

Eton fives: the best game in the world

How the game was invented

Eton Fives – as a handball game played against walls – is a direct descendent of a game which has been played for millennia. One form is known to have been played in Egyptian times.

A close cousin, jeu de paume – or handball – has been played in France since the 11th century. This became what is now known as real tennis, and is the basis for every racket sport. One-wall handball, pelota basque and jai alai are also related games.

Fives – which is what three or four-walled handball has always been called in Britain – has been played by peasants, royalty and schoolboys alike. Henry VIII is said to have been a keen player and Prince Harry played in a national schools competition. In medieval times, it was played against chapel walls and was codified at Eton College 150 years ago. Since then it has spread to many of England's great schools such as Westminster and Shrewsbury. The country's first public courts were erected at the Westway Sports Centre in west London a few years ago.

Fives for all - from seven to seventy

Eton fives can be played by both sexes and people of all ages, from seven to 70.

Girls and women are increasingly taking up the game. Children can start playing when they're as young as seven, and there are some players in their seventies. A veterans tournament in 2009 – open to players over forty – attracted several players in their sixties. The long-term benefits of exercise of this kind are huge, and help to keep people healthy, active and mentally sound. Because it is by nature a pairs' game it is a very social game and four players of differing abilities can have an evenly matched game, so long as the pairs are balanced.

Increasing numbers of girls and women have been playing three-walled handball over the past 20 years. There are now national competitions for schoolgirls and adult women, involving hundreds of competitors.

Courts are beginning to be built specially for them. As of summer 2009, Cheltenham Ladies College in Gloucestershire is building courts for its pupils. The game was introduced by a teacher there and was initially played on adapted squash courts, but it proved so popular that proper Eton Fives courts are now being provided. There is also a national mixed tournament which attracts scores of players. Fives is a good sport for girls, as it relies on reflex, fleet-footedness and guile as much as strength. It has proved as popular with the girls as the boys in the state schools where it has recently been introduced according to Howard Wiseman, who runs a coaching agency Refca (Rugby and Eton Fives Coaching Agency). He reports that as many girls have taken to the sport as boys, in proportion to the number of female and male pupils in the schools.

No place for a referee

The defining ethos of the game is a result of the fact that there is no place for a referee or umpire.

There is no referee because only the players can tell if the ball has bounced twice, they have hit the ball cleanly, if they have been significantly baulked by another player or if they would have returned the ball if they hadn't been.

Players themselves have to admit foul shots, and have to decide for themselves if they are entitled to a let.

Another reason why there is no role for a referee is that much of the play is hidden from spectators' view.

As a result, the game encourages honesty with yourself and your opponents. Disputes have to be settled between the players on court. Even the highest level of the game is played without a referee. This is very significant – many games rely on a referee to call foul play so the players themselves are robbed of the need to be honest and can become inveterate cheats – see how football has become marred by players diving to win penalties. Fives therefore promotes conflict resolution – players are taught from the beginning that they have to see things from their opponents' point of view, and to judge themselves from a neutral standpoint.

The game requires courtesy; the need to help your opposition is built into the game. Each rally starts with the server throwing the ball up for his opponent to strike. The server must serve to the returner's requirements. And yet it is very rarely a problem: servers learn to throw it to their opponents' satisfaction. No other game has this peculiarity.

The game encourages a sense of humour and a philosophical attitude to failure: its irregular playing surface means even the most well-placed shot can fly out of court.