

HARD BAT COMPETITION

On Saturday 18 January 2020, the Association's ever-popular Hard Bat competition once again took place at the Civil Service TTC and, as is customary in this event, only the hard bats being provided on the day were allowed to be used, thereby making this completely fair as usual for every player concerned. However, this year brand new bats were made available after seven years of continued use with the previous ones, compliments of our Association, which probably made it an even better experience for the participants, with the majority of them seeming to adapt to them within minutes.



With six tables being utilised this year, there would be five players on each to start with. The top ones at the end of this stage would progress to the Main half of the competition and the remainder would participate in the Plate section. As was the case last year due to time constraints, each group again played just one game against each other up to 31 points - which was probably more demanding on the umpires knowing when to change ends!

As usual there were the “predictable surprises”, with some players who one would have expected to progress to the Main competition, astonishingly finding themselves in the Plate half! You know who you are! On Table 1 then, which entertained **Dave Reeves**, **Mark Ratajczak**, **Nathan Proud**, **Ricardo Perpetua** and **Matthew Brealey**, one shock was the 2018 Plate runner-up, Nathan, finishing bottom of the group. Ricardo, however, gave an excellent introduction of himself as a hard bat “newbie” and finished a respectable third behind Dave and Mark, the latter of whom was playing in this event for his second time. Table 2 (**Gary Baldwin**, **Martyn Millard**, **Kevin Hinett**, **Dennis Coombe** and **Rebecca Burton**) finished with Kevin as runner-up behind the 2016 Main champion, Gary, whilst Table 3 saw HB debuts for **Edgar Sarfs** and **Vasily Pribylov** who both did themselves proud against **Nick Branch** (twice Main runner-up in 2017 and 2019), **Raymond Hall** (Plate winner in 2018) and **Martin Moore** (Plate runner-up in 2010). On Table 4, two more “newbies”, **Billy Guibarra** and **Jim Smith**, also did extremely well engaging with **Jon Thorn**, **Simon Monks** and **Tony Cooper**, and it ended with Billy in third and Jim in fourth spot. On the next table it was to be **Michele Reeves**, **Mark Ratajczak** and **David Goacher** who would progress to the Main half, with **Mark Kerslake** and **Steve Knight** resigned to the Plate. On the final table, division 2 player, **Nigel Dagger**, beat one of the two Prem players on his hard bat introduction and rightly snatched second place behind **Rob Chandler**, with **Mervyn George** finding himself in third spot ahead of last year's Plate champion, **Ian Maggs** and also the 2011 Plate champion, **Terry Toghill**.

Plate Competition

After a brief interlude for lunch around 11:30am, just as the intoxicating aroma of the now traditional freshly-cooked bacon rolls on offer had wafted up into the playing arena causing mayhem, the three groups of five players in this half of the competition knowing that only the top two in each would progress to the semi-finals, played their groups out as follows. On Table 4, **Simon Monks**, who had finished bottom in his opening day group, was suddenly re-energised and won all of his four games. Whether this was as a result of taking the morning session to adjust to the new bats, or the arrival of the bacon rolls, we will never know. **Ricardo Perpetua** won two matches, **Rebecca Burton** one and division five's **Vasily Pribylov** concluded with an impressive clash against the eventual runner-up and division one player in this group, **Paul Redman**. There were no problems whatsoever though for last year's Plate winner, **Ian Maggs** on the adjoining table, as he topped the group with **Stephen Knight** taking second spot, which included a close call 34-32 win over the 2018 Plate winner, **Raymond Hall**. **Matthew Brealey** and **Dennis Coombe** completed the line-up, with Matthew having a great win over the previous double Plate champion, Dennis. On Table 6, another player who had finished bottom of his group in the morning, **Nathan Proud**, also came good and won three games to finish top. **Kevin Hinett** also won three, but having just lost out in his head-to-head match with Nathan, finished as runner-up. It was the end of the road, however, for **Jim Smith**, **Terry Toghill** and **Martin Moore**.



The first three-way semi-final line-up, with all matches now reverting to the best of three games up to 21 points clear by two, saw **Kevin Hinett**, **Simon Monks** and **Stephen Knight** drawn against each other. There could only be one winner. Kevin kicked off against Simon, but met his match and succumbed 13-21, 8-21. He then played Stephen and turned it around to win 21-10, 21-13. One win each then. If Simon could defeat Stephen, then Simon would take his place in his second, and consecutive final. He triumphed in a really close 23-21 first game win, then romped away to take the second as well at 21-9. The other semi-final on the next table, was the first "group of death" on the day. **Ian Maggs**, **Nathan Proud** and **Paul Redman** were the adversaries. The first match between Ian and Paul went to three sets and was a belter, with Paul just scraping it at 22-20, 16-21, 23-21, and so the title-holder's position was already in jeopardy. He then took the next match against Nathan by a nose at 22-20, 21-18. Paul could then take a well-earned rest knowing he had made the final, whilst Ian played out a 21-5, 21-17 win over Nathan.

The meeting in the Plate final between Paul and Simon turned out to be a repeat of the earlier afternoon group encounter between these two, when Simon took the honours with a 31-26 win, but would this be a repeat success? Who would triumph in the final match that really mattered? The two protagonists took a brief moment to size each other up from opposite ends of the table, like two gladiators about to do battle in the colosseum at Rome with both of them gripping their bats as if they were deadly weapons, but at the end of the day we have to remind ourselves that this was actually Horfield - so not quite the same! Would it be the suave, sophisticated and debonair player at one end who would prevail, or the athletic Adonis at the other, nonchalantly flicking back the locks of hair that he wished he still had? The opening encounters in the first set were nervous, tentative and safe, with neither player gaining an advantage. That was until left-handed Paul missed an easy shot at 12-14, and soon afterwards Simon was lucky enough to get a net cord and an edge which took it to 18-12. Yet another fluky net and a roll-over extended it to 20-12, and despite Paul getting a thirteenth point, a forehand miss meant the first set went to Simon at 21-13. Paul served the next game, and a really good rally took it to 2-2. It was looking ominous for Paul at this stage as there were too many missed forehands, but 5-5 soon became 9-5 though in Paul's favour after some well-chosen shots, and his eye now seemed "in". A great blocked return by Simon scraped him back to 11-7, which soon became 14-10 as his confidence grew. A few moments later it was 15-13 though after a good backhand from Simon, but Paul put the pressure on with more attacking shots, and after a



wild flail at 20-13 down, the game was Paul's. It was to go to a deciding set. Simon served, but lost the first point, and found himself 4-1 down at the change. A fantastic down-the-line smash after a great rally was won by Paul (*see left*), and they changed ends with Paul 10-5 up. A good drop shot by Simon saw him claw back to make it 7-11, but there were more ominous backhand winners flying off Paul's bat and he took a convincing lead at 16-10. Just five more points needed. However, two uncharacteristic errors by Paul were to follow, and Simon was just

playing it steady wishing for this to work. Finding himself 15-19 down, he was now resigning himself to just forlorn hope. However, Paul's side of the net was unexpectedly found no less than four times in a row and suddenly it was 19-all. Game on. Although he took the next point to stop the rot, another slip and it was deuce! Simon won the next point, but then a really good spin service by Paul won the next to level the final yet again. However, it was Simon who grabbed the next two rallies that were played out, and he claimed the game, and the title, at 23-21. It came as no surprise just several minutes later, as last year's runner-up in this event then "celebrated" his long over-due success in the Plate event with another bacon roll! Congratulations to **Simon Monks** (*see right*).



Main Competition

It was overhead on more than one occasion in the hall on the day, that the "dark horse" this year was **Rob Chandler**. However, having won all his earlier round-robin matches, he found himself drawn in the same group as the defending champion, **Dave Reeves**, on Table 1 with **Edgar Sarfs**, **Tony Cooper** and **David Goacher**. The latter three had done remarkably well to reach this stage and put up spirited performances, in particular David,

but it was Tony who would win two great, but close, matches – one 31-28 against Dave and the other 36-34 against the awkward, but incredibly effective style of Ed, who played exceptionally well all day long in his first HB event. The very last match in this group though was the hum-dinger and ended with a 33-31 victory for Rob over Dave. Could the word on the street be coming true? Both would proceed to the semis. On Table 2, **Gary Baldwin** won all his games with **Michele Reeves** taking the runner-up place to advance herself. Meanwhile, **Billy Guibarra** and **Nigel Dagger** also played out some fantastic points in this group, as did **Mark Ratajczak** of division two, even claiming Prem player Billy's scalp. The third table also witnessed the two higher-ranked players progress – **Nick Branch** and **Jon Thorn**. Again, some great displays from the three Ms - **Martyn Millard**, **Mark Kerslake** and **Mervyn George** were seen, but it wasn't quite enough.

The two three-way semi-finals eventually beckoned. **Rob Chandler**, **Michele Reeves** and **Jon Thorn** lined up on Table one, with Rob taking the first match against Jon (14-21, 21-5, 21-17). He was half way to the final. Jon then played Michele and scraped through 21-19, 21-19. If Rob could beat Michele, he would be there. He narrowly lost the first set (19-21), but bounced back to seize the second (21-17). However, the long day began to take its toll in the third end, and Michele's grit and determination took it at 21-14. It was therefore a three-way tie, but because Jon had the better games "difference" he had reached his first HB final. The other trio comprised the "group of death": **Gary Baldwin**, **Nick Branch** and **Dave Reeves**. Dave pocketed the first match against Gary (21-13, 21-16), and his resolve to retain his title saw him take the honours against Nick, and his place was cemented in the final, albeit close at 21-11, 22-20. The other match was a fun 21-18, 21-23, 21-12 victory for Nick over Gary, played with plenty of laughs along the way.

The very last match then was the Main final between **Jon Thorn** and **Dave Reeves**. Who would be holding the prestigious **John Mycroft Boucher** Hard Bat trophy for a year (*see right*)? Jon served and won the first point, but Dave took the next three which was then followed by a great shot to the body by Jon. The longest rally ensued at 4-4 with the point going Dave's way. A number of unfortunate misses by Jon then meant he had to "think" the rallies through, but whatever shot he seemed to choose, the ball was unerringly being returned – and won by Dave. A wild smash by Jon hit the far corner of the table to make it 6-12 and then another fantastic hit by him for 9-14. A great drop shot closed the gap even more to 11-14, however, a lucky net and edge by Dave knocked Jon's confidence sideways and it was soon 12-18. Dave hit the net to give Jon a glimmer of hope, but at 14-20 what looked like a certain winner from Jon, was somehow returned by Dave and it clipped the net as well as an edge to win the point. 21-14 to Dave.



Dave received some advice from Michele, and Nick stepped forward to whisper in Jon's ear. After the opening exchanges, there was an absolutely terrific flat forehand winner by Jon at 3-1 down, but that was matched in the next point with an outstanding backhand smash by Dave. At 4-4, Jon (*see left*) won the next point and found himself in front for the first time. A forehand miss though and another backhand winner from Dave put him back in the lead. A deft backhand drop shot by Jon pulled it back to 7-9, but by the time that became 8-13 Jon was looking desperate. A mobile phone then rang in the hall and momentarily distracted Dave who lost that point. At 9-14 there was another dazzling exchange of shots, ending

with a winner down the line by Jon, but it was not to be, as the score soon read 12-17 and he was out of ideas. One great rally and then a timely net pulled him back to 14-18, but at 15-18 a high return from deep behind the baseline by Jon was spectacularly met with a two-foot leap off the ground winning smash by the champion who was now smelling victory. At 15-20, a final net by Jon and that was it. The Hard Bat trophy had now been won by Dave for the fifth time, but more importantly for the last four years in a row! Is anyone going to stop him taking a fifth? Our congratulations once again therefore go to our resident champion, **Dave Reeves** (*see below right*).

As you will see, all the trophies were very kindly presented by our President, **June Watts**, who came along to watch most of the afternoon matches. Our thanks must of course also go to the Bristol Civil Service club for allowing us to use their premises for this event yet again, and we must not forget **Charlotte Taylor** who was devastated that she was unable to participate in the event this year, as she had an unfortunate accident just the week before, but insisted on helping out at the start of the day. Thank you very much, Charlotte, and make sure you get well soon. **Mark Kinlocke** also deserves a mention



here, as he set all the tables up in the hall the night before without us even knowing! He then came along on the day of the competition to video both finals, which will soon be available to view on YouTube, along with many of our previous years' finals too, so thank you, Mark. Finally, I must not only thank all of the players on the day who seemed to really enjoy themselves this year and, in so doing, contributed to the continuing popularity and success of this fun tournament on our calendar, but especially for all the sincere and generous comments conveyed to me personally on the day, and then for some really kind e-mails I received from many of you after the event too. Thank you.

John Ruderham

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