



A true champion of Fives

David Barnes and Dave Hebden pay tribute to Ian Fuller, Fives player

Last year's Review paid tribute to Ian Fuller and his years of service to the RFA, but the fact that he has now decided to retire from tournament Fives provides the opportunity to celebrate his remarkable on court achievements.

Ian learnt the game at Tonbridge School on Winchester Fives courts from 1966, one year before Tony Wynn, another future champion, joined the school. Says Ian: "I was put down for (House) Fives one week – never having played it – given some ropey old gloves and told to get on with it. I won, enjoyed it and was kept playing Fives each week!"

Ian was in the 1st IV for three years and captain for two. "We had the same core squad for three years and gradually improved our fixture list as we got stronger. Beating the mighty Alleyn's on their own courts was the highlight of our last year."

Ian's record in the National Schools' singles was good, with two consecutive semi-finals. A heavy loss to Wayne Enstone in 1970 didn't dismay him. "I thought I was playing pretty well, making several winning shots, but the ball kept coming back... and back! I gradually improved and got a few points over the years until 44 years later I beat him in the Vintage singles. Perseverance pays!"

The revival in Tonbridge Fives led master-in-charge Mike Bushby to take the bold decision in 1971 to fill in the buttress in two of the Winchester courts, to allow the school to host Rugby Fives

playing schools on equal terms. Two more courts were converted later. An abiding memory from Ian's schooldays was the masterclass given by John Pretlove: "I had never seen the nick hit so regularly or with such devastating effect – a real inspiration for the future."

Immediately after school, Ian enjoyed playing in many RFA Club games and was impressed by how friendly and sociable everybody was. He entered the National Singles and Doubles regularly in the 1970s, and describes the decade as a learning process. His Singles challenge was ended, often in the third round, by Dave Hebden (three times), Wayne Enstone (twice) and John East (twice). The partnerships with Bob Peters (five times) and Keith Puckle (five times) in the Cyriax resulted in two semi-finals.

The 1972 Lancashire Open at Manchester was Ian's first regional tournament. "The small courts were a bit of a shock but started my affection for the tournament and the YM club. I remember watching Eric Marsh go into the court 5/10 mins early and just practise hitting to a perfect length on both hands. An object lesson.

"Climbing the 132 steps to play Wayne on his home courts was one of the most daunting experiences especially in front of the locals! 'Come on, Ian', they would say - 'dig in' - when I had absolutely no energy and was bereft of ideas!"

Ian was the initiator of the Club Knockout

Championship in 1974, and when Tom and Joan Wood heard about it they presented a magnificent trophy. The Wood Cup has been contested every year since, and Ian played in five winning RFA Club sides between 1976 and 1982. Later in the 1980s, he also participated in strong teams from the Old Tonbridgians and the West of England Club.

The 1980s saw Ian emerge as a complete player. He was four times National Singles runner-up to Wayne Enstone between 1980 and 1989 and won his first Singles title at the West of England in 1988. But it was in doubles that success first came. His epic partnership with Dave Hebden started in 1980, when the pair won the first of their titles in the North-West (then the Greater Manchester County Open). They immediately proceeded to win the Cyriax Cup, beating Wayne Enstone and John East, champions for the previous five years, in a two-game final lasting almost two hours. David Gardner's match



LEFT
21 consecutive years in the National Doubles final

ABOVE
Ian and Dave win the 'Barnes Bridge' eight years in a row!

CENTRE
Ian with two other great Singles champions

and he and Dave Hebden were soon winning the West of England doubles to add to their other titles. They were victorious six years in succession (1986-91) and five more after that (1993-94 and 1996-98). To round off the extraordinary array, Ian and Dave won five further regional doubles titles, and Ian collected five more with other partners.

It would be quite wrong to think of Ian as only a doubles player. Although success in the National Singles eluded him in the 1980s, he won the West of England title six times (1988-90 and 1996-98). Other regionals in which he won singles titles were the North of England (1996-99), the North-West (1998) and the London (1997-98). But undoubtedly his greatest triumphs were to win the National Singles in 1997 and 1998, defeating Neil Roberts each time. The second of these wins, at the age of 45, opened the way to a unique record: when Ian won the Veterans' Singles later that season, he became the only player to have held both

National and Veterans' titles at the same time.

Ian left his mark on the Veterans' Championships, winning the Singles five times and the Doubles, in partnership with Jeremy Schroeter, every year from 1999 to 2004. And when he was ripe for the Vintage (over 55), he won the Singles three times –

including that first win over Wayne, 44 years after their first encounter – and the Doubles five, one of them in partnership with his old nemesis.

This account would be incomplete without reference to Winchester Fives, the version of the game to which Ian was first introduced at Tonbridge. He and Dave Hebden (who else?) established another record in the National Winchester Doubles, winning the Barnes Bridge eight times in a row from 1996 to 2003.

His perennial partner, Dave Hebden, has the last word: "By any measure Ian Fuller should be rated as one of the very top players in the game of Rugby Fives. He developed a left hand that was second to none in terms of retrieval and defence, whilst his crisp low hitting with both hands made him a formidable doubles and singles opponent. Ian's economical style, steady temperament and tactical astuteness enabled him to play some of his best Fives in later years. But those that look back on Ian as a player will remember best his amazing ability to play the cross-court shot, taking the ball early and hitting crisply and low, and with disguise. No greater compliment to a cross-court shot can be made than to call it 'Fuller-esque!'"