

Middlesex regain Junior Premier crown

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MIDDLESEX REGAIN JUNIOR PREMIER CROWN



Gabriel Achampong saw Middlesex to the title

Starting the weekend in second place behind Lincolnshire, former Champions Middlesex regained the title in a thrilling weekend's action at Wood Green Academy.

The weekend started with Lincolnshire unbeaten on six points from three wins, one ahead of Middlesex who were themselves one ahead of Kent. Sussex began a further point back while Glamorgan, Yorkshire and Essex all started on two points at the commencement of play.

The first round of matches saw the top two swap places as Middlesex comfortably beat Essex 8-2 and Lincolnshire were surprisingly beaten 6-4 by Glamorgan. After Yorkshire drew with Sussex and Kent just beat bottom club Warwickshire, these four results showed what a tough two days were in store for all the counties.

The match of the round was the clash between Sussex and Yorkshire, which saw both teams fighting out a thrilling draw. Sussex, who still have sights on a top two finish, and Yorkshire, who were scrapping for every point in an attempt to avoid the dreaded drop.

The first two sets showed Yorkshire's intentions as they took them both in tight five gamers which saw AJ Mishra beat Daniel Barna 3-2 (11-8, 8-11, 8-11, 11-7, 11-9) followed by an equally close set as Matthew Stephens beat Josh Bennett 3-2 (11-9, 9-11, 6-11, 11-9, 11-9) as the White Rose county lead 2-0.

Yuki Wat pulled a set back for Sussex beating Kate Nixon in straight games but Yorkshire quickly established their two set lead as James Hobson beat Jack Bennett 3-1 (9-11, 11-7, 12-10, 12-10).

Sussex then hit back by taking the next three sets as firstly Lois Peake beat Nicole Finn 3-0 (11-7, 11-8, 12-10) and the match was then levelled as Barna beat Stephens 3-1 (11-8, 11-13, 11-4, 14-12) before Sussex took the lead as Peake beat Nixon 3-1 (11-7, 12-10, 11-13, 12-10) to establish a 4-3 lead for the Southern county.

However, Mishra recorded his second set of the match after beating Bennett 3-1 (11-8, 5-11, 11-8, 11-3) to level the match once again before, in the penultimate set, it was Yorkshire who guaranteed themselves at least a share

of the spoils when Finn beat Wat 3-1 (3-11, 11-8, 11-7, 11-7).

But, there was a final twist when Bennett gave his team the draw – beating Hobson in three 3-0 (11-7, 12-10, 11-8).

The second round of matches saw top two Middlesex and Lincolnshire fight out a draw as Sussex moved into third place with an 8-2 win over Kent while wins for Essex over Yorkshire and Glamorgan over Warwickshire saw the two counties leapfrog Yorkshire who fell to second bottom above Warwickshire.

The clash between Middlesex and Lincolnshire proved a triumph for Middlesex No 1 Gabriel Achampong who recorded a maximum with straight game wins over Liam Rowson 3-0 (11-8, 11-2, 11-2) and Matthew Leete 3-0 (11-5, 11-8, 11-4) and he was well supported by team mates Sam Conway, Hiba Feredj and Zahna Hall who each chipped in with one win to confirm their five sets.

For Lincolnshire all five players secured one win each as it was a fine all round team effort with Leete, Rowson, Nathan Butler, Olivia Churchill and Hannah Noutch all chipping in to help their team earn a draw.

Middlesex led overnight with eight points, one ahead of Lincolnshire who themselves were one ahead of Sussex and Kent, but the first round of matches on Sunday morning saw the league turned upside down as Lincolnshire received a shock.

They were beaten 7-3 by Yorkshire and with an ever-improving Sussex beating Warwickshire 7-3 and Kent beating Essex by the same scoreline the door was open for Middlesex to get one hand on the title, which they did, but not without a fight as they only just beat Glamorgan 6-4.

Sam Cowan lead the way for Middlesex with two wins as he beat Ryan Oylar 3-1 (9-11, 11-6, 11-8, 13-11) and Lawrence Johns 3-0 (11-9, 11-9, 16-14) but he was well supported by team mates Achampong, Daniel Wrights, Feredj and Hall who each chipped in with one set apiece to confirm victory.

Glamorgan did manage to strike one blow back as the set of the match was won by Chris Griffiths who beat Achampong in a five game thriller 3-2 (11-6, 7-11, 11-5, 9-11, 11-9).

The final round of matches saw Middlesex requiring just one point to take the title although such was their superior sets advantage that they were almost certain of the crown.

They began the round on 10 points which was two more than Sussex and Kent who were six and nine sets respectively behind their rivals.

Even an unlikely narrow defeat to Yorkshire would have been enough to see Middlesex take the title, so the excitement of the last round was going to be who would join Warwickshire in returning to Division One next season with just two points separating Essex, Yorkshire and Glamorgan.

In an exciting last round of fixtures the first result in was from Sussex who thumped Glamorgan 9-1, which left the Welsh team anxiously watching the remaining fixtures to see if they faced the drop.

Their concern was not helped when Middlesex and Yorkshire drew their clash moving Yorkshire above Glamorgan and safe on superior sets – a result which was enough for Middlesex to wrap up the title.

Lincolnshire beat Kent 6-4 in their last match which gave the two counties third and fourth place but in an upturn in form Warwickshire recorded their first point of the weekend when they drew with Essex which consigned Essex to the second relegation place alongside their opponents.

Barry Snowden

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