

# High Fives for a game of Rugby with a difference

The Cambridge Independent, 22 February 2017

Mark Taylor



*James Powley shows how to play Rugby Fives at University of Cambridge Sports Centre, Philippa Fawcett Dr, Cambridge. Picture: Keith Heppell*

Rugby Fives, heard of it? The immediate answer from most people is no and then the assumption is that it is some sort of variation of rugby sevens.

After all, the shortened version of rugby union has proved to be a huge success, grabbing the attention of many around the globe at the Rio Olympics.

And such is the way in sport that when an idea is cottoned on to, organisations tend to jump on the bandwagon and adapt and adapt, with the ultimate end goal to make it as exciting as possible for audiences for as short a time as possible.

But Rugby Fives has nothing to do with rugby. In fact, it is probably as far removed from it as you could get.

“Obviously, the word rugby you associate with the game rugby and then I say it’s a game very similar to squash, except you’re using your hands,” said James Powley, squash coach at the University of Cambridge Sports Centre.

“So, then they get curious and that drags them up here, and the rest is history.”

And it is a sport that certainly has a long history in Cambridge.

It has been played at the university for more than 100 years, since the building of three courts at Portugal Place in 1892.

The Cambridge University Rugby Fives Club came into existence in 1925 – the year of the first Varsity Match – and they played and practised at Portugal Place until June 1995, when the courts were demolished by owners St John's College for residential development.

A nomadic existence for the club followed, but past players from Cambridge had raised money in memory of Jock Burnet, president of the club from 1949 to 1989, to build new courts.

And in 2013 they found their home at the new University of Cambridge Sport Centre at West Cambridge – where a plaque is mounted on the wall in memory of Burnet.

“I came up here and watched and the first thing I saw was that the movement was very close to squash, except you're not using a racquet so that intrigued me and then I had a go and I was hooked,” said Powley, who has a rich background in squash.

He has coached the sport around the world, is the England squash and racketball under-15 and aspire coach and spent nine years as head squash coach at Hunts County Squash Club for the Sports Academy.

And now he also oversees the Rugby Fives.

“Anybody that plays squash or has played squash will really love this game, and there is the other form, which is Eton Fives,” said Powley.

“That takes on another dynamic, and the game is called a game of hazards, which tells you a little bit about it. You hit the ball off different ledges and obstacles to create different angles to try to catch your opponent out.

“I don't call it a racquet sport because you don't have a racquet in your hand, but in theory you could call it a racquet sport and it's the only one that uses both sides of your body so you've got your non-dominant side as well as your dominant side.

“I've been playing it for probably around seven months and the left side of my body has improved so much, almost to the case that I have started to use my left hand for certain things, even something really silly like painting.”

So what exactly is Rugby Fives? Well, it is a variation of the older game of Eton Fives, to which players can progress, and emanates from Warwickshire school. There is also a Winchester Fives as well.

Rugby Fives is for singles and doubles, players wear gloves and the ball must be struck prior to it bouncing twice, and above a 'bar' across the front wall.

You can only score a point when receiving serve. It is the first to either 11 or 15 and is the best of three games.

In contrast, Eton Fives is only for doubles and the scoring goes up to 15.

“The take-up's been brilliant,” said Powley. “As it is a niche sport we've found that we've – rather than squash where people just turn up and play – been doing inductions and that's the way we've been getting people playing on a court.

“Introducing the game, quick rules and away they go, and then they love it.

“You hit a ball with your hand, you have fun, pick the ball up, hit it again and just continue having fun. We’ve adapted the ball as well. You can play it with five to six year olds; you can start that young, although most of them start around 10 or 11 with a hardball.

“It’s not as demanding as squash.

“I know there may be maybe one or two more [courts] that are like this but not in an enclosed environment. The environment is very welcoming as well and obviously inside, whereas most Eton and Rugby Fives courts can be found outside. So this is a unique facility in the UK.”

The courts are open to the public, who just need to be members of the sports centre.

And there was success for Cambridge in the Rugby Fives Varsity Matches at the weekend, with the men’s team winning 293-94 and the ladies’ team earning a 180-6 success.