

Dr Paul M Smith (1936-2014)

Paul Smith was one of the best of the many fine fives players to come out of Merchant Taylors' School in the 1950s and '60s. To quote from words spoken at his funeral by Philip Newfield on behalf of the OMT Society:

'Fives was probably Paul's strongest sport. OMT have historically been very strong at fives and Paul represented OMT regularly in matches against other fives clubs. He reached the final of the UK National Singles in 1956 in which he lost to John Pretlove, who is known to other OMT fives players here today. Paul also took great interest in young OMT fives players' performances and supported and encouraged them as much as he was able to. In 2007 OMT Fives Club honoured Paul by arranging a Fives Dinner at Durrants attended by many OMT Fives players, past and present, and their opponents, including the RFA President, John East.'

Paul first made his mark in school fives in 1954, when he won six singles matches out of seven for Merchant Taylors' at home; and then in the Schools' Championships at Whitgift the same year, when he was within a whisker of reaching the final. He took the first game of his semi-final against JP Granger of Oundle by 15-11 and needed 12 in the second game to win the match, but fell 4 points short of his target.

In 1956, as a young medical student, Paul entered the Amateur Singles for the second time. Reaching the third round, he beat the seeded Roy Birmingham, the 1954 winner and 1955 runner-up, 15-13, 16-14. He then proceeded to defeat Mike Skliros, another seeded player, 15-5, 15-12 in the semi-final. By this stage it looked as if the OMT Club might be able to celebrate their first Amateur Singles champion, but John Pretlove was at the height of his powers and won the Jesters Club Cup for the third time in four years 'in a fast, hard-hitting match', as the RFA Handbook reported.

Paul entered the Amateur Singles three more times, reaching the third round twice and collecting some good scalps along the way, but he never got to another final. Sadly, his competition career ended prematurely when he lost the sight of an eye as a result of a detached retina, although he carried on playing fives and cricket (another favourite sport) for a number of years.

Paul was not only fun to play against but also wonderful company at the 'après-fives'. The OMT Fives Club held a number of memorable dinners in the 1960s at Durrants, their hospitable HQ. Paul was a hilarious, if risqué, after-dinner speaker with a rich fund of stories and a fondness for post-prandial singing. He was, after all, half-Welsh, but the half-English side of him enabled him to sit on Offa's Dyke and always support the winning side in the annual Rugby encounter between the two nations. 'Didn't we play well?' he would say with his inimitably appealing laugh, to the victorious team's supporters at the end of the match.

Paul was President of the OMT Society from 2006 to 2007 and was granted Honorary Life membership, a mark of distinction. He remained a member of the RFA and the Jesters Club until his death.

David Barnes

