



Braintree League: McHugh upsets expectations

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Lee McHugh turned expectations and his own season on their heads when he won the men's singles at the Braintree Table Tennis League's annual finals night on Friday.

With a lithe and lively display of crunching loops and smashes, McHugh first dismissed six-time champion Peter Hayden in the semi-final and then overcame his Rayne A team-mate Adam Buxton in the final.

Had it taken place earlier in the season the win would have been less of a surprise. McHugh had a superb run of form in the autumn, with only two defeats – to Hayden and 2017 champion Brandon Crouchman – in his first 21 sets.

But since then his form has drifted to such an extent that he now sits only 11th in the individual averages. On Friday, though, it all came right.

He had lost to Hayden again as recently as April 21, in three straight games, but this time he moved his game up a notch to dismiss him in four games before defeating Buxton in the final 3-0 (11-6, 11-9, 11-9).

Alongside McHugh's success, it was Buxton who produced the major surprise of the evening when he put out reigning champion Paul Davison in the other semi-final.

Again league form was no guide. Davison had won their encounter in March 11-2, 11-7, 11-8 and is normally the man to rise to the occasion on finals night.

But in a pulsating set that swung back and forward, Buxton kept his nerve and staged a dramatic recovery from 2-7 down in the final game to win 13-11.

McHugh's success was thrown into focus when he appeared in the division one singles final, which is open to players not ranked in the top eight in the league. It was set up originally to give players outside the top echelon a chance of a trophy. McHugh did not need that this year but gave another exhibition of his hitting power in

defeating Ian Whiteside in straight games.

Neither Davison nor Buxton went home empty handed. They were the first winners of a new event, the veterans' doubles, while Davison added the veterans' singles and men's doubles for good measure.

The veterans' singles final was a re-run of last year in which Davison again defeated Hayden. It was closer this year, 11-9, 11-7, 11-8 compared with 11-5, 11-6 11-7 last year, but Davison always appeared to have the edge.

In the men's doubles, Davison, who has won the event seven times, was paired with club-mate Graham Playle, new to the league this season, who was not overawed by his more illustrious partner and played a full part in their straight-games victory over James Hicks and Andy Holmes.

Holmes was on the receiving end in the veterans' doubles as well when he and Ken Lewis stretched Buxton and Davison to deuce in the first two games but could not quite bring it off and succumbed in three straight games.

And a third doubles defeat for Holmes came in the mixed doubles with Kelly Yuenyongpknan. His hard bat initially appeared to cause problems but Jan Fuller and Patrick Gilbert eventually settled and after losing the first game took the next three.

Yuenyongpknan gained revenge in the ladies' singles with an excellent win over Fuller, the current Essex ladies singles' champion.

She picked her shots judiciously, was comfortable hitting wide on both wings and slowed the game down where necessary whereas Fuller, clearly not at her best – this was another set that reversed an earlier league result – never quite got out of second gear.

The restricted singles produced another cracking game that was decided at deuce in the fifth game.

The event was unusual in that the top two seeds this time made the final. It also resulted in a win for the favourite, but not until it had served up its dose of drama.

Gilbert looked to be heading for a four-game victory against the unusual bat angles and unexpected returns of Sean Clift when he led 10-6 in the fourth game.

But with increasingly stoical defence, Clift, who had lost 11-5, 11-4, 11-8 in their most recent league encounter, won the next six points to take the set to a decider.

And then it was Gilbert's turn to dig in. At 5-8 down, another shock looked on the cards, but he pulled them all back and stuck to the task to win the final game 11-9.

The division two and division three singles were more straightforward affairs, the circumspect style of Roy Hooper and the more attacking approach of Peter Pond proving too much for Kevin Saunders and Ron Fosker respectively.

The over 50s singles provided a consolation for Peter Hayden. Beaten by Steve Pennell in last year's final, this time he overcame Ken Lewis.

But the fact that he needed five games to do so gave a hint of the problems to come against McHugh.

The finals night awards were presented by Ann Ogilvie, Margaret Woolmer and Harold Bickmore, who had each donated trophies to the league in recent years, Ann in memory of her husband Peter, who won four men's singles titles in the 1950s, Harold on behalf of his stepfather Harry Warde, the founder of the league, and Margaret in honour of her husband Len, a former league chairman and president.

Results

Men's singles final: Lee McHugh beat Adam Buxton 3-0 (11-6, 11-9, 11-9). Semi-finals: McHugh beat Peter Hayden 3-1 (11-9, 5-11, 11-7, 11-7); Buxton beat Paul Davison 3-2 (11-9, 6-11, 11-9, 7-11, 13-11).

Ladies' singles: Kelly Yuenyongpknan beat Jan Fuller 3-0 (11-9, 11-6, 11-5).

Men's doubles: Davison and Graham Playle beat James Hicks and Andy Holmes 3-0 (11-3, 15-13, 11-8).

Mixed doubles: Fuller and Patrick Gilbert beat Yuenyongpknan and Holmes 3-1 (10-12, 11-9, 11-6, 11-6).

Veterans' singles: Davison beat Hayden 3-0 (11-9, 11-7, 11-8).

Veterans' doubles: Davison and Buxton beat Holmes and Ken Lewis 3-0 (14-12, 16-14, 11-6).

Restricted singles: Gilbert beat Sean Clift 3-2 (7-11, 11-3, 11-8, 10-12, 11-9).

Over 50s singles: Hayden beat Lewis 3-2 (11-5, 7-11, 11-6, 5-11, 11-6).

Division one singles: McHugh beat Ian Whiteside 3-0 (11-8, 11-5, 11-5).

Division two singles: Roy Hooper beat Kevin Saunders 3-0 (11-8, 11-6, 11-6).

Division three singles: Peter Pond beat Ron Fosker 3-0 (11-3, 11-8, 11-5).

The most promising boy award this year went to Jack Dearsley, while the award for dedication, keenness and determination at coaching was given to Joe Ferguson.

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