



Braintree League: Liberal still team to beat

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Lee McHugh and Adam Buxton shook up the established order when they reached the Braintree Table Tennis League men's singles final in May. Can they now follow that by ending Liberal A's hegemony in the league?

McHugh and Buxton are part of the Rayne A squad that finished second to Liberal last season and they have solid backing in Steve Pennell and Alan Burgess.

But it will still be a big leap forward for them to challenge the champions, who have won the title for the last four years.

Liberal will again be led by Brandon Crouchman, who missed the individual tournament, alongside Simon Webber, Scott Dowsett and Peter Hayden.

Liberal finished 27 points ahead of Rayne last season and with no change in personnel in either team it will be quite an achievement if Rayne can manage to close the gap.

Liberal's B team rose to third last season after finishing sixth for the previous two years. Whether they can repeat that feat could depend on how often Paul Davison turns out for Netts A.

As Netts B, the squad of Davison, Maria Boulton, Colin Bennett and Graham Playle finished just four points behind Liberal B.

Davison only played seven of their 27 matches but has said he intends to play more this season, which should be enough to push his team up one place.

Netts were entitled to four teams in division one after their D team gained promotion but they have amalgamated three teams into two.

The mainstays of last year's C team, James Mullane, Nikki Davison and Alistair Hill are this year's B team with the addition of Hill's father Jon, returning to the league after a short absence.

This year's C team have James Hicks, Andy Holmes and Robert Wood from last year's A team, plus the D team's Joe Meleschko, Patrick Gilbert, Roy Hooper and Jan Fuller, as well as Derek Kennard and Fred Evans, a team capable of challenging for a top three place or flirting with relegation, depending on who turns out.

Rayne have taken the opposite route to Netts by expanding their B team into two. In the new B team Ryan Pitt will be joined by Ian Whiteside and Dean Andrews, who both hope to play more regularly this season, while the bulk of last year's B team, Keith Martin, Peter Hance, Paul Lombardi and Matthew Brown, will operate as the C team.

The remaining two teams are from Black Notley. The A team will be hoping that enough matches from Steve Kerns – he played 10 times last year – will keep them afloat, but the B team's resources are looking stretched.

Neil Freeman steps up from reserve status to play a full part this year alongside Dave Parker and Patrice Élonge after Gordon Fairchild opted to step down a division. But without a regular fourth player and Élonge's regular availability in question, it could be a tough season.

Divisions two and three will be featured next week.

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