

## John Howe (1943-2015) – by Stan Holt

### The Fives Player

John Howe, winner of 33 Fives titles including the National Singles twice, died from cancer on the island of Gozo where he had been living for the past several years.

I first met John when I returned to St. Dunstan's College as a junior member of staff in 1961: he was then in the Languages Sixth and Captain of cricket and Fives.

John possessed brilliant hand-eye coordination, which together with a quickness of movement and great athleticism set him apart as a sportsman of the highest calibre. He had the skills to play many games to a very high standard whatever the size, shape or composition of the ball. A junior tennis champion and talented wicket-keeper/batsman, he could also bowl spin or pace and was an unrivalled fielder; he was a low handicap golfer even though he played only occasionally and played soccer for his local village side; and he represented the Old Dunstonians at squash, playing at number 1 and rarely beaten.

However, it was Fives where he came fully into his own and was a player second to none. Physically unmistakable with his shock of red curly hair he was a uniquely gifted player. I was lucky enough to partner him on many occasions – all games were a pleasure because he played with such enthusiasm and obvious enjoyment. On court he was scrupulously fair and would pit his skills against all types of opposition with a great sense of fun. Of all the activities that John took part in I would suggest he was never happier than when playing Fives.

Two occasions epitomise the 'John Howe approach to Fives'. Firstly, in 1972 after the Saturday's games at Manchester a discussion began in the pub about the various pro's and con's of the job. On Sunday we reached the final versus Gardner & Reid and John decided to try to win the game by lobbing – and for 2½ hours played virtually no other shot! At 4.30 there was a knocking on the court door and the caretaker informed us that he was locking up at 5 and if we wanted a shower we had better stop playing. With the match undecided we shared the trophy – a unique occasion for Fives, especially for David, Stuart and myself who were trying to play normally!

The second was an evening match between the Old Dunstonians and the Old Merchant Taylors'. John and I played Richard Bulgin and John Wiles in the first set of Doubles in a hard fought 'normal' game. The second set saw us matched against Graeme Prodger and Paul Coker. Graeme, another immensely gifted player, was renowned for his boisterous play and outrageous shots – John saw this as a challenge and was determined to match him shot for shot. For the next hour and a half Paul and I played the occasional shot to keep the rally going while Graeme and John played a 'virtual' singles and provided us with a spectacle of Fives that I had not witnessed before or since. The antics, variety of shot, speed of movement and level of skill were breath-taking – if only it had been filmed! Who won? It didn't matter – it was played for fun and wonderful to watch.

It is said that soccer is a gentleman's game played by hooligans and rugby is a hooligan's game played by gentlemen. Perhaps Rugby Fives is a gentleman's game played by gentlemen and if so, John was one of its finest examples.

*See the end of this tribute for a list of John's Fives titles*

## **The Man**

John was not just an exceptional sportman – he was highly intelligent and possessed many other talents. He was fluent in both French and German (testimony to the expert teaching of Messrs Hughes, Tresillian, Dickens and Taylor).

Leaving school in 1962 he joined BP and worked for them for the next twenty years, during which time he was posted to Hamburg from 1969-1971. In those two years who knows how many Fives competitions he might have won had he still be playing. Retiring early he took up a tennis coaching post at New Beacon School and did a number of part-time jobs including working as road manager for 'The Flying Wine Man' Andrew Jones on three-week tours to various parts of the USA.

He enjoyed cooking, and meals with him were a culinary experience. He was a great malt whisky fan – he recorded all his tastings and purchases with meticulous care.

John was a great hiker who went on solo month-long expeditions walking across Spain, traversing the South Island of New Zealand, walking grandes routes in France, the Trans-Pennine Way and the South West way from Barnstaple to Plymouth. Beach-combing was a serious pastime too, and his bathroom was decorated with his remarkable and artistic 'finds'.

His favorite TV show was 'Strictly' where he could appreciate the skill of the dancing together with the artistic flair of the settings and productions.

John had contracted cancer of the colon some years ago and had recovered well after surgery, but the condition returned with a vengeance a few months ago and he died on August 19<sup>th</sup> in Gozo where he had been living for the past few years. His funeral took place there, arranged by his son Guy, followed by a beach party of which I am sure John would have approved.

A memorial service was held at New Beacon School in November.

## **Fives titles**

National Singles (2) 1966 and 1968

National Doubles (2) 1967 and 1968 (both with Stan Holt)

Veterans Singles (6) 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993

Veterans Doubles (4) 1988, 1989, 1990 (all with Geoff Sherratt), 1994 (with David Barnes)

West of England Singles (1) 1968

West of England Doubles (4) 1966 and 1967 (with Eric Marsh), 1979 and 1980 (with Chris Heron)

North West Singles (1) 1968

North West Doubles (5) 1968 (with Duncan Turner), 1972\* and 1973 (with Stan Holt), 1978 (with Chris Heron)

North of England Singles (3) 1966, 1967, 1968

North of England Doubles (2) 1963 (with Ken Knight), 1984 (with Chris Heron)

Yorkshire Open Doubles (3) 1972 (with Stan Holt), 1980 and 1981 (with Chris Heron)

\*shared with David Gardner & Stuart Reid (see above for explanation)



1994 with Dave Hebden