

TOM WOOD (1920-1994)

Tom Wood's first encounter with Fives was at the City of London School, where of course he learnt the Eton variety; but his parents soon saw the light and sent their boy to University College School, that hotbed of the true game! After two terms, young Tom found that he had been appointed Captain of Rugby Fives, and he never looked back thereafter. He met and played with the legendary Dr Cyriax, founder of the Rugby Fives Association, a giant of a man who never wore socks or a pullover to play in and who pedalled his Dursley Pedersen bicycle all over London to grace the game he loved.

The Old Gowers, as the UCS Old Boys were called, used to play on a Saturday afternoon and then go down to a café called Stewart's in the Finchley Road and have afternoon tea – a ceremony involving cream-cakes, hot toast and little pots of jam, as well as large quantities of liquid. Tom had especially happy memories of those pre-war days, a golden age for the newly codified Rugby Fives, with London a particularly thriving focus for Old Boys' Clubs from quite a number of schools.

After the War, things had changed. Some schools had lost their courts, and many players did not return from the field of action. Most sports – and Fives was no exception – were extremely hard-hit and took years to get going again properly. For almost two decades, Tom himself had little to do with sport, for teaching and lecturing in maths and engineering, as well as family life, took up most of his time and energy. Eventually he allowed himself to be persuaded back into the administrative side of the game in the mid 1960s, and in 1971 he became Honorary Secretary of the RFA Club, starting a remarkable two decades of contribution to the game, both as administrator and player.

Tom's impact on the Club was immediate. From a mere 36 fixtures in 1971, the total rose year by year, reaching 81 in 1976 and continuing until it hit three figures in 1984. What was even more astonishing than this growth was the fact that almost all these matches actually took place! Tom and Joan became missionaries for the game as they travelled all over the kingdom, and even beyond its bounds, representing the Club and searching out new courts. It was their special joy to discover a hitherto unrecognised variety of fives or an original shape of court, and Tom became expert in recounting local rules and quirky regulations. Many a lonely master-in-charge was given moral (and actual) support by the Woods' regular visits to play fives on his courts and encourage the youngsters in his care; and some of the more complacent ones were stimulated into quite unexpected activity, having to raise sides much more frequently than in the past!

The membership of the Club also increased hugely in those heady days, players of all standards flocking to Tom's banner. It was always obvious that for Tom the game was the thing, not the winning or the losing so much as the enjoyment of the event. Of course the Club won a large number of matches and has also been victorious in the Wood Cup, presented by Tom and Joan in 1974 for the National Inter-Club Knockout Competition, a number of times. But what really mattered to Tom was that people should play and enjoy the game, to whatever standard. It was in this spirit that Monday and Friday evenings at Alleyn's became such an enjoyable event for so many Club players over the years. All you had to do to get a game was to turn up! If you had forgotten or lost your gloves, Tom would sell you a pair and sign you up as a member on the spot. And you could be sure that the games would be played up to fifteen points, too.

As his father had been, Tom was Clerk to the Wax Chandlers' Company in the City of London, and members of the RFA Club who attended AGMs were royally entertained at

the Hall as a reward for their attendance. It seemed incredible, to at least one habitué of these events, that the whole membership didn't come along, so generous was the hospitality.

The Woods' generosity and organisational ability was also felt in their American tours and in the way they made sure that visiting teams were received on this side of the Atlantic. The Carey-Wood Cup was competed for with energy and enthusiasm, but it was the hospitality shown to and by the participants and supporters that really counted. The memorable dinner given at the Wax Chandlers' Hall in March 1988 in honour of John Carey's team stands as a symbol of all that Tom and Joan achieved in this respect. Those who were there will never forget it.

Tom was intimately involved in at least two further institutions of the current fives calendar: the President's Cup, which he and Joan combined to make one of the most nourishing, and yet most exhausting, days of the year for members of the Club brave enough to enter; and the Winchester Doubles, for which they presented an unusual trophy in the form of a scale model of one London's bridges! Tom would pretend to complain about the peculiarities in the rules of the Winchester game, but really he delighted in such diversity.

Tom Wood will be remembered as a great benefactor of Fives. He was Honorary Secretary of the RFA Club for a magnificent 18 years, and for a briefer period Secretary and President of the Association as well. He was above all a man of action, preferring to do things rather than talk about them, and it was entirely characteristic and fitting that he was still playing the game he loved when he was 74 years young, just a few weeks before his death.

David Barnes.

(Written in 1994, edited in 2014.)