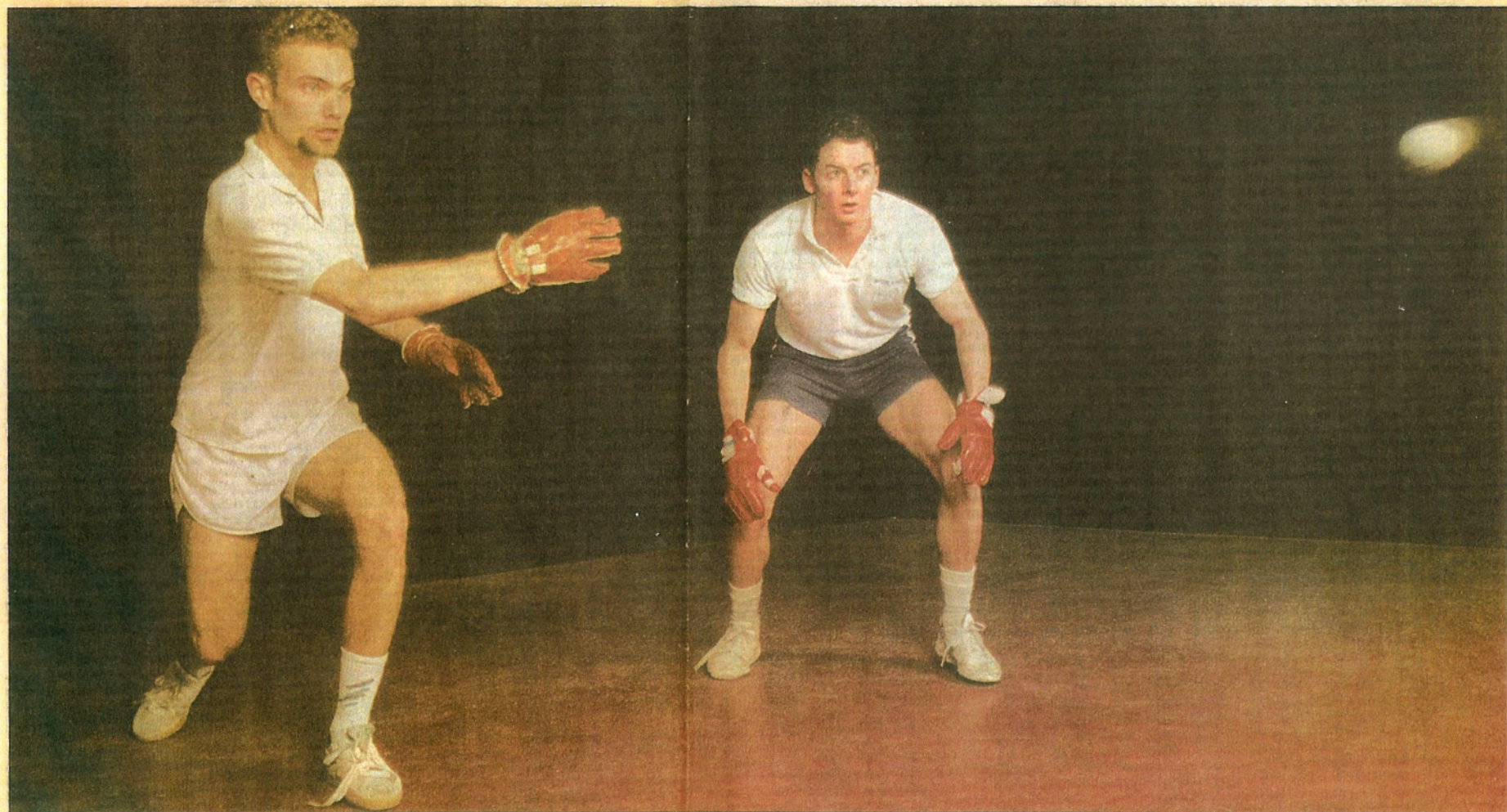




Looking for an angle: Tim Caroe, of Cambridge, left, and Cavanagh, of Oxford, do battle in the Varsity singles at St Paul's, Cavanagh winning easily as the Dark Blues overcame lack of practice to lead their perennial rivals Des Jensen

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Tradition going to the wall

David Hunn reports on Rugby fives, one of the world's toughest sports

NO SPORT more instantly exhausting has yet been devised than fives. In its singles version, a game can in 30 minutes reduce a fit, strong young man to a sweating shambles, beetroot red, struggling for breath and shaking so much he can scarcely hold a pint glass.

Does anybody you know play fives? Despite its three versions, based on the public schools of Rugby, Winchester and Eton, the game remains less known and less played than almost any other sport in the western world.

It will never expand now, for all its virtues. Even in the academic heartlands the cold hand of indifference closes around it. In the ancient schools, it needs an enthusiastic master to keep it alive; and as financial pressures bear down on the universities, they have to fight to hang on to their courts.

Oxford came to London yesterday to settle their differences at St Paul's School, Barnes, which has the six finest fives courts in the world. History gives Cambridge a huge lead in these encounters, which began 70 years ago. They led 27-17 when the sun rose, but confidence was not high. Oxford have won for the

past two years and rolled them over again yesterday by 287 points to 162. The fact that the Dark Blues acquired some courts in 1990 had something to do with that. Until the Rugby Fives Association organised an appeal for the purpose (generously supported by Cambridge), Oxford had two courts a mile apart, one at Keble and one at Worcester College. Keble's was demolished and 10 years ago a similar death befell Worcester. Some £120,000 was raised, two courts built at the Iffley Road sports centre and the spirit of fives entered Oxford's blood again.

At Cambridge, meanwhile, clouds had gathered. The lease on their centre at Portugal Place — squash, rackets, badminton and two versions of fives — expired and was extended, but the end is in sight. Commercially-rewarding development looms. Now the RFA's energies turn their way. There are possible sites, but money and time are needed, as well

as endless enthusiasm. "We shall keep it going," said Chris Caroe, who had Cambridge's only singles success here. "There are other courts we can reach and whatever happens we shall not give up, even if we have to play all our matches away."

Caroe's brother, Tim, is the Cambridge captain. Both from Eastbourne College, both at Pembroke and both on long degree courses, they have enough determination to carry Cambridge through with or without new courts, but life is not easy for those whose devotion is to such unfashionable sports.

There are still about 40 schools playing the game, but what happens after that? Oxford, Cambridge, London, Manchester, Durham, Edinburgh and Exeter universities still have their courts, but if you and I really fancied taking up the game there would hardly be a chance. In Manchester the YMCA wave a semi-public flag, but even enthusiastic old boys have to

rely on using school courts when they are available.

The ghost of a saviour, a promoter, hovers. The sport of court handball has long been played in Ireland and the United States, similar in operation to fives but on a much bigger court. A move to

larity, but surely the species must be saved from extinction. If it were possible to gather all fives and court handball players in one discipline, some real power might be assembled.

Back in Barnes, meanwhile, the Oxford first string

“The ghost of a saviour has come along in the shape of court handball, but it may be offensive to this lovely game's heritage”

establish that game internationally, probably off one wall only, has recently attracted support from the Rugby fives fraternity.

It would be offensive to the heritage of this lovely game to subject it to any bastardisation for the sake of popu-

larity, but surely the species must be saved from extinction. If it were possible to gather all fives and court handball players in one discipline, some real power might be assembled.

Back in Barnes, meanwhile, the Oxford first string Cambridge were well warm before Oxford were awake, but the Dark Blues seemed to prosper without practice.

Technical difficulties, in which The Sunday Times's photographic requirements played some part, delayed the striking of a vicious ball until midday, when all four singles matches got under way. By 12.30 the first stage was all over: Oxford 3, Cambridge 1. We adjourned for lunch, those in a physically wrecked condition facing two doubles matches before sunset.

Chris Caroe's fourth-string game against Board (Winchester and Brasenose) was one of those little slices of sporting perfection that make a reporter happy he drifted into sport rather than politics. Rugby fives is a simple game. Two men wearing padded leather gloves smack a hard little ball against very hard walls, much as many of us do on similar courts with a racket and a squash ball and very much less expenditure of energy. You would hardly know

whether the players were right- or left-handed. They must hit with equal power and certainty on both sides, twisting and turning, racing from back to front and side to side. In singles fives you try to hit where your opponent is not, but the retrieving potential is immense if you are fit enough never to stop running and the crafty enough to play the angles to your advantage.

In the past 50 years, several first-class cricketers have been outstanding university fives players. John Pretlove of Kent, Dennis Silk (later MCC president) and Vic Marks (Somerset and England) were among the best, all from long-established public schools. Their half-Blues would soon be forgotten, unlike their triumphs on the square.

Young Chris Caroe, an engineering undergraduate, may never find a place in the record books, but he has another two years at Cambridge in which to try to play a better game than this. His opponent, Board, is an im-

pressive hitter. Caroe was in danger of being left as far behind as his brother, but he would not let it happen.

Down 6-1, up 12-9, he never let go. Every point was a battle he was not going to lose. He hit to every corner, down each wall, exploiting every possibility, returning every ball. They reached 13-13, then 14-14, and it was hard for the committed spectator not to dig fingernails deep into palms. Caroe did it, 15-14, and turned to the gallery. Not in triumph, not for recognition, but with the ghastly, spent flush of a man who in half an hour has given everything he has learned from life.

Fives is full of such moments and full of the sort of absurd enthusiasm that moved a Yorkshire farmer, John Guthrie, to build his own court outside Scarborough and form his own club, the Guthrie Dalesmen. The game was founded and is maintained by privileged education, but remember this: one man has dominated singles play for the past 20 years. His name is Wayne Enstone and he was educated at Poundswick High School, Manchester — where there was no fives court.