

Nigel Gordon (1951-2017)

Nigel Gordon was not a player of Rugby Fives but he was of great importance in the history of the game as it was he who made the G6 fives ball for some twenty years until his untimely death, caused by a heart attack suffered when he was engaged in making balls in his workshop.

Nigel was born in 1951, the son of Bill Gordon, the Rackets Professional at Marlborough and the manufacturer for more than 30 years of the G6 Rackets Ball. Nigel went to school at Millfield School and excelled in squash and judo. It was there that he developed a life-long interest in the world of nature and a taste for the outdoor life. Indeed, after he left school his first employment was in farming.

Nigel had a number of jobs in the early part of his adult life, including working in a Young Offenders Unit. His first significant employment in the world of ball games was as a rackets professional and lawn tennis coach at Radley College in the 1970s. Colleagues remember him for introducing the first tennis ball machine, "a curious Heath Robinson contraption". While at Radley Nigel formed a climbing club.

Nigel then moved to Devon where he was able to pursue another of his interests: Search and Rescue, while working in the response room for Age UK. It was during his time in Devon that Nigel began making Rugby Fives and Rackets balls, as a result of which he became friends with players of the Exeter Fives Club. They well remember Nigel's perseverance in getting the bounce of the G6 Rugby Fives ball perfected. His support for fives went further than just making the balls: when he first met Wayne Enstone at an RFA Dinner he very generously offered to sponsor the South West Open Championships, which he continued to do for many years.

A few years ago Nigel and his wife moved to Arnside in Cumbria where he helped with the local Sailing Club. From his workshop there the flow of balls continued. It is reckoned that Nigel made some 40,000 rackets balls. How many fives balls is not known but Hamish Buchanan remembers him as "a real enthusiast, genuinely dedicated to producing a ball that met our demands. Once he produced four different balls of increasing pace with coloured leathers to trial".

Fives players who played with the heavy, hard, glued Cliff ball in the 1980s will recall with gratitude the time when the G6 came onstream and changed the game for the better. Severe bruising became much less common, and the game speeded up, rewarding the kind of aggressive, two-handed player who we now see at all levels of the game. With Nigel's death the RFA faced a problem it had feared for some time: Where to source balls of a similar quality. At the time of writing the RFA is working with Howard Wiseman at 'Gloves and Balls' to resolve this problem.

RLD October 2017

