



Braintree League: Still all to play for

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Braintree Table Tennis League resumes after its Christmas and new year break in the rare position of having wide-open title possibilities in all three divisions.

Liberal A lead Rayne A by six points in division one. Liberal C have a wafer-thin one-point lead over Netts D in division two while in division three Netts E lead Black Notley F by two points with Rayne F seven points behind with a match in hand.

Compare this to last season when Felsted RBL C led division three by 20 points with a match in hand, or 2016-17 when Liberal A led division one by 25 points, or 2015-16 when Black Notley C were 16 points in front in division two.

Two factors have closed the gap between the top two in division one. Liberal have let some unexpected points slip, while the promotion of Lee McHugh to Rayne's first team has added extra strength to their challenge.

Brandon Crouchman, who had lost only once by Christmas last year, has tasted defeat five times in eight matches, while Simon Webber has experienced eight defeats compared with three last year.

Their unexpected vulnerability was illustrated in the only fixture played during the two-week break, a rearranged match against their own B team.

It is a match where they might have expected to take 10 points. Instead they struggled to a 7-3 victory that was only made possible by winning two sets at deuce in the fifth game.

Andrew Huckson had an excellent evening for the B team, beating both Webber and Peter Hayden, while Adrian Pitt also beat Webber.

Add to that Hayden's win at 14-12 in the fifth against Pitt and Hayden and Crouchman's win in the doubles at 13-11 in the fifth and it is clear that the B team were doing their seniors no favours.

At Rayne, McHugh currently sits on top of the league's individual averages of players who have played more

than four matches. Adam Buxton, Steve Pennell and Alan Burgess also continue to provide solid support.

Netts' A and B teams remain capable of causing the top two a few problems, particularly if Paul Davison turns out, as he has done more frequently recently, while Liberal B have been a mirror image of their record last year. Then they lost seven of their first 11 matches; this year they have won eight out of 11.

The relegation place looks like being even more hotly contested than the top spot, with Rayne C and Notley B running neck and neck, although Notley's win when the two met for the second time just before Christmas has nudged them narrowly ahead.

With no relegated team, Liberal C, second last year, were always the likely candidates in division two but the addition of Jan Fuller, Roy Hooper and Patrick Gilbert to Netts D has turned them into a formidable proposition and it has only been their own fallibility – three times turning out with only two players – that has held them back.

The addition of Dan Anderson has greatly strengthened Notley C and more regular appearances from Glen Laing and Steve Noble could see them enter the equation.


The gap between divisions two and three has been sharply brought into focus by the fate of Felsted C. So dominant in division three last year – they won by 54 points – they have failed to get off the ground this season, which may leave the leading teams in this year's division three wondering what fate would await them if they go up.

There has been a levelling out among the top teams this season and no fewer than four teams have occupied the top spot.

The addition of James Gronland at Notley F and Peter Pond at Notley I have turned them into contenders and with Derek Kennard no longer eligible, Netts E may need more appearances from Clive Forster – unbeaten in both his matches so far – to maintain their lead.

The still unbeaten Rayne F look the most likely candidates but there remains a lot of water to pass under a lot of bridges.

Division 1

	P		D	L	A	Pts
Liberal A	12	10	2	0	21	99
Rayne A	12	10	1	1	27	93
Netts B	12	9	0	3	40	80
<u>Netts A</u>	13	6	4	3	52	78
Liberal B	13	8	2	3	56	74
Netts C	13	4	3	6	73	57
Rayne B	13	4	0	9	75	55
Black Notley A	13	4	0	9	84	46
Black Notley B	13	1	1	11	104	26
Rayne C	12	0	1	11	98	22

Division 2

	P	W	D	L	A	Pts
Liberal C	13	8	1	4	45	85
<u>Netts D</u>	13	7	2	4	46	84
Black Notley C	12	8	2	2	44	76
Rayne D	12	8	1	3	50	70
Felsted RBL A	13	5	2	6	66	64
Black Notley D	12	4	2	6	58	62
Nomads	12	5	2	5	61	59
Black Notley E	13	5	1	7	76	54
Rayne E	13	4	3	6	76	54
Felsted RBL B	13	1	0	12	108	22

Division 3

	P	W	D	L	A	Pts
Netts E	13	9	3	1	38	92
Black Notley F	13	8	1	4	40	90
Rayne F	12	8	4	0	35	85
Black Notley I	13	10	1	2	45	85
Black Notley G	12	7	2	3	41	79
Rayne H	13	5	2	6	73	57
Rayne G	13	3	3	7	80	50
Netts F	13	3	1	9	83	47
Black Notley H	13	2	1	10	93	37
Rayne I	13	0	0	13	112	18

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