



Braintree League: Liberal target record title win

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Liberal A head into the new Braintree Table Tennis League season looking to equal the record for the most consecutive division one titles.

They notched up their fifth success in a row in 2019 when the season was curtailed because of the coronavirus pandemic. Liberal were sufficiently far ahead for the league to regard the mid-March positions as final.

As with most sports, there was limited activity last season – just six weeks of matches, at which point the league was abandoned for the season – which means that a win this season will count as a sixth without interruption, equalling Crittall A's record set from 1968 to 1973.

At one point it looked as if it could end at five when Brandon Crouchman, Scott Dowsett and Simon Webber all announced they were unable to play.

Since then, however, Crouchman and Webber have said they expect to be available, though not as much as usual.

The club have signed Zach Harrington from Black Notley to join Peter Hayden and Terry Dowsett.

Their main challenge will come as ever from Rayne A and Netts A.

Rayne A, second for the last four years, will be weakened by the absence of men's singles champion Lee McHugh, who has signed only as a reserve, and will initially be without Adam Buxton, runner-up to McHugh, who is nursing an elbow injury.

Netts A have a new look this year with only Paul Davison remaining from the team that finished third in 2020.

Graham Playle and Maria Boulton are in the B team while Fred Evans and Joe Meleschko move up from the C team, together with James Hicks and Andy Holmes, who are back in the frame after playing less than usual last time out.

With none of the top teams at full strength, there is a distinct air of uncertainty, mirrored of course by the general uncertainty of the outside world and all will hope that the season will be able to run to a finish this time.

Meanwhile, former Netts player Jan Fuller has been crowned ladies' singles champion at the World Parkinson's championships in Berlin.

Jan, who has had Parkinson's for nine years, beat the title-holder Margie Alley 16-14, 11-8, 11-7 in the final.

She also took home a silver medal in the mixed doubles with her partner George Chan and a bronze in the ladies' doubles, where she was partnered by Chile's Digna Lopez-Abarca.

Jan, who has since moved to Norfolk, won the mixed doubles with Patrick Gilbert in the 2019 Braintree championships and finished runner-up in of the ladies' singles.

In the lower divisions, will 2021-22 be the season when Liberal C finally climb up to the top spot in division two?

Second, third and second in the last three full seasons, they enter the current campaign with their usual line-up of Gareth Davies, Garry Fryatt and Dave Hardy, augmented this year by Dave Razzell rather than Jon Fieldsend.

Razzell played in the brief 2020-21 season where his 10 wins out of 12 suggest he will provide more than adequate compensation for the loss of Fieldsend.

With six fewer teams in the league this season compared with 2019-20, promotion and relegation has not been straightforward and has led to an amalgamation of Rayne's D and E teams to become this year's C team.

Richard Whiteside and Dave Marsh, from last year's E team, are joined by Dave Punt and Paul Wellington from the D team.

From last season, Kelly Yuenyongpknan is nursing an elbow injury while Gauthier Chevallier has returned to France, Dave Miller has moved to Holland-on-Sea, and Keith Flowers to Derbyshire.

Or could it be that Black Notley C will be the ones to beat? Dan Anderson remained unbeaten last time and Glen Laing has cut back on his commitments to ensure he is available more regularly.

Nomads, now officially Sudbury Nomads, will be the joker in the pack. With Ken Lewis, Karl Baldwin and Kevin Saunders in their ranks they could match any side, but have eight players signed on so will provide a different challenge each week.

Rayne won both divisions two and three in the last full season and are in the running to do so again with a team of Alastair Brown, Chris High, Peter Taylor and Chas Wilkinson representing their F team.

But it is Netts' C team of Clive Forster, Peter Lewis and Tony Smith that looks to be the one to beat.

They could be challenged by Notley's G team of Matt Brooks, Jill Canning and Jim Davy, third last time, as well as the club's H team, with the returning ex-division one player Graham Chinnery and the fast-improving Peter Game.

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