

HARD BAT COMPETITION

The final thirty players gathered at the Civil Service Table Tennis club on Saturday 26 January 2019 to test their skills with the identical bats that were once again being used in the twelfth annual Bristol Hard Bat competition. As seems to happen each year in this competition, there were the usual protagonists but there were also a few new faces too, which is always great to see. The overwhelming fact was, that everyone present seemed to thoroughly enjoy the day, which once again highlights the popularity of this exciting, and always fair, event.



Due to the fact that regrettably only six tables were available for use today, play commenced with our keen and eager players seeded into groups of five and, as usual based on their current league averages, as well as trying to ensure that no two players were at least starting in the same initial group as in previous years. However, due to the time constraints as well, it meant that rather than the usual best-of-three games up to 21, we had to revert to the novel format of playing in the first two group rounds, first tried in 2017, with just one game up to 31 points.....which was more disconcerting for the umpires trying to keep score than the players! Anyway, as is customary in this competition, the top players in each group would proceed to the Main competition for the **John Mycroft Boucher** trophy, whilst the remainders would do battle for the **James Hamilton** Plate trophy. All groups went according to expectation, except for play on two of the tables. On Table 3, division one player, **Ian Maggs**, finished third, which meant he would be in the Plate competition, but on Table 5, the top seed, and 2016 champion, **Gary Baldwin**, unfortunately had to withdraw on the morning of the competition due to a back injury. We hope you get better soon, Gary. His place was, however, immediately taken by **Duncan Jones** who is always kind enough to be present on these occasions to step in, so thank you Duncan. Unfortunately, this skewed the seedings somewhat, as Duncan, although a top, top division 19 player, was replacing a Premier division player. This would mean that **Mervyn George** and **Martin Moore**, at the end of this first round group stage, would suddenly find themselves in the top half of the draw facing the big guns! If only **Simon Monks** had have been in that group, eh!

Plate Competition

By the time 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, Division four's **David Goacher** had a terrific result against Division two's **Kevin Hinett** (31-16). **Martyn Millard**, playing in his first ever Hard Bat competition was also enjoying the day and claimed three wins to top the group. **Mark Ratajczak**, also playing in his first HB event, did really well to finish second. **Cristi Zamfir** of Almonds TTC, too was playing some great stuff and beat David and Kevin, but only two players could progress. Table Five seemed to be more clear-cut, with **Ian Maggs** unbeaten throughout and **Simon Monks** making yet another marvellous recovery from his "initial loss of form" to only drop one match and finish runner-up. **Tony Cooper** playing in his second HB event, won two matches and **Charlotte Taylor** did brilliant to defeat the stand-in, **Duncan Jones**. On the last table, **Georges Chabbert**, another newbie, although not feeling that well on the day, still won two matches against **Warren Sneary** and **Steve Knight**, who himself, beat last year's runner-up in the Plate Competition, **Nathan Proud**, and must be pleased with that, because it would be Nathan who topped the group! Meanwhile, a resurgent **Rebecca Burton** playing some fantastic table tennis, was surprising herself and won three matches to finish second.

The two three-way semi-final line-ups were therefore as follows: **Martyn Millard, Simon Monks** and **Rebecca Burton** on Table 3, and **Ian Maggs, Nathan Proud** and **Mark Ratajczak** on Table 4. Some good games were on the cards. The format at this stage now reverted to best-of-three games up to 21, so normal service was resumed. Rebecca kicked off proceedings, but found Martyn too strong and lost 12-21, 11-21. She stayed on the table to face Simon, knowing that only a win would hopefully keep her in the competition. The first game went to plan, winning 21-13, but Simon took the next on a deuce at 22-20. The decider, though, went in Simon's favour (21-17). The next match would therefore decide our first finalist. Simon took the first from Martyn at 21-16, but the score was reversed in the next. However, in the last game, Simon pushed on and took it at 21-10. On the other table, Ian won in a gruelling three-setter against Mark (21-18, 19-21, 21-11), who then had to stay on the table and play Nathan, but managed to win that one (15-21, 21-14, 21-15). The Ian/Nathan encounter was over in two though, with a 21-19, 21-14 win for Ian. So it would be **Ian Maggs** versus **Simon Monks** in our Plate final, which would probably be decided on who could come with the better quips on the day rather than their table tennis prowess!



Ian served first, but lost the point. He served his second and promptly missed the end of the table. He then did it again! Could this be nerves? Of course, Simon may well have been able to capitalise at this point if he had known some good Honda jokes, (*like if this was last month and he had sung Honda first day of Christmas....*), but he didn't, and soon found the score was level at 4-4. A good forehand smash from Ian levelled again at 6-6, but that was quickly followed by two long ones off the end and Simon was quickly 12-6 up. More fancy serves from Ian were not cutting it with Simon, and more balls beyond the table from him opened up a bigger gap at 15-10. When a rare wild smash from Simon went long though, Ian remarked "*I can see why you don't hit much!*" This spurred Simon on, who saw the game out at 21-13. Simon claimed the first two points of the second game, but some

more controlled play from Ian kept the scores level up to 8-8. The next four points went Ian's way, and this was the first time in the match that he was in front. This was extended to 18-10 and one or two misses from Simon and some clever side-to-side moving shots from Ian, followed by a lucky edge and then a missed serve wrapped it up at 21-12. The extra bacon rolls were having an effect! Deciding game and first blood to Simon, but the match was more cagey now. A lucky edge from Simon made it 5-5, but ends were changed at 10-7 in Ian's favour, who had at the change-around been advised to "slow it down". 12-9 soon became 14-10, but errors were creeping in now, and a desperate high return at 12-16 was punished by Ian to make it 17-12. Although there was a final great back-hand smash at 14-19 from Simon, it was Ian who took the title at 21-14. Our new Plate Competition champion was **Ian Maggs**. Congratulations, Ian.



Main Competition

After the initial group stages during the morning, our new 2019 champion would come from one of these three top groups. The Group A line-up contained **Dave Reeves, Rob Chandler, Alex Kearney, Nick Branch** (who had surprisingly finished runner-up in the first stage to another newbie, **Jon Thorn**) and the unfortunate **Martin Moore** who found himself at the wrong end of the room due to **Gary Baldwin** not playing. This was also an unlucky group for Alex, who was in some discomfort with a foot injury that had developed during the morning. Although bravely soldiering on, he was only able to complete two matches and had to withdraw. Dave beat Nick (31-18), but Nick beat Martin and then Rob, but only just at 32-30! That was a close and exciting match. So it was Dave and Nick who would progress. On Table 2, **Terry Toghill**, our 2011 Plate champion, defeated Premier division player, **Paul Redman**, but couldn't sustain his game. **Michele Reeves** beat both Paul and Terry, whilst **Steve Doidge** beat both Terry and Paul to finish runner-up. Meanwhile, **Raymond Hall**, last year's Plate champion, won all four matches to top the group. Table 3 saw the number two seed and virgin Bristol Hard Bat participant, **Joe Ratajczak**, who had already lost to Raymond earlier in the day to find himself here in the wrong group, beat **David Boozari**, playing in his second HB event (31-17). David beat **Mark Kerslake**, but only just in the closest game in this group at 32-30. **Mervyn George** who, like **Martin Moore**, would have probably been in the Plate competition at this stage, did win against David, but it was **Jon Thorn** who was astonishing everyone on the day, but probably not himself, who would top the group. So far, he hadn't lost a game all day, and it was he who would reach the semi-finals along with Joe.

The two three-way semi-final groups were therefore split as follows: **Dave Reeves, Steve Doidge** and **Joe Ratajczak** on Table One, and **Raymond Hall, Jon Thorn** and **Nick Branch** on the next. This was going to be tough for all players, as only the winner of each trio would go through. Dave kicked off against Joe, with both players realising that whoever won this was more than likely going to be in the final. Joe found Dave too strong, though from the off, and went down 21-13, 21-13. He then faced Steve and won the first (21-15), but back came Steve to claim the second at 23-21, but then Joe claimed the next at 21-15. Dave then played Steve and won in two (21-7, 21-18). The other potential finalist from Table 2 could have been anybody! That was a strong group. Raymond played Nick to start with, but lost out (18-21, 15-21). Nick stayed on the table to face Jon in an absolutely fantastic three-setter. First game to Jon at 24-22, but the second to Nick at 22-20, in a game that Jon probably deserved to just win, but it had been a long day, and Jon faltered in the third to lose out 21-8. Nick had won his two matches, so the last match between Raymond and Jon had no bearing, but was nonetheless played out and won by Jon (21-14, 21-14). The final would therefore be a repeat of the one two years ago.

Dave served off for the first point in the Main competition final match of the day in front of a captive audience, which included our President, June Watts who was here to watch the last few matches in her first Hard Bat championships. Dave went one up, and was soon 3-1 up having served long. Nick started with his



trade-mark rolling, and controlled, forehand strokes, as Dave was retrieving them from further and further back from the table.....and in his comfort zone. 5-2 up was followed by a net cord by Nick to make it 5-3, but then Nick's forehand lifts were suddenly not working and it became 8-3. This was a dilemma now for Nick. An attempt at a delicate drop shot to draw Dave in, unfortunately did not come off, and the rallies were now getting longer as Nick attempted to prolong each rally. It worked! It was soon 11-9, but the odd missed attacking shot meant that Dave would extend his lead, and so it was. If Nick goes for it, he's in danger, if he doesn't, he risks losing anyway. Consequently, the rallies get longer and it's now 16-14 and he's back in the game. At 18-16 though, a tremendous flat cross court hit from Dave wins the point and a couple of points later the same shot, but an

even faster one, wins the first game at 21-17. Second game – first point to Nick. A wild miss by Dave makes it 2-1, but it’s soon level at 4 all. A weak shot and a net shot from Nick and he’s 8-5 down. A very long and defensive rally which wows the crowd then makes it 10-5 and by 6-12, you could see that Nick was being worn down by almost every shot he makes keeps coming back. Nick’s spirit seemed to wane and it was soon 19-8, then 20-8. Another extended rally by the pair was then ended by a fantastic backhand hit by Dave. 21-8, and game over. Dave had retained his title for the third year in succession – the first time it has ever been done in this competition! Congratulations then to **Dave Reeves**, our Hard Bat champion once again, pictured right holding the **John Mycroft Boucher** Hard Trophy.



Thus ended yet another great day for all players taking part and spectators alike, and many of them were already looking forward to doing it all over again next year. The question is though, not how many bacon rolls will need to be cooked (!), but is there anyone out there in our league that can wrest the title off our three-time-in-a-row champion? If you think you can do it and wish to take part in this popular event next year anyway, remember, get your entries in before the closing date.

Anyway, our thanks go to Civil Service club for allowing us to hold this competition on their premises once again, but also to **Mark Kinlocke** for kindly agreeing to video our finals and also some of the latter matches on the day. Even better and more remarkable news, is that the Main final has already been uploaded to YouTube along with some snippets from other games on the day, and the Plate Final will soon follow, so please do take a look some time if you wish. There are also videos of some of our previous finals too for your delectation! Thank you.

* * * * *