

Derbyshire and Middlesex both make unbeaten starts

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The battle to win this year's County Championships Senior Premier Division title looks to be a straight fight between the 2009 Champions Middlesex and Derbyshire who have both won their first three matches. It is Derbyshire with a games record of 21-9 who have made the best start of all and their success owed a lot to the form of their two ladies – Mum and daughter combination Jane and Emma Vickers who between them won 10 out of the 12 ladies singles they contested. England no. five Emma was their top performer and she stayed undefeated.

Derbyshire breezed past Essex 8-2 with Jane Vickers' fiercely contested win over Sarra Wang taking top billing. Jane came out on top 14-12, 8-11, 11-9, 15-13. England no. 88 David Arrowsmith made his mark by beating Matt Spero (3-1) and Clive Carthy (3-2). Essex's "Man on the up" England no. 49 Emran Hussain enjoyed two excellent wins over England no. 37 Sam Perry (11-6, 6-11, 11-5, 10-12, 12-10) and England no. 25 Shaun Marples (9-11, 11-7, 11-8, 11-8).

Derbyshire found Devonshire an even tougher test and their 6-4 win included five fifth game successes. England no. 11 Junior Vicky Smith not only beat Jane Vickers in five ends but she very creditably pushed Emma Vickers to a fifth end as well. Sister Sally made a flying start against both Emma Vickers and Jane Vickers but try as hard as she did she couldn't maintain the momentum and she missed out 11-6, 12-10, 5-11, 7-11, 2-11 against Emma and 11-8, 12-10, 2-11, 4-11, 6-11 to Jane. Two massive wins for Derbyshire in the match context. England no. 50 Richard Marshall scored two great wins, beating Sam Perry (3-2) and Shaun Marples (3-0).

Derbyshire went into their last match against Sussex in confident mood and they ran out 7-3 winners. Sam Perry produced his best display of the weekend, and he beat both Ritchie Venner and Da Shuai Zhang without dropping an end. He edged home 11-9, 11-6, 11-8 against Venner and 11-9, 13-11, 13-11 against "Dash". Sarah Stedman, hitting with real abandon took a stunning 2-0 lead against Emma Vickers but it wasn't enough and Emma fought back to win 13-15, 7-11, 11-6, 11-8, 11-4.

Middlesex did very well to win their three matches, even more so when you consider the likes of Jason Sugrue, Tommy Cutler, Zak Zilesnick, Igor Morais, Klaudia Szadkowska and Egle Adomelyte (who all played in varying capacities last year) weren't available this time. They won all three matches 6-4. Team Captain Neil Charles led from the front as they beat Devonshire 6-4. He beat both Mike Hugh (3-0) and the higher-ranked Richard Marshall (3-2). Regular team-member Sarah Horsnell made her mark by beating Sally Smith (3-0) and she only missed out narrowly to Vicky Smith (12-14, 11-9, 11-9, 6-11, 8-11), her only defeat of the weekend. 2009 National Junior Champion, Daniel Basterfield also stayed undefeated in this game. He found himself 2-0 down against the vastly improved Toby Mattacott, but he pulled through to win 9-11, 9-11, 11-2, 11-8, 11-3. Middlesex found themselves tied 4-4 against Yorkshire, and they will be very pleased to have won. The last two games were both potentially very tricky ones. Sarah Horsnell excelled to beat Joanna Roberts 11-7, 11-6, 5-11, 14-12 and Darek Zurowski toppled Richard Smith in five ends 9-11, 11-6, 11-7, 10-12, 11-5.

Middlesex's 6-4 win over Berkshire featured the longest game of the weekend, an epic five-setter between Darek Zurowski and David Barr, a game which had just about everything. Long rallies (that goes without saying if Barr is playing) as well as a fabulous fight back in the fifth end after Barr had trailed 7-0 and 9-2. With everyone's attention on this game the great show-man Darek kept his nerve superbly when it looked as if he had finally run out of ideas and he eventually won a five set marathon 16-14. The game had taken 50 minutes – a magnificent spectacle. Daniel Basterfield suffered his only defeat of the weekend, going down 3-1 to an impressive Tom Maynard. Middlesex should also be commended for including England no. one Under 13 girl Tin-Tin Ho in their squad. She seemed totally relaxed in the surroundings and her two wins in this match left her with a record of three wins out of four, her one defeat having come in five ends against Yorkshire's Joanna Roberts.

Cleveland beat Yorkshire 6-4 on the Saturday, good going considering they were a lady short. However, the inclusion of England no. one Paul Drinkhall in their team for this match acted as a balancing act and he powered his way past Richard Lightowler (11-5, 11-6, 11-5) and Simon Nutch (11-6, 11-6, 11-9). Helen Stoker (a new name to most of us) made her mark and her win over Sarah Nutch (11-8, 11-7, 11-8) was arguably the result that tipped the game in favour of the Clevelanders. Andy Wilson had the task of sealing the victory for his side, and he did well. England no. 11 Veteran Richard Lightowler is a ferocious competitor with bags of experience but it was England no. 74 Andy who prevailed 11-13, 11-9, 11-6, 13-11.

Sussex's weekend had started in fine fashion on the Saturday. They raced into a 9-0 lead against Berkshire as the whole Sussex side hit form. Ritchie Venner won twice, beating both Richard Andrews (3-0) and David Barr (3-1) and Craig Bryant made his presence felt, getting the better of Tom Maynard (3-1) and Richard Andrews (3-2). Rose Rainton won her two singles and Lisa Standen followed suit, beating Sharon Mitchell (11-8, 3-11, 11-8, 11-4) and Denise Weller (11-7, 6-11, 12-10, 11-9). Berkshire had to wait until the last game to notch up a win. The improving Tom Maynard will feel it was well worth the wait. He edged out Nigel Eckersley 6-11, 11-7, 11-9, 11-9.

Sussex also ran out 7-3 winners over Essex on the Sunday morning. The Essex cause was not helped when Emran Hussain was taken ill. Essex nevertheless battled very hard, particularly their lady players. Barbara Izyk recovered from 10-7 down in the fifth end to get the better of Sarah Hilditch (was Stedman) 4-11, 11-6, 9-11, 11-8, 15-13 and Sarra Wang was involved in an even tighter encounter, beating Rose Rainton 11-7, 12-14, 9-11 11-9, 18-16. Da Shuai Zhang was a double winner for Sussex. At times he looked quite devastating as he beat Matt Spero (2-11, 11-8, 11-4, 11-5) as well as Clive Carthy (11-9, 11-8, 12-14, 11-2).

Berkshire's decisive 8-2 win over Cleveland will have raised a few eyebrows, good going as Cleveland finished the weekend with three points as compared to Berkshire's two points. Richard Andrews and David Barr both won twice for the home county although Barr had to pull out all the stops to get the better of Daniel Welsh (11-5, 13-15, 9-11, 11-6, 12-10). Helen Stoker made her mark again. She beat Sharon Mitchell in four ends (12-14, 11-8, 11-4, 11-6).

The Sunday afternoon match between Devonshire and Yorkshire was evenly fought, perhaps the most evenly contested of the weekend, and for good measure it finished tied at 5-5. Seven games were decided in the fifth end, which included the last five encounters. Richard Marshall, clearly relishing the responsibility of playing at no. one for Devon scored two excellent wins. He beat both Richard Lightowler and Simon Nutch (and it goes without saying - in five ends) whilst Sarah Nutch made her mark for Yorkshire. She secured an excellent 11-9, 11-9, 6-11, 9-11, 13-11 win over Sally Smith. Vicky Smith played her part and her second success, a five set win over Joanna Roberts gave the Devon side a 5-4 lead. It wasn't quite enough to earn them a win. Toby Mattacott fought back bravely against Richard Lightowler to level at 2-2, but a sluggish start in the fifth end left him with too much to do. Richard prevailed 11-1, 11-6, 9-11, 13-15, 11-7.

Essex picked up their sole point of the weekend against Cleveland. Sarra Wang and Barbara Izyk both beat Helen Stoker which allied to the two concessions gave Essex four games. Another win was always going to be hard to come by bearing in mind that Emran Hussain was not available. It was the experienced England no. 14 Veteran Clive Carthy who came up trumps. He played magnificently to beat England no. 30 Senior Bryn Drinkhall 11-8, 11-3, 5-11, 12-10. Matt Spero had moved into a 2-1 lead against Danny Welsh but the last two games went very much in Daniel's direction. Daniel ran out a 10-12, 11-5, 3-11, 11-3, 11-1 winner.

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