

Fives

Nick Hillier has been Master-in-Charge of Fives since 2005. A former captain of the Oxford University 1st VIII, he looks at Fives' current progress at Merchant Taylors' and explains his continued enjoyment of the sport

My enjoyment of Rugby Fives stems in part from the game itself, a fine mixture of all-round physical challenge and skillful pursuit, but almost more from the sport's genteel nature. By this I don't mean that Fives is in any way an easy or soft sport. The ball flies around the court at high speed and I have been on the receiving end of both ball and player on many occasions. What I mean is that those who play Fives are almost invariably of a generous disposition as it seems the sport either attracts those I would describe as gentlemen or it somehow produces them. Indeed, the atmosphere at any Fives event is always one of good cheer and camaraderie. I have now personally played Fives for almost two thirds of my life. I started playing when my Geography teacher in the equivalent of the Upper Thirds at Whitgift School, Nick Morgan, encouraged my group of friends to take it up. I represented the school throughout the rest of time there, although as is often the case this was alongside rugby and hockey. I was lucky to go up to Oxford where the courts are easily accessible to the students and I enjoyed my time representing and captaining both the Beavers team and the 1st VIII. I must admit that one of my criteria when looking for my first

teaching position was that the school played some form of Fives and I was lucky when Merchant Taylors' was my first interview.

Fives has always been popular at Merchant Taylors' and this has been due to a number of staff who have helped promote the sport. Peter Ingram was an incredibly committed Fives master and his legacy is a similarly committed Old Boys' club who still have the enthusiasm that he instilled in them many years ago. More recently, and immediately before I arrived, Owen Toller helped many boys

improve their technique and to enjoy the game through his enthusiasm and deep understanding of Fives. He was also a great help to me as I took over the role of Master-in-Charge and made the transition an easy one.

During my time at Merchant Taylors' many boys have made their way onto the courts and I hope have enjoyed their time there. Fives has always seemed to me a natural game for boys to play. Around every school in the country there will be someone hitting a ball against a wall somewhere and Fives is merely the organised expression of this. In my first few years at Taylors' picking a 1st IV was always made easier as the first name on the list would always be Keir Sloan. Keir remains the most natural player of Fives I have coached as he seemed to have an innate understanding of the length a ball should be hit. When boys start playing, Fives rallies take place only in the front third of the court and you exhort them to strike it harder. Once they improve and get older they continue to try to hit the ball harder and harder which just leads to the ball bouncing invitingly off the back wall and you have to try to train them to aim for a better length. Keir, as well as being incredibly athletic and possessing fine hand-eye coordination, understood this and his shots invariably faded into the back corner.

It was also in these first couple of years that I encouraged as many as possible of the younger boys to take up





the sport. Players such as Peter Judge, who now plays at Cambridge, Cory Percival, Zach Smith and Daniel Hooker all came on board and have been almost permanent fixtures on the courts during my time at the school. One of the great things about Fives is that players can do well in different ways. Some excel in singles where fitness and a good "weak" hand are important. Others are much better in a game of doubles where a strong hit, particularly if on the left hand, helps considerably. Curran Choudhry was one of the latter who could boom the ball around a court and was tricky to break down if playing with a solid right-hander. Other talented players during my time included Nick Hemming-Brown, Shaun Miller and also Chris Cox, Mike Laming and Ashish Patani. The last three of these made up, along with Keir, the 1st IV in my first year at Taylors' and were an extremely keen bunch who had an excellent record that year of only losing two games out of eight, and those against St Paul's and Alleyn's who are generally the strongest teams on the circuit. They were also extremely welcoming to a new teacher and indeed did turn out on the occasional Wednesday night with the OMTs.

I have tried to make sure that Fives has been as accessible as possible. Being a minor sport always means that you are battling for the attention of boys who will already be down for rugby or, during the Fives term, hockey. Therefore I have always run extra clubs after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays and encouraged the boys to come down at lunchtimes as well. Fives is also now a three term sport as a games option, something that has opened it up to more participation. I have always been a firm believer that getting boys on court is the most important thing and that once that is achieved many will stay on with the game.

The OMT club has seemed to go from strength to strength during the last few years. The numbers that play on a Wednesday night have increased and in particular Dan Grant and Gareth Price have been busy entering tournaments both of the Fives variety and now of Handball. Indeed the two of them have been the driving force behind the building of the four handball courts in the sportshall and Gareth is now to be found coaching the boys on a Friday during the hour. The Old Boys also demonstrated the fondness Fives is held in by organising a Rugby Fives OMT

dinner in 2007. This brought together OMTs both young and old for a very enjoyable evening at Durrants.

Fives continues to be a sport that the boys seem to get a real sense of enjoyment from and it continues to be the case at Taylors' that the boys who take it up are invariably good sorts. Currently the 1st IV is made up of a group of Lower Sixth boys who have played the game since joining in the Fourth Form and already have a fine record this year. Next year should prove to be a good one for the school if these boys, including at number one seed a very talented Rushil Patel ably supported by Vivek Patel, Nick Finney, Anuj Shah and, when he can be dragged away from hockey, Russell Lamb, continue to improve as they have. Further down the school it also looks promising with a number of new boys having taken up the sport including Elliot Tebboth who won the Singles Plate competition at this year's Under 14 Nationals only about a month after having started playing. It continues to be a pleasure to introduce these boys, with the assistance of colleagues Simon Stott and Berta Broncano, to the mysteries of a game I feel has so much to offer.