

Interview with David Gardner 2017-18

David, what is your first memory of Fives?

As a 12 year old I would sit on the high benches in the playground at lunchtime and eat my sandwiches. These benches also served as a viewing platform for a rather peculiar game which I had never seen before, which involved hitting a ball against a wall, with gloves on! I would often finish my lunch, then stand on the benches and view this spectacle through some rather solid chicken wire! Whilst I was interested enough to want to try the game, this was not possible for juniors, and only when we were put into Houses, after 2 years in the school, were we allowed to try things out for ourselves. It seems that I took to it like a 'duck to water'!

What do you remember of how Fives was run at SDC in those early days, not long after the war?

Looking back, I think it was rather thriving. There was a master i/c Fives – Jim Williams – not a fives player himself, although I believe that he may have played the odd game of Eton Fives at some time in the past. However, he was a great enthusiast and provided tons of encouragement, even though fives was really run by the boys themselves. There was a full list of fixtures ranging from visits to Epsom Downs to the far-flung North, in Hertfordshire (via the Underground to Moor Park). What an exciting day out that was!

Jim was at all the home matches – be it Wednesday or Saturday – and often went away to more local schools, although we were sent off on safari alone to Moor Park!

Fixtures were very much part of the scene when I appeared, so – and I suspect the school records would show this – things must have got going rapidly again after the war. The Old Boys were flourishing – players like John Mockford, Pat Cordell, Ted Robertson and Ralph Judd, all post war players –, combining with pre-war stalwarts such Ron Musk, Eric Scading, Geoff Wise, and, of course, Teddy Goddard (Gen. Sec.) who held the whole Club together, seemingly for centuries! He also attended many school home matches on his famous motorbike and created a link for future players for the OD Club.

Learning the game was done in the House system, where the best players taught and encouraged the youngsters. Each House had a small amount of its own equipment, but, obviously, you were encouraged to purchase your own gloves asap – this was often done rapidly, as you did not want to be seen wearing 'borrowed gloves'. There were ample House competitions, and the School Fives Captain and his cohorts would keep a wary eye on emerging players at these events and select them for 'Team Practice'.



1958 with Peter Grender

School Team Selection was the responsibility of the Fives Captain, under the ever watchful eye of Jim. The courts were always available for use and we would just go out and play whenever we wanted. Stan [Holt] and I used to snatch a quick 45 minutes a couple of lunch hours a week. No Health and Safety hindrances to worry about in those days!



1955 Gardner & Holt versus Ingram & Morris at the Public (National) Schools



1955 Johnson & Freebairn, Holt & Gardner at the Public (National) Schools



1955 St Dunstan's: Sharman, Williams, Rolfe, Wade, Holt Gardner, Grender

[It shows, apart from Stan & me – Peter Grender, who sadly died recently; Jack Wade – front left – who still lives in Australia, but appeared a year ago at an OD re-union; Dave Sharman top left – still lives in Charlton – and John Rolfe – became an actor]

What do you remember of the Schools Competition at Whitgift and indeed any school matches at the senior end of your schooldays?

I remember very little really – except Charles Whyte, who ran things as efficiently as ever. The competition was, of course, a very big event in the Schools Calendar, especially as St. Dunstan's had never won anything before – and were in with a chance. I never performed well in the Singles – Stan was always better at singles in those days and twice reached the last 8. In 1955 in the Doubles we were, I think, the favourites. One of the photos shows the Bedford pair – Ingram & Morris (our semi-final opponents) – and the other shows Freebairn & Johnson (our quarter-final opponents from Oundle).

In the final we played Whitgift, who we had beaten comfortably on the Catford courts in a school match, but victory in the final on their home courts was not to be, although I still maintain that in reality we WON, as we scored more points than them in the 3 games, losing 10-12, 11-4, 10-12! I do remember a very long break at one point, after Ian Anderson, with his flailing left hand, managed to break my nose and cause a severe nosebleed, which needed not just medical attention, but the cleaning services as well. Ian was partnered by John Ewart.

I was actually quite lucky to even play in that event. I remember entering the Civil Service Examinations that year, which in the end clashed with the Schools event – having sought the advice of my Headmaster as to what I might do about it. He rather tactfully pointed out that, although it was my choice, he was not sure that I was suited to the Civil Service!

Of schools matches not much really stands out in my mind – so long ago. I do remember one new fixture v. Forest School – where St. D's won by 180 points to 8! In hindsight we should have eased off and allowed a decent game to develop, but the enthusiasm of youth prevailed and getting maximum points became the priority!

Perhaps the other thing that always sticks in my mind was when I first met Alastair McKenzie – he played No 1 for the RFA v. St. Dunstan's and finally won a very tense singles battle by 15-13! He then spent the next 50 years reminding me that he did beat me ONCE in his playing career!



The Gardner Cup for London Singles

What do you remember of your time at Loughborough, with special reference to your thesis on Fives courts and your founding of the Universities event?

I started at Loughborough Training College, as it then was, in September 1958 after completing National Service. At the same time Stan Holt also went there. He was my doubles partner from schooldays and so it was natural that we should look around for anywhere to play fives in Leicestershire. By pure chance, one day we were visiting another Hall of Residence – Quorn Hall – and one of the students told us that there was a squash court there. As soon as we looked at this we realised that it was, in fact, a fives court – stone floors etc, in an old barn, converted to squash by painting walls etc. – so it wasn't long before we were able to get some sort of a game going. I have no idea if this court still exists or if it is still a Hall of Residence. I doubt it, as Loughborough has expanded enormously as a university since those days, with lots of accommodation on site.

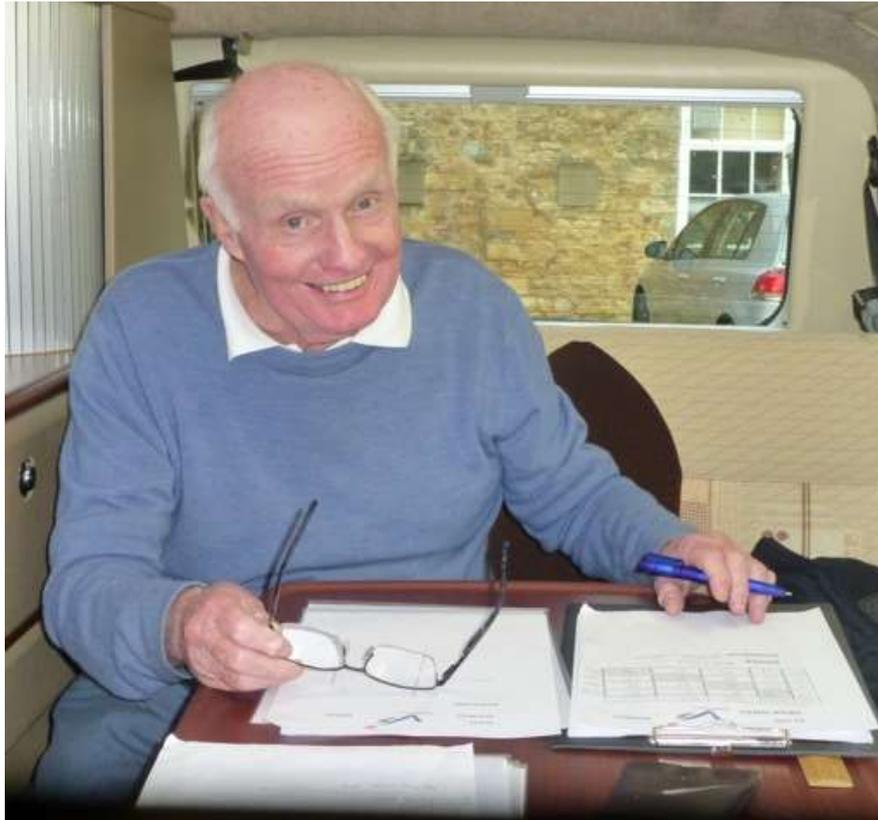
The idea of a Loughborough Fives Club then became a possibility – and we gained quite a lot of members (for a fives club) – some of them no mean players – including Rick Stubbings (Rutlish) and Chris Jones (Cheltenham); in the 2nd year there were Pat Badmin (Alleyn's), Rod Helliwell (Crossley) and of course Bob Bielby, another Halifax man, with whom I won the Heath Doubles – no mean player. For real fives courts we started to travel on Sundays to play at Denstone – and, having got permission to form a Club from the powers that be, we got lots of fixtures with other universities – Leeds, Sheffield, Durham, Manchester and Cambridge, for example. A Loughborough fixture against top universities pleased the authorities no end and I remember that the Deputy Principal (Head of Loughborough PE) actually drove the team to Cambridge for the match (being ex- Cantab himself).

From these matches came the idea of a University Championship and in my final year, 1960/61, this came to fruition, with some 8 universities playing – which apart from the above included Edinburgh, London and Bristol – and such famous names as Rick Wilson. Eric Marsh, Peter Carlile, apart from Stan and myself, competing.

The 4-day event was held at Bedford and comprised Singles, Doubles and a Team Championship. It was followed by a DJ dinner at The Swan Hotel. The aforementioned Loughborough Deputy Principal, Clinton Sayer, was guest speaker. All very different to these days!

Following that success I managed to get the event taken on by UAU, which then became BUSF, BUSA, BUCS etc. The rest is history!

Two other things really came out of Fives at Loughborough. The first was my thesis, a Statistical Survey of Courts – we had to do a thesis for Physical Education and also one for History, my second subject. Naturally I chose Fives for both – Statistical for one, and Historical the other. Apart from the fact that this was a natural decision for me, I also worked out, correctly as it turned out, that none of the lecturers marking the projects were likely to know anything about the game and could probably not dispute anything I said or wrote – therefore a good grade was a distinct possibility.



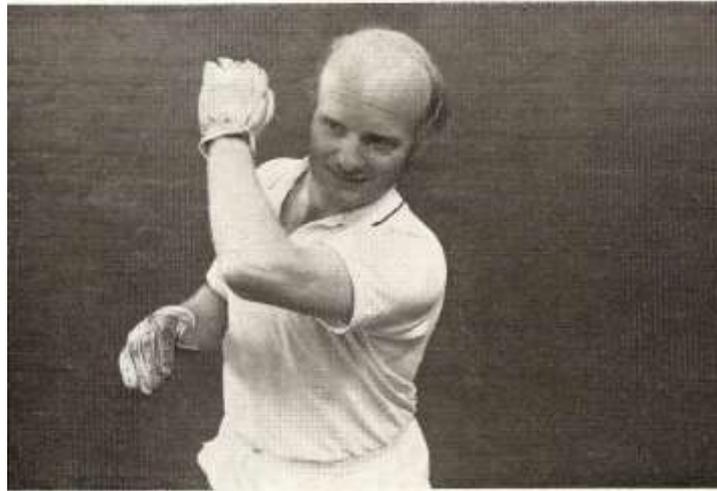
The organiser at work: Sherborne 2014

Doing a thesis was, in those days, a hard task – no computers or printers to use, just hand written or, in my case, using my typing skills learnt in the Army – lots of letters to post and lots of money spent on postage. No e-mails, sad to say. Quite a large outlay for a poor student. However, having just been elected to the Committee (Board) of the RFA in 1957, I requested a grant – and got £10 towards my expenses!

The other feature that came to light was the discovery of a new set of Fives players. Manchester was not even on the RFA radar in those days, and by linking with the University there, I came across a whole new group of players and a set of courts situated on top of a building in the centre of the City, with a swimming pool beneath them! The YMCA, of course, with such players as Joe Cohen, Geoff Whitley, and of course, Fred Beswick (a future RFA President). In those days, as we discovered, it was probably the most thriving club in the country – and no one in London knew anything about its existence! Mind you, they had never heard of us either.

Fixtures arranged with the 'Y' were always exciting to say the least. Women were not permitted at the courts – after all it was the YM! – so there were no specific 'dress' rules for players. I can remember playing several singles matches against Joe Cohen – with narrow courts you played front and back singles not side by side so getting a ball past your opponent in front of you was often difficult – and as Joe only wore a 'jockstrap' and trainers it was sometimes embarrassing. But I'm not sure who was the more embarrassed. Those games led to Joe giving me a nickname (from the days when I actually had hair!): The 'White Haired Wonder'. Those were the good old days!

By our reckoning you won 62 Open titles in your playing career, 13 in Singles and 49 in doubles. They include one National Singles title and 7 National Doubles titles, with 4 different partners, over a period of 14 years. What are your strongest memories of those successes?



Playing in 1977

Strangely enough, my memories of winning national titles are rather vague! Rather than winning 7 Cyriax titles in 12 years, I had always thought in terms of having 12 Finals in 19 years (7 wins and 5 losses) and never having been outside of the semi-finals during that period – although I may have missed a couple due to school commitments, in 1957 and 1976.

I never really considered myself as a 'great' singles player – consistently good, maybe – but I was never going to win the National Singles very often, so once delighted me. However, the final was not the main match. There I played Stan Holt, which was never going to be easy but much more comfortable than my semi-final, where I consider that I played my best ever 3-to-15 match in defeating Eric Marsh and preventing him from winning five in a row! Somehow throughout that match I always felt that I was going to win! That did not happen too often with me in singles.

That was the era when Dunstonians ruled the waves – 3 out of 4 semi-finalists.

Finals and semis were always at the Hampstead Squash & Fives Club in Belsize Park, and I always enjoyed that as they had a nice café/bar which provided excellent post-match food including rabbit casserole. Pre-myxomatosis!

Doubles was again a record of 'best years of play' rather than individual titles won. Stan Holt and I played as partners from our schooldays right up until the mid-60s – some 13 years. Then, with so many top OD players around, we decided to switch pairings: Stan went with John Howe and I went with Eric Marsh. What happened then was we met in the final, where Eric & I edged out Stan & John. I met them again the following year, but this time with John Watkinson – and again edged them out! Not to be outdone, however, they went on to win in the following two years. Heady days for the OD squad!



With Stan Holt (centre) at the RFA Dinner 2007

By then I had observed a 'newcomer' from the North: Stuart Reid, who had caught my eye during Northern events. It struck me that our patterns of play would be ideally suited, so I wrote to him and suggested we might form a pairing for the Cyriax. It appeared that Stuart had similar thoughts and was pleased that I wrote to him – and that began, perhaps, the most successful part of my Cyriax performances, with my 4th partner! 6 out of 7 finals from 70-76 with 4 wins and twice runners-up. Our games fitted ideally and our plan was simple – Stuart controlled three-quarters of the court and I had the remaining, back left-hand quarter! Ideal for me and confusing for the opponents: I was fresher to play winners and Stuart was more than happy sprinting all over the rest of the court, causing mayhem or blasting the ball at supersonic Merchistonian pace from the back of the court.

Stuart & I didn't practise together; we never played as a pair other than in tournaments, but that did not seem to matter: we instinctively knew each other's play whatever the situation. In any event practising was not on the cards – he lived in Morpeth and I in Bromley! A long way for a training session!



With old friend David Barnes at St. Paul's 2005

In all the Cyriax years, highly competitive though they were, I can only remember one match that was unpleasant – a semi-final on the old St. Paul's courts – where a left-handed opponent decided, accidentally or otherwise, to stand in front of me all the time and obstruct, thus forcing me into a different choice of shots. Constant appeals to the umpire for a let (before striking the ball – in order to avoid an injury) met a rebuttal each time, so I was forced to simply hit the ball at pace straight into the opponent's back each time and then claim the let – which was of course then given – and strangely enough the player started to duck down a bit more!

I suppose one bad match in 20 years is not too bad for our normally 'peaceful' sport. Well, you did ask for outstanding memories!



At the opening of the back courts at Alleyn's 1960

Perhaps another memory is trying to find a way out of presenting the trophy to myself, as the incumbent President during part of that time! I suppose that the Dunstonian Dynasty was a bit like the Pauline Dominance of today, or the Alleyn Old Boy Era before us?

You joined the RFA Committee at the AGM May 1957, thus doing a stint of 60 years. What are your thoughts on your time on the Committee/Board?

My main memory of my first Board (Committee) Meeting is vague on the content, but it stands out as a quite daunting experience. As a youngster, less than two years out of school, I found myself sitting in the boardroom of a well-known insurance company in Coleman Street in the City – amongst a variety of smartly suited gentlemen – all of who were in excellent, often senior, City jobs or were company owners. Also many were 'Founder Members' of the Association from 30 years earlier. Whilst I am sure that I contributed something to the evening, in the main I kept my place, as all good 'juniors' should in such company.

I can't remember how, or why, I was selected to join the Board, but I suppose I must have caught the eye of someone as an 'up and coming youngster'. They were, as always, looking for 'young blood' to continue their good work.



The Committee in 1998

The work of the Committee in those days was rather different to that of today – basically keeping things going as they were, in an orderly fashion, with no real thought of development; run a few championships; and give help and advice where possible. Of course, the regular topic that appeared on almost every agenda throughout my 60 years was 'Balls'!

Generally they were not forward-looking and in this respect they missed out on a golden opportunity which occurred during my early years on the Board. The GLC were planning the

sports development at Crystal Palace and two Fives courts were on offer– with the proviso that we would guarantee to keep them full of players. A tall order, I agree, and so, in their wisdom, the Committee turned the offer down, saying that they could not guarantee to fill them! Of course we could not 'guarantee' that, but my pleas to 'say we would' and get the courts were too 'dishonest' for the RFA. We would have had several years to plan before they were to be built and, if the RFA could get them used in the evenings, I could have filled many of the days since I took loads of boys by coach each week to use the swimming, squash, and many other facilities. Fives could easily have fitted into this schedule. Loads of other GLC schools did the same. What a chance missed!

Many years ago, when President, I think, I wrote an article, possibly in the Handbook, about the future of Fives and my main point was (and I still think the same) that the game would never develop unless we got facilities in Sports Centres, in the eye of the public rather than behind the closed doors of schools and universities. Crystal Palace was that first opportunity and who knows what others might have followed if we had made a success of that. Since then – nothing comparable.

During my time I remember taking on all jobs except Treasurer – never was good at accounting, anyway: I was variously Championship Secretary, Handbook Secretary, General Secretary, Chairman (the President did not Chair meetings until quite recently under President Sherratt) and President. I think that I was, and perhaps still am, the youngest person to have been elected as President (aged 37). The Universities job was a separate issue, totally apart from the RFA until very recent years when the BUCS organisation abandoned their interest in Fives.

The current committee (now become the Board) has changed its guidelines enormously and is much more outward-thinking. Modern events in Sport and Society have forced this change with more politics involved – lots of time spent sorting out Health & Safety documents and guidelines; links with EFA and, of course the incorporation of the RFA Club (which has considerably enlarged the Association's membership and finances). Plus, of course, Ladies fives!

Society has changed, with far fewer people continuing to play regular sports after school/university and the RFA has changed with it, becoming almost totally Championship-orientated rather than Club-based. The Board must be very wary of this, in case clubs fade totally and the game becomes even more elitist than it was before!

The really good point is that the Board is now looking at the future, with a 'strategy' – but we must remember that a strategy is only any good if we implement it. Just keeping it in the file is no good – one really good point is the proposed development of cheaper court construction, which is essential. However, the two other major points are much more difficult: finding large sums of money to build such courts and persuading local authorities/government etc. to offer sites for them, in the public domain, not in the school playground.

There is still much work for the Board to do. Unfortunately, as has always has been the case, too few people to do things and, more to the point, Board members do not always have the

time to do things, with jobs, wives and families to look after, etc. With often a very low attendance at meetings I wonder if the Board should look at itself from time to time.

Unless we get into the 'big money game' somehow (maybe a Russian billionaire has a fives-playing son somewhere?) and get more into the public domain in Sports Centres and the like, I fear that, with schools becoming more closed communities because of Health & Safety and Safeguarding issues and with schools closing courts, the future is not exceptionally good for the long term. I hope I am wrong.



2013 National Singles Plate (the 'Longboat') presented by David

Fives has not been your only sporting interest throughout the years, has it?

Oh dear – what a question – I could write a book on this!

At St. Dunstan's, apart from Fives I played for the 1st XV Rugby, 1st Team Tennis and Senior Athletics Team (Hurdling, Sprints and Jumps).

At Loughborough I played 3rd XV Rugby, 1st Team Squash, 1st Team Tennis, plus Fives. I also started my lifelong interest in Outdoor Education.

As Director of Sport at Colfe's, I ran Rugby, Basketball, Athletics and Tennis; plus a multitude of other things. I played Rugby with the Old Colfeians 2nd XV and captained the O.C. Tennis Club.

With newly gained independence Colfe's started Outdoor Education schemes. I ran these and participated in all sorts of weird and wonderful activities: Caving (Potholing); Climbing; Abseiling; Sailing; Whitewater Canoeing; Mountain Biking; Windsurfing – to name but a few.

I also completed a walk of some 250 miles down the Pennine Way from the Scottish Borders to Edale in Derbyshire.

And, at the age of 25, there began my lifelong enjoyment of skiing – my last trip was just after my 80th birthday!

I had always enjoyed watching sport as well as playing – and retirement, just after the turn of the century, gave me the opportunity to develop myself as a 'Worldwide Traveller in Sport', something I still enjoy. Events have taken me to six Olympics since 1960 – and loads of other athletics events around the world – ranging from China, Japan, the USA, Canada and Australia to almost every European country. Rugby has seen me in New Zealand, Argentina and Australia; whilst Cricket has seen me watch Test Cricket at over 20 grounds around the world: in Sri Lanka, India, South Africa, the West Indies and Australia. Not to be forgotten are the grass court tennis season in the UK – with Wimbledon, Queen's, Eastbourne and Nottingham as regular venues – and just the one non-UK Grand Slam: the Aussie Open.

This year is quite challenging: I am just off to another Davis Cup in Marbella; then the World Indoor Athletics in Birmingham in March; the Commonwealth Games in Queensland in April; and the Europeans in Berlin in August.

Were you to ask me for my favourite sporting moments that I have seen on my travels, I suppose I would probably pick watching Mo Farah in so many great races – but particularly on 'Super Saturday' at the 2012 London Olympics. Or perhaps sitting behind the goalposts when Johnny Wilkinson dropped the winning goal for England in Sydney to win the World Cup in 2003. Or maybe they might both just be pipped by being asked to attend on the Princess Royal at Buck House at her 60th Birthday Bash in the Gardens – which just happened to coincide with my 50 years running University Fives.

Lots of exciting memories, and hopefully a few more to come.



2017 The final Universities Championship!