Alim & Alice Rise To University Challenge

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Alim Hirji and Alice Loveridge were the stars of the show by winning their respective top Band 1 events on day one of the Bribar Bristol Grand Prix that was held at the Frenchay Campus of the Bristol University on Saturday the 13th of November.

For Alim it was a great day at the Uni by fending off all his challengers to take the title with a final match win in straights sets over Emran Hussein. Hirji seeded at two for the event consistently produced stunning displays to overcome Neil Charles, semi finalist Dan O'Connell and finalist Hussein to take a well deserved cheque for £60. For Emran who lost out in the last match against a higher ranked opponent, was obviously disappointed however the Grantham Academy player must take the positives out of the event as he was responsible for the departure of Ian McLean and top seeded Tom Maynard in the semi final but could never match the razor sharp Hirji in the final.

In the Women's Band 1 and main event it was once again another title victory for the sparkling Guernsey sixteen year old Alice Loveridge who took top honours in the final over a spirited Vicky Smith from Devon. However her adventure almost came unstuck as in her group stage Alice was taken right to the edge of near defeat by Megan Phillips (who held three match points in the fourth game) but unfortunately could not convert them taking the match into a fifth close game with the Channel Island star weathering the Welsh storm from Megan to win her group. From there on Alice took control of the event by displacing Sanja Clements in three close sets followed by another magical performance at the last four stage to outplay Welsh top junior Charlotte Carey in four close games to reach her final with Vicky Smith. Losing semi finalists Abbie Milwain (who played very well to win her group which included Sanja Clements and then oust Julie Furber in the quarter final) but then lost to Vicky Smith, whilst the other losing semi finalist Charlotte Carey enjoyed brilliant victories over Sue Collier and Yolanda King, but could not stop the effervescent Loveridge on her pathway to the eventual title. Losing finalist Vicky Smith played some awesome table tennis in displacing Megan Phillips (coming back from a 1-2 deficit in games) to then follow up with a straight sets result over Abbie Milwain, however her glory run came to an end in the last match with Alice who eventually found wonderland!

Without a shadow of a doubt the best final of the day involved the Men's Band 2 competition and was played out by Dan O'Connell, another rising star from the Grantham Academy and his much respected Cippenham British League opponent, Robert Hansell. Eventual winner O'Connell had to come back from the brink of defeat from his older opponent by reducing a 1-2 deficit in games to level at 2-2. Then the match developed into fifth and final game classic encounter of patient and controlled attack from Dan against the expertise of top quality defence from Robert. Looking out of it at 2-6 down in points O'Connell's coach Alex Perry called an astute time out which then transformed the game. Dan fought back to levell at 8-8 then lost the next two points with Hansell holding two title points. To his immense credit Dan fought back to level at 10- 10 with both players giving it their all. In a dramatic deuce game O'Connell held his nerve to win 12-10 in spellbinding encounter that was appreciated by a packed show court audience. Losing semi finalists Adam Nutland and Steve Hall enjoyed five wins apiece in reaching the penultimate stage.

Yolanda King showed her class by dropping just the one game on her way to the Women's Band 2 title and that game was to Julie Furber in the first round. Her final opponent Angharad Phillips was also in the zone and fresh from her debut in the Commonwealth Games representing Wales. Angharad was in cruise control displacing knockout round adversaries Emily Standing, a brilliant victory against Vicky Smith and a straight sets win against Kelly Skeggs to face Yolanda in the final. The final between these two young ladies was a great contest with three very close games going to the Sussex Star Yolanda King.

No stranger to the Winners enclosure is James Ward from Staffordshire who confirmed his top seeding by taking

the Men's Band 3 title in straight sets over finalist Lewis Williams from the valleys in Wales. James ended the progress of Billy Pegg, Matt Outhwaite, and semi finalist Paul Hooper to take home his glassware trophy. Lewis mastered opponents Alan Cherry, Brian Wright and last four adversary Ryan Flood to reach the final with Ward. Losing semi finalists Paul Hooper and Ryan Flood played extremely well to reach the latter stages.

The Women's Band 3 event went to unseeded player Naomi Jackson from Devon taking a straight sets final victory against Becky House from Hampshire. Naomi dislodged Charlotte Binley and semi finalist Sally Hughes on her way to the title. Becky enjoyed a great tournament beating Nicole Hall and last four opponent Charlotte Spencer but lost out to Champion Naomi Jackson in three very close games.

Matt Outhwaite highly impressed and was the superstar of the Men's Band 4 event showing great maturity for a junior player in winning all his seven matches in this event with a final 3-0 scoreline against finalist Conor Edwards. Matt's victims included Danny Lawrence, Dave Randall and semi finalist Simon Mitcheson. Losing finalist Conor Edwards took the scalps of Alan O'Connell, Max Tupper and last four opponent Alex Kearney to reach the final.

A rare sight in junior table tennis was displayed by the superb defensive skills of Jarred Knowles from the Kingfisher club Reading who fought tooth and nail to beat the best in Men's Band 5 (one of the toughest events in terms of numbers) to take a well deserved title victory against finalist Aaron Smith from Kent. Jarred got the better of rivals Jonathan Evans, Ray Powell, Simon Forest and last four opponent Conor Edwards, whilst Aaron Smith was responsible for the departure of Max Tupper, Jonathan Wooldridge and losing semi finalist Tomasz Halucha, but was no match for Knowles at the last hurdle.

Dom Sussex from the county of Devon? Came through the rounds to take the Band 6 event at the expense of finalist Finny Wilson from Sussex……confused?- Unseeded for the event Dom proved too strong for all his opponents that included William Ross, Neil Hulme and last four opponent Ray Powell to take the title in straight sets.

A final word- Referee Mick Strode and his team of officials and umpires did a brilliant job to keep the tournament running smoothly and ahead of time with a total of 519 matches being played on 18 tables and that in itself warrants a five star rating!

Results from day one at Bristol;
Men's Band 1. Alim Hirji (Mi) beat Emran Hussein(E) 11-5, 11-5, 11-8.
Women's Band 1. Alice Loveridge (GGY) beat Vicky Smith (Dv) 5-11, 11-6, 11-5, 11-5.
Men's Band 2. Dan O'Connell (WAL) beat Rob Hansell (Bu) 5-11, 11-1, 6-11, 11-5, 12-10.
Women's Band 2. Yolanda King (Sx) beat Angharad Phillips (WAL) 12-10, 11-9, 11-9.
Men's Band 3. James Ward (St) beat Lewis Williams (WAL) 11-6, 11-9, 11-7.
Women's Band 3. Naomi Jackson (Dv) beat Becky House (Ha) 11-9, 14-12, 11-9.
Men's Band 4. Matt Outhwaite (Wa) beat Conor Edwards (WAL) 11-7, 11-7, 11-9.
Men's Band 5. Jarred Knowles (Bu) beat Aaron Smith (K) 9-11, 11-4, 8-11, 11-5, 12-10.
Men's Band 6. Dom Sussex (Dv) beat Finny Wilson (Sx) 11-9, 11-3, 11-8.

By Geoff Ware

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