

Northumbria League: Casuals by name, but not by nature as champs lead way

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Cramlington Casuals, the reigning champions, lead the way in the Premier Division of the Northumbria League at the halfway stage of the season.

The squad of Andrew Wilkinson, Barry Richardson, Steve Penman and the Barella Brothers, Graeme and Anthony, are unbeaten although they have been held to a draw on two occasions. Springwell's team of John Williamson, Colin Hunt and Dave Pringle were the first to stop them from winning and Byker Table Tennis Club did likewise in the final match before the Christmas break. The latter match saw two of Northumberland's best players in opposition when Dave Robson narrowly defeated Andrew Wilkinson 12-10 in the fifth end.

Young Ellis Cooper has been having a good season so far, having won 20 out of 25 matches, and his fine form has helped his Cramlington Reivers team-mates Dale Aitkenhead, Gary Sangster and latterly Mark Christie to move to within four points of the leaders.

N.E.S.L.C. Eagles' team of Jim Stamas, Richard Wilson, Robert Reed and very occasionally Eddie Smith are just another four points behind and Byker, who have lost only once, are also still in contention.

At the other end of the table Riding Mill already appear to be doomed to relegation along with either Cramlington Tigers or North East Chinese Association. The Chinese, however, could easily move up the table if they fielded their strongest team.

Newton A team are well on course for a quick return to the top flight, having opened up a big lead at the top of **Division One**. Their team of Anthony Ainley, Graeme Bell and John Russell have won all of their matches except one, the exception being when the Chinese Association B side included Chun Yin Yu in their team and he duly won all of his matches to force a draw. Apart from this defeat by Yu, Ainley has been undefeated.

The Chinese player Yu has played most of his matches in division three but is far too good for this standard as he proved when he won the Band 6 event at the Nottingham Grand Prix and also got to the final of the doubles partnered by Graeme Barella.

Seaburn Dene are also looking for a swift return to the Premier Division led by Chris Dixon, whose only loss so far has been to Clive Dewison of North Fire. Backed up by Rod Roberts and Ken Bowman they are battling it out with the North Fire B team of Barry Hill, Bob Atwell, Karen Henry and Micky Bull for second spot. Cramlington Cobras are propping up the table.

The Springwell B squad of Caron Guthrie, Michael Hope, Alan Livingstone and Charlie Mouzon are carrying all before them in **Division Two** and have a lead of 17 points over second-placed YMCA North Tyneside B, for whom Jim Robertson has been outstanding.

Neil Rodgers has been having good results for Ouston A, who are only a single point adrift of the YM, whilst Mike Bradley and John Rowell have ensured that Birtley are also in the hunt for second place being only one point further away. Newton B are another team who could also feature in the promotion race.

At the foot of the table Saints and Old England FATTs are in the relegation zone but Cramlington Swifts, Old England Crocks and Cramlington Trojans are not many points ahead of them.

The Tynedale club, Matfen, are dominating **Division Three** with their B team top of the table and their C team currently in second place. Alex Holliday and Dave Swan have been regulars for the B team, with John Henderson and Philip Spencer also turning out for them as they have gone unbeaten throughout the first half of the season.

They have drawn twice, with their C team at the start of the season and with the North East Chinese Association C team who had Chun Yin Yu in their side. Keith Rodgers, Nigel Tree and Peter Seago have been regulars for the C team who are six points ahead of the Chinese but the latter have a game in hand.

If they continue to play Yu in their side the Chinese team will be very hard to beat in this division.

Cramlington Dragons are stranded at the foot of the table having lost all of their matches, while N.E.S.L.C. Codgers and Sacriston Comets are also in danger of relegation.

In **Division Four**, YMCA North Tyneside C team of Ramon Pini, Gerry Mellor and Ron Bain, relegated from Division Three last year are unbeaten and head the table by two points from newcomers Brandon and Byshottles TTC.

With the third-placed side, Matfen D, some 14 points behind it looks as if the top two will be the sides to go up at the end of the season. Brandon's young players Simon Knopf and Max Duffin are both boasting unbeaten records at the present time.

Cramlington TTC have four teams of juniors in this division and whilst they occupy the bottom four places the youngsters are all continuing to improve their personal performances.

Aubrey Drapkin

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