

THE FUTURE OF FIVES

In which direction does Fives go now? During the past fifty years the game has developed considerably so that we now have a regular and increasing pattern of competitive play throughout the season, and throughout the country. However this covers far too few players because the opportunities for regular play are so limited by available, acceptable facilities. Thus we still retain the nucleus of 'closed' Old Boys Clubs with few opportunities for the general population to learn the game.

It is, perhaps, regrettable, that in a modern society, the sports which are prospering, are those which are able to offer more than the sheer physical and competitive element, but the element of comfort as well. To achieve this money is needed and unfortunately for Rugby Fives to break into this circle is proving almost impossible.

The hardy few can always survive, but to develop the game fully we must have the support of the general public, not just a selective few. To obtain this support we must offer more than we do at present. It is all very well to suggest that we use all the available facilities that we have, but it is not easy to persuade people, even enthusiasts, to travel to a court, which might be miles from anywhere; to play in the corner of a field or playground; with limited changing facilities; to spectate or wait to play in the open-air, on a wet, or chill November evening; when, in fact, he can go a short distance from home, enjoy the warmth of a club-house or Sports Centre for changing and engage in conversation with friends whilst waiting for a court to be free; then have the added use of the Club's facilities for socializing after the game.

Obviously we have missed out on the post-war rush to squash—with a bit of luck it could have been fives that 'took off' instead. Now we find ourselves the poor relation—not really seeking the fame of squash, but merely seeking to preserve a game which embodies much skill; an abundance of fitness; and considerable enjoyment. We would like to allow as many people as possible the opportunity of enjoying the game of Fives.

If this is our aim, then we cannot stand still and allow things to continue as they are. We have a steady influx of players, mainly from the Independent Schools, but without players from other sources we can only stay in a backwater, and perhaps slowly fade away.

Over the past few years the Rugby Fives Association has tried to expand and has sought the help of the Sports Council with a number of ideas. Our hopes for a National Centre at Crystal Palace or Manchester, have folded with the economy, and the fact that we must prove the need for the Centre before public money will be committed to the project. Not an unreasonable request, but in view of our present facilities, it is one which is almost impossible to answer.

The Sports Council has, at last, given us the opportunity to prove the need, by financing one or two coaching schemes—one in Bristol and the other in London. There is no guarantee that we will succeed, as basically we are still trying to operate in very limiting, and to present society, unacceptable conditions. Thus we will only attract the dedicated enthusiast, not the larger numbers, to the game. At least, however, we are trying—but if we fail we surely cannot depend upon future support with public money—and thus we shall have to 'go it alone'.

Personally I remain convinced that the only real development scheme that is going to work, is one which involves a 'National Centre' idea. A centre embodying Fives, which has good facilities attached and where we have the opportunity to show off the game to the public. It must also be where we have the enthusiastic organisation to run the Centre.

There is no doubt, at present, that only two places could cope with such a scheme—London and Manchester—and of these the latter must, perhaps, offer the greatest opportunities for development. Their courts are already over-full with adults and juniors and its lack of affiliation to the historical basis of the game—the Independent School—is the welcome feature of Mancunian fives.

Only a plan of some stature will attract real interest. We already have some court plans; we have already investigated the possibility of a glass wall, which would add considerable interest for spectators. We must continue to strive to improve the standard of the ball, in order to make the game as interesting and enjoyable as it was with the older ball, and above all we must do something about raising the money to activate our ideas.

I cannot see public money coming forth and therefore we must, perhaps, look towards sponsorship or to our own efforts. What greater incentive is there to make a scheme work than when it has been achieved by our own efforts and money?

We have an opportunity at present to try and help ourselves. We have some of the finest players that the game has ever seen who are willing to put their time and efforts into making the game a success. We are preparing a Coaching Manual, to help people to coach the game, and Proficiency Awards to help give an incentive to younger people to play and improve their game. If only we can now find the 'House of Fives' to show off our wares, we may yet impress upon the powers that be that Rugby Fives deserves a place in the Sports Centres of Britain—and the World!!

There are those who would wish us to stay as we are and in many ways I would agree. But if it is to be a choice, as I believe is the case, between slowly fading away or advancing towards a more professional status in sport—then there is no choice. The game is too great to die!