

Woolwell Open Report

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Posted On: January 03, 2012



Paul Drinkhall ended 2011 in style (Photo courtesy of Alan Man)

By Geoff Ware.

Turkey and mince pies aside, a spectacular entry of top players headed south west to Plymouth the day after boxing day for a Christmas table tennis bonanza at the first ever Woolwell Open. With over 250 matches scheduled to contest the £3,000 prize money on offer, the scene was set for some breathtaking table tennis at the new home of the Woolwell TT Club, the recently re-furbished Eggbuckland Community College.

This unique two day tournament witnessed some outstanding table tennis climaxing with top seed Paul Drinkhall enthraling a packed centre court arena with a dazzling five game victory over a spirited lean and mean Darius Knight who gave everything in a sensational see-saw final, to claim the £1,000 winner's prize purse, with a score of 4-11, 11-6, 11-7, 6-11, 11-8. A grand performance leaving Paul in Devon Heaven.

Unquestionably the new home of the Woolwell Club has been firmly etched onto the tournament map with this inaugural event that was an outstanding success and equally fitting that ETTA President Keith Ponting should present the prizes.

The main event started at 11.30am on Tuesday 27th of December with 44 hopefuls including yours truly competing in eight groups. The top two in each going through to a qualifying round ending up with eight players joining the top 16 seeds on day two in forming six groups of four. These eight players then had the rare opportunity to play against the quality of the likes of Paul Drinkhall, Darius Knight, Ryan Jenkins, Chris Doran, Matt Ware, Craig Bryant, Kelly Sibley, Joanna Parker, Hannah Hicks, Marketa Myskova, Richard Marshall, Garth Kinlocke, Darren Reed, Paul Whiting, Stamatis Kioufis and George Downing.

Early local cheer was brought about with an unexpected victory by Devon's top junior Dominic Sussex, defeating seeded local ex-Czech international Marketa Myskova, to claim a last 16 place. It was very exciting for the huge audience and players alike with several top ranked women that included Joanna Parker, Kelly Sibley and Hannah Hicks all enjoying the rare challenge of competing against some of the best men.

Despite group defeats to Craig Bryant & Matt Ware respectively, both Joanna and Kelly reached the quarter-finals with close fought victories over Garth Kinlocke (possibly the match of the day with a score of 6-11, 11-8, 11-8, 10-12, 11-6) to Joanna, with Kelly defeating recent local addition from Greece, Stamatis Kioufis, with a 3-1 games win. Hannah Hicks, despite being in a tough group (Paul Drinkhall, Darren Reed and Stephen Foster) progressed through in third place to face local county player Chris Smith with Hannah taking that preliminary round 3-0 to set up a first round tie against 2nd seed, Darius Knight.

It's never a dull moment when Paul Beck (the veteran legend or octopus as he is often referred to) is competing and he put on a gritty show against Darius Knight in an earlier group match. Although outclassed, Paul made the shot of the day during a back from the table topspin rally, he stepped in with an unbelievable soft handed deft drop shot that had everyone off their seats in appreciation and left Darius with a wry smile on his face not able to return the ball!

With top seed Paul Drinkhall easing into third gear past Paul Whiting and Craig Bryant enduring a titanic five game belter of a match with Darren Reed, and Joanna Parker taking that epic struggle over Garth Kinlocke then Chris Doran outclassing sixteen-year-old George Downing, we had the top half to the semi-finals stage sorted.

In the lower half of the draw Darius was made to work for his 3-1 win over Hannah Hicks, whilst on an adjacent table Kelly Sibley enjoyed a similar score over the local Greek "God" Stamatis Kioufis. After a first game loss Matt Ware won the next three against Richard Marshall whilst Ryan Jenkins made short work of Dominic Sussex 3-0 to complete the lower half last four.

So into the last eight with the top half of the draw seeing Joanna facing her 'partner' Paul Drinkhall in the very first match and although a straight games win went to Paul there were many top drawer attack v defensive rallies for the packed audience to enjoy. Next up Chris Doran weathered the storm against a determined Craig Bryant by 3-1.

Darius Knight had to overcome the fighting spirit of Kelly Sibley by 3-1, whilst in the last quarter final match Matt Ware achieved a first ever victory against third seeded Ryan Jenkins by 3-1 to take up his semi final slot.

Paul Drinkhall gained a tight three games win over Chris Doran 11-9, 11-6, 11-8, to claim his final spot, whilst Darius had a close encounter three game win against Matt Ware 18-16, 11-9, 11-5 to take his chance in the final. As earlier mentioned it was a brilliant last match against the champion, with Darius taking home a very well deserved runner's up cheque for £400.



Champion Drinkhall celebrates after beating Knight in the final at Woolwell

Chris Doran proved the stronger with a tight 11-9, 12-10, 11-9 win to take third place play-off and a nice cheque for £250 over fourth positioned Matt Ware (£150) to complete the main event placings.

Joanna Parker and Kelly Sibley shared the leading ladies winner's purse of £400. The main event supplied cheque's for all the losing quarter finalists of £100 with a last 16 placing earning £50 each. The plate winner received £50 with a runner up prize of £25, with also cool prizes for the consolation event and beginners tournament. The entire contest was exceptional in that it catered for all levels of ability and open to both sexes of all ages from International Superstars to grass roots inexperienced competitors that all enjoyed plenty of matches and where no-one was eliminated on the first day.

The women also made a vast impression in a very competitive plate event, with Sanja Clements holding off a determined tense five game sheer quality challenge from Vicky Smith in the semis before going on to avenge a qualifying group loss the previous day against Kevin Buddell in the final. The eagerly contested sixteen player consolation event was won by Kevin Vandabona from the up and coming young son of Ryan, the welsh diddy dynamo, Jac Jenkins (a sure-fire future superstar in the making).

After a great christmas spent with my family and enjoying probably too much turkey, I felt sure a couple of day's later I would get the "paxo treatment" in my qualifying group but managed third spot (of six) avoiding the consolation but made the plate event, so relatively pleased with myself. However, having competed in both days I witnessed first hand the enormous amount of energy, enthusiasm and sheer hard work the officials and organising team had put in to make this event the huge success everyone agreed it was.

Referee Richard Avent together with the help of several Blue coats kept the tournament running like clockwork and a massive thank you must be afforded to organisers Paul Whiting and John Smith together with so many helpers who did a magnificent job. The constant flow of quality hot food kept us all going throughout the two days of play and the Tuesday evening buffet dinner laid on was simply delicious.

Many Thanks John, for a splendid event that was also made possible by your hard-working wife Yetty, together with her band of helpers that included Jan Marshall, Debbie Whiting and Wendy Haskell that looked after all the catering, plus of course your siblings, Vicky, Sally and Chris who gelled together to form a great team.

The Woolwell Table Tennis Club was formed in 1998 and has grown into a hub of dominance throughout Devon with 17 Plymouth league teams. It has produced a number of Junior and Schools Internationals and continues to provide the county with junior and senior team members. The club wish to thank sponsors Devonport Royal Dockyard Employees Trust, University College Plymouth Marjon and the Plymouth Herald for their kind support. Let's hope that this event can be a regular highlight in the future playing calender!

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