

The Fives Annual Review conducted this on-line interview with Dave Hebden over the course of February 2009. Dave retired from competitive Fives this season after over 40 years of tournament play.

FAR: Dave: What do you remember of your first experience of Fives at school?

DJH: I joined Alleyn's in the 2nd form in 1960 when my father moved his job from Oxford into the London area. Alleyn's was a popular choice of school for me since it got me back playing soccer after a year at Grammar School in Oxford playing Rugby! But I was fanatical about all sports and when I heard that Barry Banson, who was a big influence on me during my school days, ran some Saturday morning Fives for the junior school, I jumped at the opportunity. I had no idea what Fives was, but the classes were popular, with some 20-30 boys attending, and it was natural for me to join up.

Barry was a hard task master – I think I might have received a grudging compliment from him after about five years of playing Fives – but it was great that he got me playing the game. Barry was later my form master in the 3rd form, and was also my Maths teacher at that time, the subject that I was later to major in at Cambridge, so I have a lot to thank him for.

As for my first experiences with the great game of Fives, I have to say it was not at all successful. The main reason for this was that my left hand was laughably poor, and people did laugh! I think it took me several years to learn how to protect my left side with a lot of “turning” in the back left corner, and several more years to develop a passable left-hand shot, this only coming when, after many years of concentrating on Doubles, I decided that maybe Singles did have some merit and that I might manage some decent results if I persevered.

During those first years, Barry Banson's influence was important. We played exclusively on the small Alleyn's courts, and I think it was a couple of years before we were allowed to progress to the “big”, full size courts, which I remember we did eventually with great excitement. But the small courts were ideal for learning the game, with the opportunity to play plenty of “4-wall” Fives. Barry did not allow volleying, and if you were drawn up to receive a shot at the front of the court it was mandatory to lob as your next shot! As a result, it took me quite a while later in senior Fives to feel comfortable with the volley, but I would say that the disciplines that were enforced in these formative years were beneficial overall.



The 1905 small courts



1st IV 1965: Hebden, Langley, Baker, Smith

In those days it was possible to play all sports at school, so my efforts were largely divided between Fives and soccer in the winter terms. The good all-round sports players tended to be the ones who emerged as the top Fives players, and the early school teams were mostly made up of a motley selection from this group, but eventually the core Fives players to emerge in my year were George Baker and Les Smith, along with me. Both George and Les had great successes at other sports, and were numbers 1 and 2 in the Fives squad, with me at number 3. We remained together as a trio throughout our Fives-playing school days, with the number 4 slot being filled by a selection of other players.

One such fourth player was Brian Langley who was School Captain and Fives Captain in his last year. George, Les and I were three or four years younger, still in the 5th form, and I was certainly somewhat in awe of the prospect of playing with Brian. We were lucky that the years immediately ahead of us lacked very strong players, which meant that the three of us got an early “bleeding” in the School 1st IV. I think it is fair to say that Brian was something of a journeyman player of the game of Fives, but he was a great role model and superb leader of our Fives team. Sadly he died just a few years ago.

I enjoyed the competitive Fives at school, both travelling to matches, and entertaining visiting teams at the School. Occasionally Barry would allow us to join in with the snooker in the Allyn’s Masters’ Common Room where post match refreshments were served, but usually our role was to watch and serve the coffee! We were very lucky with some of our visitors! I can remember the Old Dunstonians turning up with a squad of Holt, Howe, Marsh and Gardner, surely the strongest Old Boys IV ever? It was quite an education. All four were of course great players, but I have to say my abiding memory is of John Howe playing some amazing shots, the like of which I had never seen before. He was and has remained an inspiration and personal Fives hero of mine!



John Howe and Dave Hebden at the Veterans in 1994

My first year in the Schools Championships in 1965 was also an education. I was drawn in the first round Singles against the Number 1 seed, Richard Williams from Bedford Modern. I can remember being on court and not quite knowing what was happening, with the ball speeding around at a hundred miles an hour! I lost 11-0, 11-0. Williams went on to the semis where he was beaten by the 4th seed, a certain John East, who went on to take the trophy, beating his partner and 2nd seed from St. Paul’s, John Shneerson, in the final. In the Doubles my partner was the year younger Barry Ware-Lane, an excellent all-round sports player and a very good and steady exponent of Fives. He was to remain in the 1st IV with George, Les and me over the next three years, and went on to reach the Final of the Schools Doubles with Roger Parkinson in 1968, only losing to the very strong Rugby pair of Cowie & Cleaver in the final.

From a Fives-coaching point of view at Alleyn's, my second major influence was Eric Marsh. Eric joined Alleyn's as a Maths teacher but also took over running the Fives during my last year at school. To some extent he concentrated on George Baker, since George was ranked in the top half-dozen school players at that time, and had chances to do well in the Singles. However, Eric played on court with us all, and at that time you could not wish for a better example. He had been four times Amateur Singles champion just a few years earlier, and he played the game with superb discipline, concentration, and skill.

Eric also made a brave decision for which I shall always be very grateful. At that time, for some mysterious reason my game improved significantly and some timing appeared on my right side which enabled me to hit the ball quite hard! So coming up to the Schools Championships in 1967, Eric decided to pair me with George for the Schools Doubles. This decision was taken only a few weeks before the event, and was tough on Les Smith, who had partnered George since their early days at School. However, the gamble paid off and we had a very successful run at Whitgift, beating the reigning champions from Clifton, Tony Dixon and Alan Brown, in the semi-finals 11-5, 11-6. The final was a cracking match against a pair from Rugby, composed of the left-handed Andrew Cowie and his partner Allan Colver, whom I was to partner in winning the University Championships a few years later. I think George and I did well to beat them, the scores being 7-11, 11-6, 11-6, but mostly I remember being extremely tired at the end!

My Singles experience in that final year's Schools was also formative. I was seeded 8th, reflecting my recent improvement under Eric's guiding hand. This meant I played the Number 1 seed and strong favourite, Julian Dalzell from Bedford, in the quarter finals. Despite my reservations, I can remember surprising myself in going into an 8-1 lead in the first game before fitness failed, and the stronger and fitter Dalzell went on to win 11-8, 11-6 with relative comfort. However, it did make me think that maybe I could do something in Singles after all, and I believe that the seeds of later efforts on the Singles front were planted then.

I'll finish my school reminiscences with a tribute to one other school player who significantly influenced me, Bob Dolby. Bob preceded me as House Captain of Cribbs some three years earlier, so being in the same House, our paths crossed quite a bit. Bob was a great role model as a



1963 squad with Bob Dolby Captain

Fives player and also as a person. I admired the way he played the game, and I would say he was the most talented school player in the country of his year, if, regrettably, not the fittest! When George and I achieved our Schools Doubles win, we received a congratulatory note from Bob, which meant a lot to me at the time, and this just helped to add to the sense of achievement and enjoyment of the moment.

FAR: What role did Fives play for you at university?

DJH: On leaving Alleyn's, George Baker and I went up to Cambridge in 1967 and remained in partnership on the Fives court over the next two years. As Schools Doubles champions I can remember feeling rather over-confident about our abilities. We entered the National Doubles at Bedford Modern in 1968 and beat a seeded pair, Jack Slater and Peter Carlile, in three games to reach the semi-finals. The Fives world appeared to be in our grasp. However, when we travelled to St. Paul's Hammersmith the following week we were given a lesson in Fives by John Howe and Stan Holt in the semis, although we did manage a respectable number of points. Maybe there was a little more to the game than I had thought. John and Stan were ever the gentlemen and took the time and trouble to give us the benefit of their experience with some welcome advice after the game. They went on to win the final the next evening against Watkinson and Clarke.

However, I feel that my three years at Cambridge enabled me to achieve the transition up to the Senior game. We had a very strong Cambridge squad in each of the three years I was there, but this was matched by equally competitive teams from Oxford. This produced some great Varsity games which I think raised the standard of the players on both sides. In particular, the first year in 1968 was a year where we won against the odds. With Oxford having won the last three years, and containing a number of stars from the game of Fives, they were clear favourites. Chris Bascombe, our captain, was to a great extent responsible. He created a training regime and team spirit which resulted in a very fit eight turning up to do battle, and I think the level of the Cambridge play rather took Oxford by surprise. We ended up by winning 260-237 with the first IV just about holding Oxford, and our 2nd IV managing to achieve the winning margin required.



1968 Cambridge VIII: Hebden; Colver; Summerfield; Baker;
Short; Bascombe; Jock Burnet; Hirst; Wilkinson

We had two more wins against Oxford, with increasing margins, in 1969 and 1970, skippered by Chris Hirst and then Bob Short.

In the University Championships I have some regrets in not having picked up a Singles win. My best chance was in the first year where I felt I perhaps should have won, playing against my Doubles partner George Baker in the semi-finals, with George winning in three games and going

on to win the Championship deservedly. I can remember that my mind was rather focussed on our preserving energy for the (to me) “more important” Doubles - oh well, my competitive instinct at Singles improved a bit in subsequent years.

On the Doubles front, George and I won the University Doubles in our first year, beating Bascombe and Hirst in an epic battle in the final. In the second year the Cambridge squad rather underperformed, and Stuart Reid dominated the Doubles on his home courts in Durham, winning comfortably with Hares. In my 3rd year the Cambridge pairs were rearranged in an attempt to improve our fortunes. Our best player, Bob Short, was put with the No. 2, George Baker. This was my first break away from playing with George for some years, but left me to partner the excellent Allan Colver, my old opponent from the 1967 Schools Doubles. The switch achieved the desired win for Cambridge, but in an unexpected way, with Allan and me picking up the trophy with steady Fives and good retrieving. It was very satisfying for us as the No. 2 pair!

The other breakthrough for me at University was in my last year. Andrew Cowie had just come up to Cambridge and one day in January he asked me if I fancied a trip to Manchester to enter a weekend regional Fives event. I had no idea about regional Fives, nor about Manchester Fives, which was played in those days on the non-standard YM courts for Singles and the University courts for Doubles. It seemed like a good idea, so I accepted. Andrew had a car, so transport was easy, and we were offered hospitality for the weekend at the Beswick residence. Fred Beswick was somewhat taken aback at the arrival of a scruffy young student with shoulder-length hair, and his unfavourable impression was probably reinforced by my 1st round defeat in the Singles. Fred himself, by the way, beat Andrew in the 2nd round of the Singles. Andrew was to become Amateur Singles champion twelve months later, so this was no mean feat for Fred – even with home court advantage! So the signs were not auspicious for the Cambridge pair, but by this time in my career my right hand was becoming not too shabby, and Andrew’s left was something to marvel at. Anyway, we managed to win the event, beating David Gardner and John Mockford in the final, and this was the start of a long and enjoyable involvement with regional Fives events, and in particular a much loved and valued association with the Manchester Fives scene.

This was my first senior tournament win, and I was proud to win it with such a player as Andrew Cowie. Interestingly, another player who also won his first senior tournament at that same Manchester North West event in the Singles, at the age of 18, was a certain Mr Wayne Enstone.

FAR: Picking up from what you’ve just been saying about tournament play at Manchester, you have probably travelled more miles than any other players in pursuit of silverware. Where have been your favourite places to play and compete?

DJH: I have very happy memories from many Fives venues, but I suppose Manchester must come top of the list for several reasons. From a Fives-playing point of view, as just mentioned, I won my first senior title there with Andrew Cowie in 1970, and it was also the venue for my first Doubles venture with Ian Fuller in 1980. However, my memories are more importantly of the many friends I have met through the Y Club, for example the Woods, Sherratts, Beswicks, Enstones, and many more. The RFA matches run by Keith Puckle and, later, Ian Fuller were always great social occasions, and the old YM courts will always remain vivid in the memory.



Old friends and rivals: Enstone and Hebden

Other particular favourite Fives venues include Durham, Bristol, Exeter, Halifax and Edinburgh, each having their own individual character and attractions. As for the best courts, well Alleyn's of course! And rather than "pursuit of silverware" I would choose to phrase it "pursuit of a fun weekend". I've always enjoyed the challenge of doing as well as I can on the court, but the "après Fives" has always been the main attraction.

FAR: You have been a stalwart of Alleyn Old Boy Fives, yet virtually all your post-Cambridge Doubles successes were gained with players like Keith Puckle and Ian Fuller until you teamed up in later years with Alleyn Old Boy Hamish Buchanan.

DJH: I suppose just about all my Fives partnerships have chiefly come about through friendships. My first regular partner after Cambridge was a left-hander, Lionel Lawson, who played regularly at Alleyn's but happened not to be an AOB. We achieved some success, winning twice in Halifax, but we were always a little weak in the centre of the court. All three of the players you mention were also regular players at Alleyn's, and have one shared characteristic, all being right-handers who also played an excellent game on the left. This enabled my rather poor left hand to be protected by my partner covering both the left-hand wall and the centre of court.



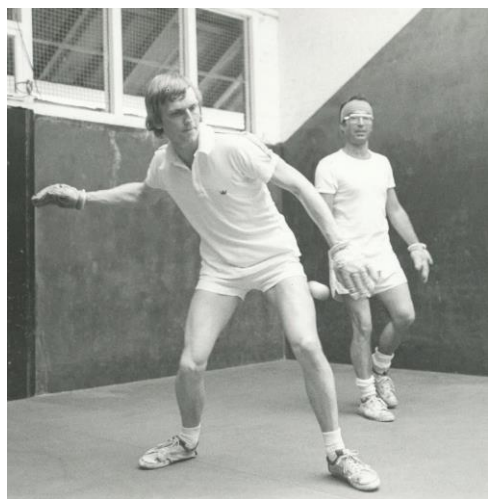
1974 Wood Cup: Hebden, Gibbons, Baker and Birmingham



1986 Heath Doubles with Lionel Lawson

As for other AOBs, unfortunately the good players from around my era at school drifted away from the game, including my school partner, George Baker. Also, the slightly younger John Gibbons could have been another very effective partner, but he had problems with bruising and moved away from Fives to achieve great success on the Racquet Ball court.

It was very nice, though, to end my competitive Fives career with an Alley Old Boy, Hamish Buchanan. It has been a privilege to play with Hamish, who has been the strongest Doubles player on the circuit for the last few years, and who has the combined attributes of steadiness, speed around the court, stamina, and the skills to find some great winning shots.



1979 Hebden & Puckle



1980 Hebden & Fuller



2006 Hebden & Buchanan

FAR: Of all these partnerships, the one with Ian Fuller must stand out with those ten National Doubles titles in the 1980s. What was the secret of that combination?

DJH: Yes, I've been very lucky with my Fives partners. A couple of very good left-handers in Lawson and Parlby, but as mentioned before, most have been ambidextrous players – Baker, Puckle, d'Ancona, Roberts, Buchanan, which has allowed me to play on the right of court.

By the way I've also enjoyed playing with a wide range of other players, with each combination offering a different pattern of play and new set of opportunities. For, example I've very much enjoyed playing on the left in competitions such as the President's Cup, where, in this unfamiliar position, a whole new range of shots is opened up. Some of my most satisfying events have been in this type of situation, for example having some success in Scotland with Pete Woods and in Exeter with Geoff Sherratt.

I first played with Ian Fuller as the chance result of my regular partner Keith Puckle needing an operation which put him out of the North West Championships. As a scratch pair Ian and I travelled to Manchester and won the tournament fairly comfortably. We stayed together that first year for the National Doubles and beat the defending champions East and Enstone in the final 15-12, 15-4. This was the start of a fruitful partnership over the next 25 years and indeed it was some years before we lost a match in any competition.

Over the ten years in the '80s when we were at our peak, we balanced pretty well. At the start I suppose our main attacking weapon was my right hand, but as I aged and this became less potent, Ian, the younger man, was still improving, and his amazing left-hand winning cross

courts became more and more the key factor in our games. We both had good concentration, and were happy to retrieve, an important requirement with the old Cliff ball in use in those days.

One of my happiest memories of Fives remains those National Doubles finals at Alleyn's on a Sunday morning. I played in 24 altogether, losing rather more than I won, but there were some great three-game battles and it was always fun. One record I am very proud of is the 23 consecutive finals between 1978 and 2000, the first two with Keith Puckle and subsequent ones with Ian Fuller – maybe that one might take some beating!

FAR: You also teamed up with Ian to play Winchester Fives with some success.

DJH: Yes, I just love the game of Winchester Fives, although my first impression was not a good one. I think I played a game at Winchester in a four where none of us knew the game well, and any buttress shot was an immediate winner. It all seemed a bit pointless. I then played in a friendly at Bradfield with Roger Layton and Mike Tremellen, and suddenly I found that my best buttress shots were being retrieved! It was a true wake-up lesson in Winchester Fives.

I was very lucky to partner Simon Constantine for my first Winchester Championships in 1985. Simon was a real specialist in the discipline and the then holder of the title with Robbie Barr, and I couldn't have wished for a better mentor to help me with the intricacies of the game. We managed a win at our first attempt, with Simon providing some much needed coaching as we progressed through the rounds. We won on four occasions over the next few years, and had some tremendous battles with some expert exponents of the game such as Layton & Tremellen, and Barnes & Barr.

I later teamed up with Ian Fuller for the 1995 Winchester event and we had an 8-year winning run, so two consecutive circuits of the four venues. It was always great fun, very tiring, and a refreshingly different challenge from the game of Rugby Fives. It's interesting that we found that towards the end of our run, we were strongest with me playing on the left, allowing Ian to volley and retrieve from the buttress on the right, with me having a chance to turn in the left corner and have a go for the buttress.

I finished my Winchester playing days partnering Dave Fox, another Winchester Fives specialist from Sedbergh School, and we managed a couple of wins before the years began to take their toll on me! To achieve success at Winchester Fives, experience is very important, but speed around the court and fitness are also essential requirements!

FAR: It's 30 years since you won the Amateur Singles and broke Wayne Enstone's run of 23 titles. A happy memory?

DJH: Yes, that year of 1979 will always stand out in my memory, and I count myself a shade lucky to have caught out the great man in that year's Singles. Certainly I was in a better position to challenge that year. For a while I had been capable of pressing Wayne quite hard over one game, but my fitness was never sufficient to give me a chance over three. However, a series of fortunate occurrences worked in my favour in 1979.

At 30 I think I was about at my peak, my left hand had become a bit more solid over the years, and in March that year I had the good luck to be posted for several weeks to the IBM education centre near Brussels where there were some superb training facilities. These included a "parcours" obstacle course through the woods which I used maybe three times a day, before breakfast, at lunch, and in the evening. Squash was also available and I had a good sparring

partner who gave me some excellent long battles. So I returned to the UK a fitter man and was able to test myself at the Scottish Singles in April, which was just two weeks before the National Singles finals. This proved to be a very good tune-up, with a testing contest against Tony Wynn in the final.

During the following two weekends in the Singles I progressed without too much trouble to play John East in the semi-finals on the second Saturday. I had always struggled against John, but this year I came through fairly comfortably, 15-3, 15-5: I think my first ever win against John. At that time the Doubles and Singles finals were played on the same day, and this I think worked a little in my favour. I was in the Doubles final on Sunday morning with Keith Puckle, playing Wayne and John East. I can remember being very disappointed to lose this match in three games, but perhaps that gave me a little more motivation for the afternoon. Maybe that surprise of '79 caused Wayne to be even better prepared, physically and mentally, in the years that followed. I always think I did those who followed a disservice with that win!



Hebden with Jesters Club Cup 1979

Good fortune followed in the final as well. Playing at Allyn's was, of course, to my advantage and we had a great first game. This could have gone either way, but I sneaked it 16-15 after an epic struggle. That was me about finished, and the best thing I did was to lose the second game very easily, 15-2, not that I had any choice about the outcome! I went on court for the 3rd game to face the inevitable, but here I have to thank my partner of the morning, Keith Puckle. Just before we were about to start, he held up a new ball at the back of the court asking if I wanted to change the ball, which was of course my right. I thought, oh well, nothing to lose, and took the new ball. This turned out to be a cracking fast ball, enabling me to win some quick rallies, sufficient to take me into a 10-2 lead in next to no time. And at this point I suddenly realised I had a chance, the finishing post being not too far away. But Wayne was not through. He relentlessly pegged me back and although I got to 14, I couldn't quite get that last point. After about five match points, I was starting to think that it wasn't going to be, but at last at 14-12 thankfully Wayne made an uncharacteristic unforced error, and the pain was over. Wayne was the perfect gentleman after the game, as he always has been, and actually presented me with the Jesters Club Cup himself. Wayne of course went on to win the title for the next seventeen years, an amazing achievement.



2005 Hebden wins his 100th title: the Veterans Doubles

FAR: So what does a chap with a “rather poor left hand” who’s won over a hundred titles nationally and regionally, in Singles and Doubles, do now he’s retired from the game?

DJH: Good question! Well, firstly, I certainly intend to stay involved with the game of Fives. For example, I will continue to prepare the rankings, assist with the West of England Schools with my old partner Lionel Lawson, and I am also interested to do some more research into the history of the game. I also plan to do whatever exercise the knee will permit. This will hopefully include plenty of mountain walking, which I love, a bit of work in the gym, which I don’t love, and I am also interested to get PADI qualified for diving. There are plenty of other things out there, for example my grandfather was a Bowls champion, and I always fancied having a go at that, but perhaps that’s for later. And you never know, don’t write me off completely for Fives – perhaps medical science will get me back on court for a comeback in a few years’ time!

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