

Warner digs deep to take singles title

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Ben Warner is the new 2015 M&G Investments Chelmsford & District Table Tennis League Men's Singles champion.

Joint third seed Warner – a former top Essex Junior who has returned to the sport after a lengthy absence, took the title only after a marvellous and widely fluctuating final against 19-year-old Brandon Crouchman, a player who exceeded all expectations.

In the first semi-final, few people gave Crouchman much hope against Rik James, the top seed and vastly experienced campaigner. Brandon will have been aware that he had yet to register a win over Rik in league matches but he didn't let it trouble him. Blocking and counter-hitting patiently, moving his opponent all over the court and hitting some cracking forehand winners from time to time Brandon came through to win a spellbinding five-setter 3-2 (10-12, 12-10, 11-5, 12-14, 11-9).

Warner beat Scott Dowsett in three sets in the second semi. Dowsett hit what were arguably the more spectacular and powerful winners but Warner's greater control and his accuracy coupled with his clever serves and overall alertness meant he always had a slight edge. The scores of 11-9, 11-5, 11-8 probably reflected this.

The final proved to be an eventful game. Warner was the quicker out of the blocks and he won the first end 11-8. He then led 8-4 in the second and he must have thought that he was coasting into a 2-0 lead. However, Crouchman had other ideas and he raised his game superbly in this set. Retrieving as if his life depended on it he somehow won the end 12-10 and secured a similarly close third end by the same scoreline.

Warner was in trouble and at 6-1 down in the fourth end it looked to be heading away from him. This time he raised his game just as Crouchman had in the second end and he produced some superb controlled table tennis to level at 8-8 and win the game 11-8. Ben was now in the ascendancy and he won the decider 11-6.

The Mixed Doubles title also went to the steadier pairing. Steve Whileley and Shirley Carroll took a 2-0 lead against the very hard-hitting combination of Dawn Baldry and Ciaran Whelan and although they lost the third end they reasserted themselves in the fourth to run out 3-1 (11-9, 11-7, 6-11, 11-8) winners.

The Men's Doubles final went the full five sets and it was a triumph for the youthful pairing of Dowsett and Crouchman. They made a slow start against Rik James and David Cole and trailed 2-0. With Brandon becoming increasingly effective they raced through the third end 11-4 and held it together to take fourth end as well. The fifth end was a thriller and Scott and Brandon led 9-7 only to see Cole power Scott's two serves straight past him. At this stage it was clearly anybody's game and it was Brandon and Scott who won the two vital points to win 3-2 (8-11, 5-11, 11-4, 11-7, 12-10).

James and Cole had little time to rest as they were back in action in the Veterans' Singles final. These two players perhaps know each other's games better than anyone and the rallies were free-flowing and at times spectacular. Cole really put it together and he hit a number of perfectly angled forehand winners as he won in four ends (11-9, 11-6, 7-11, 11-5). This was Cole's fifth win in this event.

By contrast the Under-21 Singles final didn't feature so many long rallies as Dowsett met his doubles partner Crouchman, who was clearly on top of his game. There was no let-up as Brandon raced through to win 3-0 (11-7, 11-4, 11-2), a reversal of last year's final.

Julie Johnson showed all the composure and experience which has seen her dominate these Championships for so long as she defeated Sarah Austin 3-0 (11-6, 11-3, 11-6) in the Ladies' Singles final. Sarah competed bravely throughout, attempting to match her opponent in the fast up-to-the-table rallies and she gave a very

good account of herself. However, Julie always had the edge and she duly secured her 23rd title, a truly outstanding record.

Steve Kerns (press & publicity officer)

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