

A lifetime of dedication to Fives, on and off court

The Review conducted an Interview with **David Gardner** on the occasion of his retirement from the RFA Board after 60 years

What is your first memory of Fives?

Aged 12 sitting in the playground at St Dunstan's, eating my sandwiches and viewing a rather peculiar game which involved hitting a ball against a wall, with gloves on. It wasn't possible for juniors to try. Only when we were put into Houses, after two years in the school, were we allowed to try things out for ourselves. I took to it like a duck to water.

What was Fives like at St Dunstan's in your early days?

There was a master in charge but Fives was really run by the boys. There was a full list of fixtures ranging from visits to Epsom Downs to the far-flung 'North', (i.e. Merchant Taylors' via the Underground to Moor Park.) What an exciting day out that was!

Learning the game was done in the

House system, where the best players taught and encouraged the youngsters. There were ample House competitions, and the captain and his cohorts would keep a wary eye on emerging players and select them for team practice.

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!

Tell us about the Schools Competition at Whitgift and the school matches in your senior schooldays

In 1955, in the Doubles, Stan and I were favourites. In the final we played Whitgift, who we had beaten comfortably at home 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, losing 12-10, 4-11, 12-10.

I do remember one particular schools fixture against Forest School where St. D's won by 180 points to 8!

The other thing that sticks in my mind was first meeting Alastair Mackenzie when we played the RFA. He won a very tense singles battle 15-13. He then spent the next 50 years reminding me that he did beat me ONCE in his playing career!

What do you remember of your time at Loughborough?

I started at Loughborough Training College, as it then was, in September 1958 after completing National Service. Stan Holt also went there. By sheer chance we found a hall of residence that had what people thought was a squash court in an old barn, which it turned out to be a Fives court, with walls painted for squash.

A Loughborough Fives Club then became a possibility, and we quickly picked up a number of other players. For real Fives courts we travelled on Sundays to play at Denstone and set up fixtures with other universities – Leeds, Sheffield, Durham, Manchester and Cambridge, for example.

From these matches came the idea of a University Championship and in my final year, 1960/61, this came to fruition, with eight universities playing. The four-day event was held at Bedford, consisting of singles, doubles and a team championship. It was followed by dinner at The Swan Hotel.

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

You won 62 Open titles in your career - 13 singles and 49 doubles. They include one National Singles title and



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

The Committee in 1998

The organiser at work: Sherborne 2014

2017 The final Universities Championship!



seven National Doubles titles. What are your memories of those wins?

I never really considered myself as a 'great' singles player, never going to win the National Singles very often, so once delighted me. However, the final wasn't the main match. There I played Stan Holt, which was never going to be easy but was more comfortable than my semi-final, where I consider that I played my best ever match in defeating Eric Marsh, preventing him from winning five in a row.

Doubles I played with either Stan Holt or Eric Marsh until I teamed up with Stuart Reid, who I had met at Northern events. Our games fitted well: I looked after the back left-hand corner while Stuart sprinted all over the rest of the court, blasting the ball at supersonic pace. My other partner, John Watkinson, was as hard a hitter of the ball as any player ever.

You joined the RFA Committee at the 1957 AGM, doing a stint of 60 years.

My first Committee meeting was a daunting experience. Less than two years out of school, I found myself in the boardroom of a City insurance company – amongst a variety of smartly suited gentlemen, all of whom were in excellent, often senior, City jobs or were company owners, some of them founder members of the Association. In the main I kept my place, as all good 'juniors' should in such company. I suppose I must have caught the eye of someone as an 'up-and-coming youngster'.

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.

Generally they were not forward-looking and in this respect they missed out on one golden opportunity. The

Greater London Council was planning the sports development at Crystal Palace and two Fives courts were on offer – if we could guarantee to keep them full of players. 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 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 other facilities. Fives could easily have fitted into this schedule. Loads of other GLC schools did the same. What a chance missed!

What are your thoughts on the future of Fives?

Many years ago, as President, I wrote an article saying 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.

The current Board is much more outward thinking. Modern events in sport and society have forced this change with more politics involved: lots of time spent on health and safety policies; links with the Eton Fives Association; and, of course the incorporation of the RFA Club, which has enhanced membership and finances. Plus, of course, Ladies' Fives!

Society has changed, with far fewer people continuing to play regular sports after school or university and Fives has changed with it, becoming almost totally championship orientated rather than club based. The

'STAN AND I USED TO SNATCH A QUICK 45 MINUTES OF FIVES A COUPLE OF LUNCH HOURS A WEEK'

Board must be very wary of this, in case clubs fade totally and the game becomes even more elitist than it was before.

I am pleased that the Board is now looking at the future, with a 'strategy', one really good point of which is the quest for cheaper court construction. The other major points are much more difficult: finding large sums of money to build such courts and persuading local authorities and governments etc. to offer sites for them, in the public domain, not in the school playground.

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 eye, I fear that, with schools becoming more closed communities because of health and safety and safeguarding issues and with schools closing courts, the future is not exceptionally good for the long term. I hope I am wrong.

■ A full version can be found at www.rugbyfivesassociation.net



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Playing in 1977

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

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