sports which syphon off the best and keenest sports players.

With regret we report the passing of Roger Freebairn, former Master i/c at Oundle, whose obituary can be found at <https://therfa.uk/about/archive/obituaries/> and George Baker (Alley’s and Cambridge), who won the Public Schools Doubles with Dave Hebden in 1967 and the Universities Singles and Doubles (with Dave Hebden) in 1967.

**Chris Blakeley**

General Secretary

September 2023