

Hand and racket ball games played at Catholic Colleges in England

Information on Ampleforth, Downside, St. Edmund's (Ware), Stonyhurst and Ushaw.

In Spring 1983, the *Tennis and Rackets Association Bulletin* published an article written by the editor and entitled 'Strange Games: Cat or Racket', which read as follows:

Some people keep their eyes open on holiday and Norman Rosser saw what seemed to him to be an old rackets court right in the heart of the main building at **Ampleforth**. On enquiry he elicited the following very interesting information from Father Anthony Ainscough:

'You enquired about the odd looking racket court which may also, I understand, be seen at Downside and Ushaw College in Durham which is now a seminary. At Ushaw the game was known as 'Cat'. (*This is inaccurate, as 'Cat' is one of the other Ushaw games, played outside – see next article by Norman Rosser.*) The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definition: 'A term used in games: esp. a piece of wood tapering at each end, used in tip-cat; also the game itself 1598.' The game played is quite likely a cousin of Pelota, a Basque game.'

'At the time of the dissolution of the monasteries the Benedictines left for the Continent and the future Ampleforth Community settled at Dieulouard in 1608, coming under the influence of Spanish monks and hence the game Pelota. Downside and Douai School had a similar history and this was true for other religious bodies. We remained at Dieulouard until 1792 when we returned to England and eventually settled here in 1802. So far as one can judge from photographs there was no 'ball place' (as now known) c. 1850 but it was certainly there in 1900 and probably a good deal earlier.'

'As to the game itself, known as Racket and NOT Rackets, the racket was made by local carpenters in a local village and of ash wood. Later on the boys made their own by cutting down broken cricket bats, using just the handle and splice area. The ball, very like a fives ball which was often used, was again built by the boys from string wound around a cork and then covered by sheep-skin and sewn with four quarters.'

'The rules were fairly complex. There was a line on the front wall above which the ball had to be served. At the service, the ball had to come back to the short line and not further back than the long line. No service could use the side walls. If the ball bounced unevenly, then a 'Hard' was called and service began again. Three successive 'shorts' or 'longs' put the server out. The clever player made full use of the corners provided by the side walls. A game went up to 21 points. Two or four could play on one court, but there was no change in the dimensions used.'

When compiling this article, the editor of the *Bulletin* asked Norman Rosser for clarification on certain points and received the following reply:

'The Rev. Patrick Barry, a former Headmaster of Ampleforth, came to preach at Malvern and he was telling me of his successful efforts to revive the game some twenty years ago, although it has died now. He agreed with me that the court is, in a strange way, a strikingly beautiful building. It has a dominating position right in the heart of the school buildings, is made of large blocks of stone similar in colour to Cotswold stone. It has a front wall and short side walls, no back wall, and the floor is made of large flagstones. The Rev. Patrick Barry said that when expatriate communities came to England from the Continent, they were determined to be 'more English than the English' and so they modified their games to bring them more in line with English custom – hence the fascinating hybrid form that resulted with something of Pelota and of Rackets in it.'

Two photographs of 'The Cat Court' were published, 'by courtesy of Father Ainscough', but one clearly shows two courts!

Norman Rosser, an indefatigable historian of Tennis and Rackets, wrote an article for the 1984/85 *T. & R. A. Bulletin*, as follows:

The Winter 1985 *T. & R. A.* newsletter (No 13) published a letter from Australia which mentions the Cat court at Ampleforth. Photographs of that court and a description of the game and its equipment appeared in the Spring 1983 bulletin (No 9) and it may be of interest to report on the correspondence with a number of Catholic schools and colleges in March 1983 which resulted from that article, the Rev. Patrick Barry, a former Headmaster of Ampleforth, having written 'I suspect that a Catholic boarding school would not have considered itself properly equipped without such a court.'

Dom Philip Jebb, Headmaster of **Downside** School, sent prospectus photographs which showed two courts, with a central arch which was used for handball. The dimensions of the courts seem to be similar to those at Ampleforth and the Ball Place is again in a very central position in the school. An article in the School magazine 'The Raven' in 1951 begins: 'At Downside in the eighteen-nineties the game known here as Bat-and-Ball was in high favour. It was undoubtedly a splendid game, though requiring as it did considerable skill in the player, it was for the most part limited to a comparatively small number of the bigger boys. Four players were required for a set, two a side, and though the Ball Place could accommodate two sets at a time, it was more convenient if only one set made use of it. Smaller boys, often with damaged or broken bats, played a less stringent variety of the game, against any available wall of the school building.' After describing the origin of the game, its rules, and the bat which had an overall length of 26 inches and was made from one piece of willow, the article ends: 'At the present day when nearing its hundredth birthday, the Ball Place is far from being a 'white elephant'. Against the strong old walls, the boys still play 'small cricket' and 'keep-up' with tennis balls and racquets; the hard ground in front is still of use to the School C.C.F. and sometimes in the afternoon the Juniors and novices may be seen there engaged in a strenuous game of hockey.'

Philip Jebb adds: 'I must have been one of the last to play the game in about 1947. With the new science buildings it is not now really possible to play it properly.'

The Rev. M. G. Garvey, headmaster of **St. Edmund's College, Ware**, wrote: 'Cat seems to have gone out about the turn of the century. Although it was played in a ball place, i.e. an area walled off on two sides, the walls played no part in the game other than preventing the ball getting lost. Its nearest equivalent would seem to be Rounders or Baseball, though every member of the team carried a stick. The ball was made of worsted wound whilst wet. In the 1820s the junior boys had a lottery each week to see who would have to make a cat ball. Those who were chosen were presented with a jar of water with the worsted in it. When the balls had been made they were securely wrapped in many layers of paper and baked in the oven. The balls would rebound 20 feet. On reading our magazine of the 1890s it seems that the sport always began on Michaelmas Day but it was becoming less and less popular. It would appear that the game called 'Football' began to replace it.'

The Rev. F. J. Turner, Archivist of **Stonyhurst** College, wrote: 'We trace our foundation back to St. Omer in the Spanish Netherlands, later in France, in 1593. Because of this isolation many customs, games and even words became, as it were, fossilised and survived for long after Elizabethan times. Handball was one of those and was played against a large stone wall. The first wall can be dated from about 1810; about 1880 it was broken up into two separate walls, about 20 feet high and 40 feet broad, which still survive, although the game does not. Their only use now is for boys to kick a rugby ball against them, or as a background for single wicket cricket when the fields are too wet. The

Centenary Record for 1984 gives an account of Handball and adds: 'One variety of this game which was certainly indigenous, and of which no trace can elsewhere be discovered, was 'Second Bounce'. The balls employed were marvels of manufacturing skill. Round a small core of material, india-rubber, pricked so as to make it soft and spongy, were wound strips of the same material, carefully prepared from large blocks purchased for the purpose. The cover was of the best kid leather, procured in skins, and sewn with silk. They were about the size of a golf ball and nearly as hard, but of wonderful elasticity so as to bound nearly to the height from which they were dropped. Eight players took part in a game, which occupied the whole side of the big handball, the 'over-line' being the 'over-all', bounding the courts to the rear. The party who had to stand out took their places about 30 to 40 yards away. The ball was served in the usual manner, but so as to secure the longest possible flight after re-bouncing from the wall, and as it came out one of the other side, stopping it with his hand in the air, let it bounce twice before offering – to have tried to hit it on the first bounce would have been hopeless. The stroke was given with a long swinging jerk, and propelled the ball as if it had been struck with a racquet; but, with the long distance that had to be traversed there was a sensible interval between the dull thud of the hand and the sharp click on the wall to which the ball was sped. The general principles of the game apart from that peculiarity where it took its name, were the same as the ordinary handball, but the style of play was altogether different, being stately and graceful and evoking admiration rather than excitement.'

Finally the Rt. Rev. Mgr. Peter M. Cookson, President of **Ushaw College** Durham, wrote: 'The information relating to Ushaw in the Spring 1983 bulletin is not quite accurate. The name 'Cat' does not refer to this game, but to another traditional Ushaw game imported from the continent (Ushaw and St. Edmund's College, Ware, are both descended from the College founded in 1568 at Douai in Flanders). Cat is somewhat similar to baseball or rounders and is played in an open field. We do however have courts similar to Ampleforth but with three sides (and the complication of a pent-house) on which two games are played, one a variation of fives, played with the hand, the other a variation of rackets played with a wooden battledore (more like a hurling stick than the Ampleforth racquet). These two games survive (just), but 'cat' has been dead for half-a-dozen years – ever since the junior school here closed and we became exclusively a Theological College.

'I have never heard a Spanish origin attributed to any of these games before. We have always assumed that the expatriate English Catholics took them with them to Flanders from Oxford and Cambridge when they set up their continental Colleges, but this is perhaps wishful thinking.

'It may also be of interest that a rule-book of Ushaw games from about 1810-20 gives a more complex picture. In addition to the above games it lists six other games including a game of Racket played in *covered* courts, apparently with a small bat.'

Norman Rosser concluded: Do any members of the T. & R. A. know of similar courts at other Catholic schools or colleges, or elsewhere?

As far as I know, no further correspondence was published on the subject in the Tennis and Rackets Association bulletins.