

High fives

The game of fives has long had a reputation for elitism, but is it deserved? Not then, and certainly not now, says Andy Pringle, as he reports on the sport's urban resurgence.

Photos by Ian Dawson

As Mark Twain nearly said: "Reports of the death of fives have been greatly exaggerated."

Contrary to what some may think, the game - usually described as "squash with your hands" - is not an outdated sport from *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. In fact, fives is alive and well; particularly well for something that's a good 500 years old. Received wisdom tells us that fives was invented in Victorian public schools, but this is not so. It was first recorded in Britain in the 16th Century, and fives walls from the 18th Century still stand in Somerset, while another survives in Langley Park, near Durham.

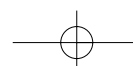
What's clear from the locations of these walls is that the game was at the very heart of the community. And that's why we're setting off on a trip around the country, to see how fives remains true to those roots.

The sport is cheap to play and run, so London wants to follow the example of New York, where there are over 2,000 courts and several thousand players. In the 'Big Apple' the sport has backing from the Mayor and sponsorship from the likes of Sony and Coca-Cola. That's why an ambitious plan from the Inner City Fives Association will see 1-Wall Fives, a direct descendant of the original game, launched in schools across the capital later this year.

The potential of such a scheme is already being demonstrated at our first port of call, London's Westway Sports Centre. An oasis in an urban desert, it sits literally under the A40 Westway, dwarfed by foreboding tower blocks and surrounded by garish graffiti. You could hardly imagine a setting less in keeping with the accepted image of public school fives. Yet here you'll find the only public Eton Fives courts in England, packed with players of all ages on every club night. During the week children as young as 10 play every day after school, and again on Saturdays. In short, it's a massive success.

Ryan Perrie is a perfect example of how the sport has become part of the local ☒

■ **Writer Andy Pringle, foreground above, has played fives for 25 years and is nationally ranked. He joined players at London's Westway Sports Centre, which has the only public Eton Fives courts in the country**



A top fives player needs a blend of skills, among them agility, strength and quick reactions, and the C 55 AMG offers the very same virtues, with comfort, practicality and refinement added for good measure.

community. "At school, I had the choice of playing tennis or fives, and only ended up playing fives because I was late," he says. "But now I enjoy the game twice as much as tennis. I reckon people are only put off because they don't know what fives is."

Indeed, Ryan enjoys it so much that on leaving school he became a coach at the Westway Centre. Similarly, Dominique Redmond also encountered fives for the first time at the Westway. Initially reluctant, she was persuaded to try the game and hasn't looked back since - in fact, she now has a couple of national titles to her name.

From London, we head north to Derby Moor Community Sports College, the only state school in the UK with a flourishing fives club. Taking us there is the most powerful model in the C-Class Estate range, the 367hp C 55 AMG. It's an ideal car for the journey, its links with the sport we're researching going much deeper than the

pair of 5s on the boot lid. A top fives player needs a blend of skills, among them agility, strength and quick reactions, and the C 55 AMG offers the very same virtues, with comfort, practicality and refinement added for good measure.

By 2pm the light is already fading and no sooner have we reached the M1 than the heavens open. At a time like this, there's nowhere I'd rather be than ensconced in a Mercedes and it's a joy to adjust the climate control and settle into the car's leather upholstered, multi-adjustable seats. The V8 engine may be barely ticking over, but it makes for effortless progress.

The Rugby Fives courts at Derby Moor College, on the outskirts of the city, owe their current excellent state to a group of dedicated players who oversaw their renovation just three years ago. Club member Bob Dolby coaches at the school, and there are club nights at least once a week, as well as on Saturdays, when as



Derby Moor College's fives courts were renovated just three years ago

many as 14 youngsters play. The club is gradually establishing itself in the community and a wide range of people are now involved. Some members have carried on since school or university, others have returned after a break, and yet more are new to the game.

The following morning, as we head across the country from Derby to Manchester, we have a chance to enjoy another side of the C 55 AMG's personality. If the motorway cruise from London to Derby showed off its comfort and refinement, the roads that snake over the contours of the Peak District allow the car to demonstrate its sporting credentials.

And so it does. As the road unravels in front of us, Derby's city streets soon become no more than a distant memory. Over these open, twisting roads, the C-Class is a joy, its performance blistering and the handling sharp. In another car we might get stuck in the traffic but the



The C 55 AMG Estate tackled a mix of urban and cross-country routes between fives centres in London, Derby and Manchester



Playing fives

There are three different types of fives, each named after the school - Rugby, Eton and Winchester - that developed the particular set of rules.

The basics of each game are similar: wearing gloves, you use both hands to play the ball around the court and win rallies when your opponents cannot return the ball above a bar on the front wall or before it has bounced more than once.

The difference is in the shape of the court. The simplest is Rugby Fives, played in something that looks almost identical to a squash court, while a Winchester Fives

court has a small buttress on the left-hand side wall which adds an extra dimension to the game, sending the ball flying off at odd angles when it's struck.

In both cases, singles and doubles can be played and the best players combine powerful but accurate hitting with delicate touches that can wrong-foot an opponent.

Eton Fives, however, can only be played in pairs as the court is modelled on the steps of Eton College Chapel, where the game originated. It features a step in the floor and a large buttress sticking out from the left-hand wall, but no back wall.



Fives was first recorded in the 16th Century

Compared to the other variants, it focuses more on deft touches and guile, but demands swift reactions as the ball can come off the various obstacles at very bizarre angles.



■ With blistering performance and sharp handling the C 55 AMG Estate is a joy to drive

beauty of the C 55 AMG is that, when we get an opportunity to pass, we can take it. Just as a fives player waits for the right moment to pounce and hit the winning shot, so we wait for the road ahead to clear and then react. Flick down a couple of gears, floor the throttle and, in an instant, we're past.

All too soon, though, we reach the outskirts of Manchester, and let the satellite navigation take the strain of finding our way to the Y Club. Like the Westway Centre, the Y Club is something of a rarity, a fives club with no ties to a school or university. Its roots are in the Manchester YMCA, which was built in 1911 and has always had fives courts. The game has long

been enormously popular here and locally-based players of all shapes, sizes and ages come to play almost every day of the week.

We arrive just before 5pm on a Wednesday and there's already a queue of players waiting for their turn on the two Rugby Fives courts. The spirit among them is obvious, with what we must politely describe as 'banter' filling the air.

Even on a club night, with nothing at stake but pride, the games are fiercely competitive, drawing an enthusiastic audience of fellow players and other club members. Among them are two of the game's current stars, Phil Bishop and Claire Knowles, respectively men's and ladies' national champions.

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■ Manchester YMCA boasts national champions Phil Bishop and Claire Knowles, in action above, and pictured below



Phil learned fives at school in London but, like many others here, Claire only started to play at the Y Club. "When I first came in, I just saw the game and thought I fancied playing it," she told us. And boy does she play! Claire competes with most of the men on equal terms and has been national ladies' champion in both singles and doubles since 1999.

The opportunity to share a court with these two champions makes for a fitting end to a couple of days during which we've seen fives played as it was always intended, as a game to be enjoyed by people of all ages and from all walks of life, and which has benefits for the whole community.

So, is fives elitist? Not a bit of it. □

For further information visit the following websites:

Rugby Fives Association: www.rfa.org.uk

Eton Fives Association:
www.etonfives.co.uk

Westway Sports Centre:
www.westway.org/westway/sports/wsc/fives/

Derby Moor Fives Club:
www.derbymoorfives.org

Manchester Y Club: www.yclub.org.uk