

County Championships: Ho and Co seal junior title for Middlesex

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Middlesex and Sussex were the two form teams as this season's County Championship Junior Premier Division reached its conclusion at Wood Green Academy.

Both counties went into the weekend on maximum points having won their first three matches when the first round of fixtures were played at Batts, Harlow, in November.

They both recorded thumping wins in the first round at Wood Green as Sussex beat doomed Surrey and Middlesex beat Lincolnshire by the identical scoreline of 9-1. However, something seemed likely to give as they were due to face each other in a second-round match.

Middlesex started better and took the first three sets as firstly Omar Khassal beat Jack Bennett 3-0 (13-11, 11-7, 11-6), which was followed by a 3-0 win by Mitchell Jones over Dave Pound (11-6, 11-5, 11-5) and when Tin-Tin Ho scored a four-game win over Eva Wang (8-11, 11-7, 11-9, 11-8), Middlesex were ahead 3-0.

Sussex got back into the match when Josh Bennett beat Gabriel Achampong 3-0 (14-12, 12-10, 11-8) to reduce their arrears to 1-3 but saw this bright spot quickly erode as Middlesex then took the next two sets as Denise Payet beat Lois Peake 3-0 (11-9, 11-9, 11-5) and Khassal completed his own personal maximum as he beat Pound 3-0 (11-5, 11-7, 11-3).

Middlesex were in an unbeatable position as they now led 5-1, but Sussex hit back and took the next two sets as firstly Wang beat Payet 3-1 (11-9, 11-8, 9-11, 11-4), followed by a hard-fought five-game win from Jack Bennett over Achampong (8-11, 14-16, 12-10, 11-6, 11-8) as Sussex were making a contest of the match with their opponents' lead now only being 5-3.

The penultimate set of the match saw Ho take on Peake and despite dropping the second game, the England international was always in control and ran out 3-1 (11-2, 9-11, 11-4, 11-7) victor as Middlesex completed victory as they led 6-3. Despite Josh Bennett taking the final set with a 3-1 (11-7, 7-11, 14-12, 11-5) win over Jones it was Middlesex who took the match and put themselves in the box seat to take the title.

Although in the driving seat Middlesex found themselves in a real scrap against Northants first thing up on Sunday morning and found themselves 3-4 down. They fought back to level the match after eight rubbers and in the final two sets, wins by Payet, 11-6, 11-6, 11-7, over Nicole Bird and Jones against Ben Tombs (11-5, 11-7, 12-10) saw them snatch victory once more 6-4.

Sussex themselves were made to fight hard in their Sunday morning match against Glamorgan and also found themselves locked at 4-4 before wins by Wang over Beth Roberts (11-6, 11-3, 11-5) and Josh Bennett over Callum Evans (11-9, 11-9, 11-9) in the final set saw Sussex also snatch a 6-4 win.

It meant with one round of matches to play there was just the two match points separating the teams. Sussex quickly established a winning lead against Lincolnshire and ran out 8-2 victors but could only sit back and watch as Middlesex, only needing a point, took the title in the sixth set as Jones beat Callum Evans 3-0 (11-8, 12-10, 11-9) thus establishing a 5-1 lead. But they were not prepared to accept a draw and ran out 9-1 victors to take the title by two points from Sussex.

Surrey were well adrift at the bottom of the division with only one point to show for their season's work and are relegated. They are joined by Devonshire, who finished next to bottom by virtue of an inferior sets difference as they finished the season on the same points as Northants.

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