



Braintree League: Liberal unbeaten in title triumph

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Liberal A have become the first team for four years to win division one of the Braintree Table Tennis League without losing a match. They emulated Netts A, who won the title in 2015.

Liberal's ratio of 8.18 points per match is the best since Netts A's 8.3 (159 points from 19 matches) in 2011.

It takes them up to equal fifth place in the league's history. Their five title wins put them equal with Netts A (although Netts Phoenix, effectively their B team, won the title in 2013) and just one behind Witham FC A and Reccers, with Crittall A, on 11, and Colne A, on 13, still some way in the distance.

Liberal have been the model of consistency over the past three years, once Brandon Crouchman started playing regularly, and have scored 218 points in 2017, 217 last year and now 221. Crouchman, Scott Dowsett, Simon Webber and Peter Hayden have formed their team over those years, the last two of which they have also won the team knockout cup.

Despite getting two of their players through to the men's singles final, Rayne A, second for the third year in a row, were unable to hang on to their coattails and finished 27 points behind, five more than last year.

In many ways it is Liberal's B team who are the team of the year. They have finished seventh, eighth, sixth and sixth over the past four years but surged this time into third place, with much the same personnel.

Andrew Huckson, in his second season with the team, and Adrian Pitt, with the team now for five years, have both made major advances this season. Huckson's average has gone up from 65 to 75 per cent while Pitt's has risen from 62 to 74. Mike Johnston has gone up from 47 to 58 per cent and Robin Armstrong from 33 to 39.

The races in divisions two and three were tighter than for many years. The destination of the division two title was decided only in the final match while Black Notley F won division three by just one point.

The lead in division two alternated almost weekly between Netts D and Liberal C, with Rayne D always hovering in the distance with matches in hand and Notley C capable of turning out a team that could trouble any of them.

In the end it was Netts D who pulled away by winning their final six matches, including a 10-0 and three 8-2s.

Patrick Gilbert, a former division one player and men's doubles winner, back after three years out of the game while at university, was their mainstay but he received strong backing from new signing Jan Fuller, Roy Hooper, the former Hedingham player returning after a year's absence, and captain Joe Meleschko.

The five-point gap at the top was the closest in the division for at least eight years (the pre-2011 tables were run on a different format). And the tightness at the top is exemplified by the fact that Netts D lost seven of their 27 matches, a 25.9 per cent ratio that is the highest since 2000.

Notley F secured the division three title when their I team could only beat their H team 6-4 to leave them 11 points adrift with one match to play. Their one-point lead is the closest in any division since Netts A and Liberal A's tie on points in 2015.

They too lost more matches – six – than would be expected of divisional champions but had a consistent squad who took it in turns to pull them through difficult patches.

Declan Baines finished with 79.4 per cent, James Gronland, back in the league after more than 20 years away, was on 70.4 with Mel Cooch on 69.7 and Steve Baines on 56.4.

Interestingly Notley I would have won the division had the league been calculated on two points for a win and one for a draw, as would Rayne D in division two. But before they feel too hard done by, it should be noted that the league has not been run on that basis since 1965.

Final tables

Division 1

	P	W	D	L	A	Pts
Liberal A	27	24	3	0	49	221
Rayne A	27	17	5	5	76	194
Liberal B	27	19	2	6	100	170
<u>Netts B</u>	27	14	6	7	103	166
<u>Netts A</u>	27	13	8	6	109	161
<u>Netts C</u>	27	10	5	12	152	118
Rayne B	27	8	4	15	158	112
<u>Black Notley A</u>	27	9	1	17	164	105
<u>Black Notley B</u>	27	2	1	24	218	52
Rayne C	27	1	1	25	220	50

Division 2

	P	W	D	L	A	Pts
Netts D	27	18	2	7	91	179
Rayne D	27	20	2	5	96	174
Liberal C	27	17	3	7	99	171
<u>Black Notley C</u>	27	17	3	7	112	158
<u>Black Notley D</u>	27	10	4	13	140	130
<u>Felsted RBL A</u>	27	10	3	14	141	129
Nomads	27	10	3	14	142	128
<u>Black Notley E</u>	27	10	2	15	159	111
Rayne E	27	7	5	15	160	110
<u>Felsted RBL B</u>	27	2	1	24	60	210

Division 3

	P	W	D	L	A	Pts
<u>Black Notley F</u>	27	20	1	6	80	190
<u>Black Notley I</u>	27	23	1	3	81	189
<u>Netts E</u>	27	19	5	3	85	185
Rayne F	27	17	5	5	88	182
<u>Black Notley G</u>	27	13	5	9	120	150
<u>Netts F</u>	27	9	3	15	150	120
Rayne H	27	8	3	16	170	100
<u>Black Notley H</u>	27	4	2	21	181	89
Rayne G	27	4	4	19	183	87
Rayne I	27	3	1	23	212	58

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