

A tribute to Howard Wiseman

HERE'S TO HOWARD - WHO HAS DONE SO MUCH TO SAVE OUR GAME

Tonight Howard Wiseman is celebrating his first 25 years as a professional fives coach with an event at St Olave's which has attracted nearly 150 people. The evening also celebrates more than 100 years of Olavian Fives ... but the point is that there wouldn't be such a landmark without Howard.

Howard has saved Eton fives. Pretty much single-handedly, he has rescued the game from its sickly state in the 1980s (when courts were being knocked down, tournament attendance was dwindling and even our equipment was parlous) and has nurtured it to the point that it is sitting up in bed and looking pretty cheerful.

Now, I know that there have been many others who have devoted a great deal of time and thought to how to make our game more healthy and I don't mean to be disrespectful but this is Howard's night and he deserves the plaudits.

Howard – with the potent combination of vision, persistence and tact – addressed the two great issues facing the game in the late eighties:

- 1/ we needed coaches because there were no longer enough schoolmasters with fives experience to pass on their knowledge in fives-playing schools, and
- 2/ we had no decent gloves with which to play the game.

These two problems had proved intractable: I learned the game at a school which had no fives-playing masters (and owe a huge debt of gratitude to some indulgent sixth-formers), with gloves I had stolen from the graves of former players. The game was in danger of withering.

But Howard – as we now all know, set up a fives coaching agency – the first ever. And he designed and had manufactured the first decent fives gloves since Slazenger stopped providing them.

His coaches have taught the game at literally dozens of schools – many of which would no longer be playing the game if he had not done so. St Olave's, City of London, St Bartholomew's Newbury, Lancing, Emanuel, Oakham, City of Norwich and Rydal Penrhos are just the tip of the iceberg. Just think of all the schools who have benefitted and are benefitting from [Olavian Fives](#) players or REFCA coaches – Westminster, Berkhamsted, Eton, Highgate and Shrewsbury spring to mind but there are many others.

We all (or nearly all) play with Howard's gloves.

And Howard the player has scaled the heights. Howard won the Kinnaird for the first time in his late 30s. He won it playing honest, generous fives and you can't say more than that for a player. Moreover, I don't think there's anybody who won it for the first time at such an age, which says much for the way that he worked on his game and invented himself as a player. Most successful players are nurtured through their careers either by successful clubs or by doting Svengalis but Howard had no such help – the Olavians' first glory days were back in the 1960s. He himself created the environment in which he could thrive and in which many of us have thrived. There's

not a fives club in the country which Howard hasn't helped or a player which hasn't been influenced by him.

The very way the game is played owes much to Howard. It has evolved along lines that Howard has devised. For instance, the variations of return-of-cut which all the top players now employ were developed by him.

I could go on – and would with pleasure – but for now let's celebrate Howard's huge contribution to the game we love.

And if you can contribute to Howard's latest plan, to build four more courts at St Olave's School to create a south-London fives hub, please do so. Details on how are here:

<http://olavianfives.com.gridhosted.co.uk/>

So, if you care about Eton fives – one of this country's most marvelous sporting inventions – raise a glass to Howard.

John Reynolds [posted on Facebook September 2016]