

HARD BAT COMPETITION

The final twenty-four players gathered at the Civil Service Table Tennis club on Saturday 24 March 2018 to test their skills with the identical bats that were once again being used in the eleventh annual Bristol Hard Bat competition. However, nobody could have predicted at the moment this group photograph was taken early that morning, what a treat would be in store for everyone by the end of the day in the very final match!



All participants began the day in bands of four based on their current league averages, as well as trying to ensure that no two players were in either the same initial group as in previous years. The top two in each group as usual would proceed to the Main competition for the John Mycroft Boucher Main trophy, whilst the bottom two in each group would do battle for the James Hamilton Plate trophy. All groups panned out as expected, apart from the assembly on Table Two where the perennially-determined 2011 Plate champion, **Terry Toghill** took the prize scalp of the 2014 and 2015 Plate champion, **Dennis Coombe**, in straight sets.

Plate Competition

As the next round-robin stage got underway around lunchtime, the players seemed to be adapting to the hard bats with ease, as so many rallies seen all around the room were of a really high standard. On Table Four, **Mervyn George** kicked off proceedings winning a close three-set match against **Martin Moore** (17-21, 21-18, 22-20), and then won another close three-setter (23-21, 19-21, 21-18) against **David Goacher** to finish second in the group behind a much-improved three match group winner, **Nathan Proud**. Meanwhile on the next table, **Charlotte Taylor** nearly caused a huge upset when she just missed out 21-19 in the third to **Dennis Coombe**, who eventually topped the group in front of **Simon Monks** and **Colin Dowding** in third place. On the final table, however, there was an upset. **Rebecca Burton**, playing in her last Hard Bat competition today as her job will be relocating to Leicester, recorded two great wins against **Bryan Taylor** and **Geoff Mallett**, but was beaten into icing the group by a seemingly un-stoppable **Nathan Proud** when she just missed out 21-19, 19-21, 21-19 in their encounter. The top six players were to then face off in two three-way semi-finals. Table number three was where **Rebecca Burton** was to come up against the Ant and Dec of our league, **Simon Monks** and **Raymond Hall!** (*I'll leave you to work out who of the two might be checking into the bacon roll rehab centre after today's play!*). Anyway, Raymond kicked off with a 21-12, 21-8 success over Rebecca, but then Simon lost 23-21, 21-16 to Rebecca and then capitulated to Raymond

(21-13, 21-15). Raymond had therefore reached his first Hard Bat final, but who would he meet? Division four's **Nathan Proud**'s impressive mastery of the hard bat today was steadily gaining momentum on the adjoining table, where he overcame two club-mates who ply their trade a division higher, **Mervyn George** (21-14, 21-14) and **Dennis Coombe** (21-19, 17-21, 21-17), and quite rightly earned his place in the final.

The Plate final commenced with restraint by both players, but slowly Nathan began to open up. However, he soon found himself 8-5 down and then 11-6 down as his backhand shots were not going to plan, whilst Raymond was focussing on being extra steady. Some good defensive strokes from Raymond pushed his lead up to 17-12 as Nathan appeared nervous. However, this was when Nathan decided he should be more cautious himself, and from 16-19 down he was somehow level at 19 all and then 21 all. A good drop shot from Nathan saw him take the lead for the first time in the game, and then a hurried attacking miss saw Raymond lose the set. After some coaching on the side from Dan Ives, Nathan went 2-0 up in the second game, but then found himself 13-6 down. A fantastic forehand smash by Raymond, who was now spotting a slight weakness on Nathan's backhand, pushed his dominance even further to an unassailable 20-8. A brilliant deep retrieval shot from Raymond followed where the ball went about fifteen feet in the air before landing on the table, but Nathan then



missed the smash. One game all. Before the deciding game got under way, Nathan was being counselled by no less than two coaches, whilst Raymond cut a forlorn figure in the opposite corner! However, both players started off the decider slow and steady with relatively few attacking shots, but Raymond eased to a 12-7 lead, only to lose the next five points in a row, before gaining the next three. Another attacking slip on the forehand from Nathan made it 15-12 in Raymond's favour, before the best rally of the match which included nets, drop shots and recoveries to make it 16-14. It was soon 18-17 and then 18-20, but two really brave attacking shots from Nathan made it deuce. Brilliant stuff! Another bold shot from Nathan saved his bacon to make it 22-22, but then he tightened up nudging a tame one into the net. He followed that though with a courageous "all or nothing" hit to make it level yet again. The best rally of the match came next, but then an error by Nathan and it was all over: 25-23 to our new champion, **Raymond Hall**. Congratulations, Raymond.



Main Competition

Following the earlier initial group stages during the morning, all three groups in this half of the Hard Bat competition contained some really strong candidates for the title. In Group A, number one seed and current title holder, **Dave Reeves**, beat both **James Ashton** and **Alex Kearney**, but then lost in three sets (18-21, 21-16, 21-19) to the 2016 champion, **Gary Baldwin**, who ended victorious. Dave, however, finished second to qualify alongside Gary. The next table was the proverbial "group of death", with **Paul Laverly**, **Nick Branch**, **Paul Redman** and **Dan Ives** squaring up. The first match saw **Paul Laverly**, who was exhibiting some fantastic and unusual serves throughout the day, just miss out 11-21, 21-11, 21-19 to Dan, and then Paul became embroiled in another close-losing three-setter against **Paul Redman** (12-21, 21-12, 21-19), who himself had just lost out to the 2017 runner-up, **Nick Branch** in a two straight game defeat. Dan then seemingly bamboozled **Paul Redman** in their encounter (21-8, 21-4), but meanwhile Nick was calmly winning his three matches in two straight games each to top the group in front of Dan and was setting his sights on another appointment in the final. Table C was to see **Anthony Kent** top the quartet unbeaten with wins over **Michele Reeves** and **Terry Toghill**, but had to endure a close battle with **Rob Chandler** (20-22, 21-17, 21-14) who finished second, whilst Terry's win over Michele was even closer (24-22, 14-21, 21-19).

The two three-way semi-final groups were therefore split as follows: **Gary Baldwin**, **Dan Ives** and **Rob Chandler** on Table One, and **Dave Reeves**, **Nick Branch** and **Anthony Kent** on the next. This was going to be tough for all players, as only the winner of each trio would go through. Rob kicked off with a fantastic two straight game win over Gary (21-16, 21-13), but then lost in two to Dan (15-21, 15-21). Dan then faced

Gary knowing that if he were to win, he would make it to his first final in this competition. Some great sportsmanship and fun ensued, but there was nothing Gary could do to halt the inevitable, as Dan claimed his second victory in the group (21-11, 21-12). He had made it! Meanwhile, Dave won a gruelling three-setter against Anthony (21-15, 21-23, 21-11), and then umpired as Anthony beat last year's runner-up, Nick (21-16, 21-18). If Dave could repeat his win against the same player next on, he too would go through to the final in this competition...and his third. Nick played extremely well and won the first set (21-18), but Dave's sounder defence saw him take the next two (21-14, 21-15). The final two players were now known.

At the start of this concluding match, nobody could have predicted what a feast of table tennis was about to be seen. After testing each other out in the first few points, a delicately disguised drop shot saw Dan go 3-2 up, after which he decided to start opening up with a flurry of attacking forehand smashes. However, it was not long before he found himself 6-9 down with a succession of forehand errors as a result of some good defensive and veiled tactics from Dave. A peach of a forehand placement from Dave in one rally then gave him a 12-8 lead. The attacking strokes from Dan countered by Dave's defence were a sight to behold, but not much fun for Dan as he rapidly went 16-10 down which soon became 19-10. A final miss and it was all over at 21-10. Advice for both players by two coaches ensued before play commenced again. It was evident that Dan was more controlled in his play now and the rallies were getting even better by the time the points were shared at 7-7. However, Dan started to throw caution to the wind again and lost the next seven points! At 15-9, Dave was now ensconced even further back from the table as Dan's shots were developing



even more power, speed and aggression. Clawing his way back somehow to just 14-16 down, Dan claimed a lucky net and then a fortunate edge to level at 16 all. Dave looked at his opponent unbelievably, but a fantastic rally at 17-17 momentarily put Dave one point ahead, but back came Dan. At 19-19, a rare mistake by Dave and a float which missed the far line by inches and it was 21-19 to Dan. Game on. The title could now go either way. At 6-6 in the decider, Dan was doing more walking between rallies in order to gain some "thinking" time, but still changed ends 10-6 down. Then, inconveniently for everyone, the main lights went out! However, after a few moments of consultation, both players

elected to carry on, as the overall light was still good and the main light would return soon anyway. The first point was another outstanding rally complementing attacker against defender which went to Dave, but at 12-11 a bad serve and error from Dave saw him go 14-11 down, before he clawed himself back to 15 a piece. Two misses by Dave after one good point and a net from Dan made it 17-17. Another absolutely brilliant rally ended with a wild flail by Dan to make it 18-17 which soon became 18-20 and match point to Dave. One redeeming point from Dan, and it was then that we had the "shot of the day" from Dave from a ridiculously impossible defensive position just so many feet away from the table, which was out of this world. Dan's spirit was broken and Dave claimed his third title in this competition at 21-19 in what was simply a fantastic final. Congratulations then, not only to our winner **Dave Reeves**, but also to **Dan Ives** for giving us all a final that we will all remember for a very long time. When **Ken Simmons**, who has now played no less than 68 consecutive years in our league, made the presentations to all of our winners, he confessed, and with a tear in his eye, that in all of those years he had never seen such a brilliant match between two contrasting and outstanding exponents of our sport, and everyone present entirely agreed with a standing ovation.



Please also note that a number of the matches today were kindly filmed by Dan and will hopefully soon be available to view on YouTube, as too are some of our previous Hard Bat finals, so please do take a look. So, with everyone thoroughly enjoying the day as it unfolded, it is once again hoped that next year's Hard Bat tournament will be yet another success and who knows.....could it be even better? Thank you.

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