

Various theories about the origin of the term 'Fives'

Bob Dolby to Dave Hebden and David Barnes July 15th 2013

In the very witty 'history' of the Clove Club by Bill Pett there is a reference to the Hackney Downs method of scoring.

"The game consisted of 20 points, the side winning the toss taking the first service and receiving last, the service being changed as the leading side reached the score of 5, 10 and 15, the players rotating in a clock-wise direction."

I've always felt that the name 'Fives' has nothing to do with a 'bunch of fives' but more to do with the scoring system. I'm sure Dave H. knows much more about the scratching of scores on walls than I do but I remembered the following bit from Caroes the architects' article on fives in churches:

5. Tally marks

Identified at Martock by Prebendary Saunders (1923) these may take the form of a series of five drilled holes in a cross or 'T' pattern with a sixth outlier. Saunders proposed that they were for counting the five services, the sixth hole serving to mark 'game ball', the 21st point.

RLD

Dave Hebden in reply July 18th 2013

Yes, the scoring and derivation of the name 'Fives' is interesting. It would be nice to have a definitive answer for the book but I suspect that won't be possible. The three theories I have come across are:

a) 'Bunch of Fives'. I agree with you that this is unlikely although it seems to be the most popular explanation if you ask the 'fives player in the street'.

b) Number of competitors on each side. A number of early 19c books say definitively that this is the origin of the name 'Fives'. Most if not all of these are drawn from Strutt 1801. The main evidence Strutt offers is the quote below:

In 1591, when queen Elizabeth was entertained at Elvetham in Hampshire, by the earl of Hertford, "after dinner, about three o'clock, ten of his lordship's servants, all Somersetshire men, in a square greene court before her majesties windowe, did hang up lines, squaring out the forme of a tennis-court, and making a cross line in the middle; in this square they (being stript out of their dublets) played five to five with hand-ball at bord and cord as they tearme it, to the great liking of her highness." (quote available on the web)

This is my favoured explanation (1) The name first crops up around this time (I believe) – previously such games were called handball or similar (2) It has the support of Strutt (3) It just seems very plausible to me – a bit like seven aside rugby is called 'sevens'.

c) Scoring system. Yes, this is possible. I'm aware of the tally marks at various Somerset churches (e.g. Martock) and some of these appear grouped in fives. I wasn't aware of the

Hackney Downs rules, but it seems a bit unlikely that this might be linked to some very old scoring systems, e.g. for churchyard fives in Somerset in early 17c? But you could see this as being an origin - e.g. Blackjack is called '21' because you play to 21. If you score in '5s' you could see people calling the game that.

DJH

David Barnes to Dave Hebden and Bob Dolby July 18th 2013

Thanks, Dave, for that succinct summary of the 'Fives' mystery. I change my mind quite frequently on this.

When I think of 'bat-fives' or else of early 'rackets' being called fives, the 'bunch of fives' idea falls out of favour. But then I think of the 'jeux de paume', which lie at the origin of the 'fives group' of games, according to most historians. Obviously this expression translates better as 'handball' rather than 'palm game', but the link with the hand is clear.

The five-a-side theory sounds like rather too many people to put on a court, but 'longue paume' was played out of doors, and one of its living children is the outdoor game called 'rebot', still played on Sundays in the Basque country, with ... five players per side! (One server, two defenders and two attackers, to simplify matters a bit.) As in real tennis, the teams change ends when the score reaches game-ball with one 'chase' to play off or else when two 'chases' have been scored. A 'chase' is best imagined as half-a point, with the other half to be settled later.

There is a huge difference between 'direct' games like real tennis and lawn tennis where teams occupy opposite ends of the court, and 'indirect games' like rackets, fives or squash where players occupy broadly the same areas of the court. It would be hard to envisage a game of 'courte paume' - i.e. a court game played in a restricted space up against a wall - with ten players all trying to get out of each others' way. It's hard enough with four! But for 'longue paume', no problem. So half of me goes for the five-a-side theory!

Then there's the scoring: four times five plus one = 21, as you say. Ingenious - and one can well imagine a gaggle of locals rotating in a clockwise direction out the back of the pub (or church!) to play 'foives' and knock each other about a bit, the more the merrier. The sober one would have kept the score ON THE WALL, so that everyone could see it - no arguments. That's what they do in 'rebot', with the scorer, a village elder who has seen it all before, SINGING the score in Basque before putting it up for all to see. Unfortunately, this is where my analogy breaks down a bit: 'rebot' is played up to 13 games, each game being scored as in real or lawn tennis, 15, 30, 40 and game.

As my father used to say when he didn't know the answer, 'you pays your money and you takes your choice'. It used to annoy me every time he said it, but now I'm his age and more, I'm beginning to see his point!

David [B]