

'All you need is a pair of fives gloves and a ball and you're off'

A Life in Sport

JAMES TOOP FIVES

James Toop, 24, an Oxford graduate and trainee management consultant in London, is the only man to become national champion at the two fives codes, eton and rugby. A fine all-round sportsman, Toop has become the eminent fives player of his generation. He is running a youth scheme called Inner City Fives Association to popularise the game through the one-wall code, a sport already well established in New York.

THE basic game of fives, the one-wall version, dates back to medieval times. I believe the name derives from bunch of fives, an old expression for 'hand'. Eton fives is not played much outside England – a little in Nigeria and Switzerland, but not much elsewhere. There's not much glory, but even if I didn't excel at it, I would still play because it's a fantastic sport.

The game is played with padded gloves and a hard, rubberised ball which may bounce once, using four smooth concrete walls in rugby fives, as with squash, and three walls in the doubles-only eton code, which has a step and buttress as added complications.

Fitness is one of my strengths – I have run the London Marathon in 3hr 20min – but there are no particular physical attributes you need. Tall players might be good at volleying and use their height to get on top of the ball, smaller players can get low. The main thing is to have quick reactions.

My sister Helen, a medical student in London, plays and reached the ladies' national semi-finals and we have won the mixed doubles.

There is a uniquely high level of integrity



required. That's a sportsmanship aspect I like about it. Even at the highest level there is no independent referee.

In about 1840 a version of fives was codified by Eton College. The boys enjoyed playing against the wall of the chapel, and courts were built replicating the buttress and step. There are about 20 courts at Eton now. Rugby fives, from Rugby School, started later.

The costs of putting up a proper fives court these days is huge, more than £150,000 for a block of three. But those courts will last for 100 years or more, and it's cheap to play individually. All you need is a pair of fives gloves and a ball and you're off. It costs virtually zero. Not many sports can match that. Even if you want to just go running, you still need special expensive shoes.

I'm hoping one-wall fives will get more people interested. I have now got a project, purely for altruistic reasons, introducing one-wall fives to every school in London. You use bare hands and a tennis ball on one wall, with lines marked out on the ground. All it costs, really, is a tin of paint. There is only one proper public fives facility in the whole country, and that's in London. Four eton fives courts were built by the Westway Development Trust and opened four years ago at Crowthorne Road, Shepherd's Bush. They are excellent in quality.

People often ask whether I prefer eton or rugby fives, and perhaps a diplomatic answer is required. I like the different aspects of both – different ways you can kill the ball and win points in eton fives, using spin and touch shots, and the power and stamina needed for rugby fives. Because I play both I think I have an advantage. The two main codes never used to have contact, as different schools played, but the two boards

High fives: James Toop is attempting to spread the popularity of fives in the inner cities

have now joined forces as the Fives Federation, so that they can pool resources.

On leaving St Olave's School I went to Geelong Grammar School in Australia as a sports coach for two months after my A-levels, using a travel grant. There were two eton fives courts there, but the school had stopped using them because nobody

knew how to play. I coached fives for all year groups, and almost the whole school had a go. Whether they still play, I don't know.

Then I taught for two years at Selsdon High School in the Teach First scheme and introduced the game there, starting with the one-wall version. From a pupil's perspective they all loved the game. Nearly everyone who actually gets on court enjoys it; very few don't. One-wall fives is called handball in New York. It's huge over there.

They have over 10,000 children playing it and over 3,000 courts in different parts of the city. What I'm hoping to do is replicate their model across London through Inner Cities Fives Association, an organisation supported by UnLtd – Foundation For Social Entrepreneurs, but money remains a problem. It's a really effective way of getting sport going for inner-city children.

Interview: Charles Randall

