



Braintree League: Hayden, Beckles shine

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Peter Hayden, predictably, and Antonio Beckles, totally unpredictably, were the stars of the preliminary rounds of the Braintree Table Tennis League annual individual events.

Hayden's successes were predictable in that as a six-time winner of the men's singles, he could have been expected to shine – but this time there was a twist.

Because of a chronic wrist injury he has been playing this season with an anti-loop bat, but for the annual event he decided to throw caution to the wind and turned to his old bat, and his old action, pain or no pain.

And even though he had not picked up that bat for a year, he quickly showed he had not forgotten how to use it, making his way through to the finals of the over-50s and the veterans' singles, and then the crowning moment, eliminating No 1 seed and holder Brandon Crouchman from the men's singles. In a classy fast-moving set, he triumphed 3-1 (11-9, 15-13, 9-11, 11-7).

He earned his place in the veterans' singles final the hard way, a win at 12-10 in the fifth game over Adam Buxton. In the final, to be held at the Earls Colne Recreation Centre on Friday (starting at 7.15), he will face the holder Paul Davison, whose semi-final win came over Ken Lewis after Victor Chan had put out No 3 seed Steve Pennell.

In the over-50s', Hayden overcame Lewis in the semi-final and will face Pennell – a semi-final winner over his doubles partner Ian Whiteside at 11-9 in the fifth game – on finals night.

In the men's singles semi-final, Hayden will again face Buxton, the No 4 seed, who reached the last four despite a defeat at the group stage at the hands of his doubles partner Lee McHugh.

That meant he faced a tougher than expected last 16 meeting with equal No 5 seed Andy Holmes.

Holmes gave him plenty of work to do before he emerged 3-1 (11-9, 13-11, 10-12, 11-7) to face the surprise of the tournament Antonio Beckles, a player with just seven wins out of 39 in the league but who discovered some

astounding form on the day to knock out No 3 seed Simon Webber, who had lost only five of his 53 sets in the league – and in three straight games 11-7, 12-10, 11-9.

Beckles had exceeded expectations even by getting out of his group where he overcame Robin Armstrong and Mike Johnston, both of whom had beaten him twice in the league.

His progress was halted by Buxton at the quarter-final stage but even then he put up a tremendous fight, losing only 3-1 (12-10, 11-13, 11-8, 11-8).

McHugh, Buxton's group conqueror, made his way through to the other semi-final with wins in straight games over Lewis and Alistair Hill, a surprise winner over equal five seed John Andrews at 13-11 in the fifth.

He will face five-time winner Paul Davison, who dropped only one game – to Pennell – in his five outings to reach that stage.

The men's doubles threw up another surprise as the unseeded pair Andrews and Keith Martin made their way through to the final with a win over the 2015 finalists Pennell and Whiteside (11-2, 11-3, 11-6) and No 2 seeds Buxton and McHugh in five (11-3, 11-13, 11-9, 6-11, 11-5).

They will face top seeds Crouchman and Webber, who put their singles defeats behind them to come past Lewis and Dean Andrews, but not without some alarms in their 3-1 (10-12, 11-9, 13-11, 11-9) win.

Other events on finals night will be the restricted singles between the holder Ken Lewis and 2015 winner Steve Noble, the division one singles between McHugh and Whiteside, the division two singles between Garry Fryatt and Kelly Yuenyongpknan, and for the first time for seven years, a ladies' singles between Yuenyongpknan and Hannah Pitt, and mixed doubles, Yuenyongpknan & Andy Holmes against Pitt & Crouchman.

Zara Darcy Willis was a double winner in the junior events. Runner-up for the past two years, 13-year-old Darcy Willis finally got her hands on the junior girls' trophy with a victory in the final over the holder Mia Charles (11-6, 13-11, 11-8).

She also took the cadet girls' singles, beating Charles in the semi-final this time before beating Melinda Abraham-Victor 3-0 (11-9, 12-10, 11-4) in the final.

The boys' events were shared between Jonny Evans and Elliott Game. Game won the junior singles with a 3-0 (11-6, 12-10, 14-12) win over Evans in the final, but in the cadets' event, Evans knocked out Game in the semi-final before beating James Donald 3-1 (12-14, 11-8, 11-3, 11-6) in the final.

Evans and Game then teamed up to win the junior doubles with a final victory over Charles and Darcy Willis (11-4, 11-8, 11-7).

The under-11 event was played as a round-robin and was won by Malachi O'Leary, who dropped only one game in beating the other three contenders.

Alexia Mullane, who stretched O'Leary to 3-1 (11-8, 11-8, 9-11, 11-8), won her other two singles to finish runner-up.

In other events played to a conclusion before finals night, James Hicks took the handicap singles with a win in the final over Lee McHugh 21-19, 21-13 after McHugh had narrowly squeezed past the holder Takunda Nerutanga in the semi-final 11-21, 22-20, 22-20.

The handicap doubles was won by Antonio Beckles and Stewart Ireland, two players new to the league this season, with a 21-16 victory in the single-game final over Tim Huxtable and Ken Lewis.

The hard bat singles, reintroduced after a 15-year absence, was won by Andy Holmes with a victory in the final over Ryan Pitt.

The most promising boy award went to Harrison Daniels and the most promising girl to Alexia Mullane.

The event was organised by league competition secretary Keith Martin and refereed with his usual efficiency by Arthur Clark.

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