

No Stall-ing as Colin makes triple crown history in Clacton

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Colin Stallwood with his trophies

Colin Stallwood made history this weekend at the Clacton & District League's 2015 Closed Championships by becoming the first player to take the coveted triple crown – the Men's Singles, Men's Doubles and Mixed Doubles titles – on two occasions.

But Stallwood's achievement in repeating his 2009 success was the closest of close-run things, with his win in the Men's Singles a last-gasp 3-2 (11-5, 8-11, 5-11, 11-8, 13-11) victory over 14-year-old Sam Hume, playing in his first Men's Singles final.

In a match high on drama, tension and quality – and one of the best Men's finals of recent years – the talented Stallwood was forced to call on all his experience and table tennis nous to defeat the jack-in-the-box Hume, a young player full of energy and inventive shots.

At two sets to one down, Stallwood got off to a disastrous start in the fourth, trailing 4-0, but recovered to take it 11-8 to send the match into a decider. And he was staring defeat in the face at 10-7 down in the final set before saving three championship points – one with a brave attacking forehand at 10-9 down.

Even then the drama wasn't over with Hume taking an 11-10 lead before Stallwood saved a fourth match point, this time with an daring backhand winner – a masterful performance to salvage the title from apparent defeat.

Although Hume will reflect on what might have been, his maturity on the table showed he can mix it with the big boys of local table tennis – and it is surely only a matter of time before this likeable young man takes the ultimate glory.

Both Stallwood and Hume had been seeded third-equal, and both had disposed of the top seeds in the semi-finals. Hume defeated reigning champion James Denyer in three-straight whilst Stallwood eliminated the dangerous second-seed Peter Burrows 3-2 (3-11, 11-9, 11-7, 5-11, 11-4).

In the quarter-finals, Stallwood defeated Mark Smith in four and Hume eliminated former champion Greg Green 11-5 in the decider in another high-octane match. Denyer was impressive in taking out Gary Young in three-straight whilst Burrows disposed of the impressive Paul Hume.

The group stages of this event went mainly to form but there were notable performances from Barry Allen, who made it to the knockout stage by beating Mark Gale in three-straight, as did Graham Parkes after a surprise victory over Martyn Green.

Stallwood, partnered by Greg Green, and Hume with his older brother Paul, were also on opposite sides in the Men's Doubles. But Stallwood and Green, the reigning champions and No 1 seeds, were always a too shrewd and experienced for their younger opponents and, after three tight opening sets, ran out 3-1 (11-9, 8-11, 12-10, 11-2) winners.

It was a fifth Men's Doubles title for Green, who'd also won it with Gary Young in 2010, 2011 and 2012, and a sixth for Stallwood, who'd won it three times with Iain Vine in the 1990s and twice with Martin Hogg in the 2000s.

The event had gone largely to form with the top four seeds reaching the semi-finals. Green and Stallwood disposed of the ranked pairing of Derek Willis and Gary Young whilst the Hume brothers took the scalp of three-times finalists and 2013 champions James Denyer and Felipe Rodriguez.



Annabelle Rodriguez and Colin Stallwood in action

Since 2009 when Stallwood and Annabelle Rodriguez last won the Mixed Doubles title, the pair had three times been runners-up – including 2014 against James Denver and Gill Locke. But with the holders absent this year, Stallwood and Rodriguez made no mistake against second seeds Paul Hume and Gracie Edwards, taking the final 3-0 (11-9, 11-7, 11-7).

The event had produced some exciting matches with both losing semi-finalists scraping through earlier rounds. Sam Hume and Caroline North, who eventually lost their semi-final to Stallwood and Rodriguez, had edged their quarter-final 3-2 (11-13, 11-7, 5-11, 11-5, 11-8) against John and Isabel Barton, whilst Ian Fielder and Sandie Isaac – eventually defeated by Hume and Edwards – just got through their quarter-final in five (11-5, 9-11, 6-11, 11-8, 12-10) against Ferdy Rodriguez and Jenny Higgins.

So Stallwood's three wins – his second Men's title, his seventh Men's Doubles title, and his second Mixed Doubles title – moves him up to seventh place in the Clacton & District League's all-time Closed Championships Men's Roll of Honour behind Ken Gladwell, Derek Wood, David Binns, Martin Hogg, Darren Jones and Kevin Gowlett.

And to acknowledge his exceptional achievement, Stallwood was presented with the Victor Trophy as the Outstanding Player of the Championships.

For the record, the only other four men to have won all the three major titles in the same year were Dennis Arr (1964), Terry Letard (1970), Derek Wood (1996) and Keiran Lally (2005).



Ladies' Singles winner Graie Edwards

A new star was born in the Ladies' Singles where 13-year old Gracie Edwards took advantage of the absence of Gill Locke and Sue Welham to become the youngest-ever Ladies' champion. In the final, she defeated 2006 and 2007 winner Annabelle Rodriguez 3-1 (11-8, 11-9, 9-11, 11-3) with a display of all-out attacking play which gradually disheartened and dampened the challenge of her more experienced opponent.

It was the culmination of an excellent season for Gracie, who has adapted well in her first season in the top-flight of the League. But it was a bitter disappointment for Annabelle who, earlier in the week, had beaten her younger opponent in a League match.

The losing semi-finalists in the Ladies' Singles were Sandie Isaac and Isabel Barton – who appeared on opposite sides of the table in the Ladies' Doubles.

In something of a minor shock, the Windsor Harriers' pairing of Isabel Barton and Jenny Higgins turned back the years to take the title with a nailbiting 3-2 (8-11, 11-6, 6-11, 11-9, 11-8) victory over top seeds Gracie Edwards and Sandie Isaac, who thus finished runners-up for a second year running.

Having disposed of second seeds Annabelle Rodriguez and Caroline North in the semi-finals, Isabel and Jenny showed excellent form in the final, unleashing some brave attacking shots to counter the well-known attacking threat of their two opponents – to produce a thrilling match that was always in the balance.

It was a 10th Ladies' Doubles title for Jenny but her first since 2000, and a ninth for Isabel – but the first time they'd won the title together as a pair.



Sam Hume in action

It would have required a shock of seismic proportions had not Sam Hume taking the Junior Singles title – which he did with a comfortable three-straight final win against Gracie Edwards, appearing in her fourth final of the Championships. Having been a runner-up in 2012, this was surely the first Junior Singles title of many to come for the popular 14-year old Sam – although only scant consolation for losing out on two major titles in the Men's events.

However, it surely bodes well for the future of Clacton table tennis that both the finalists in the Junior Singles also

featured so well in the senior events.

The semi-finalists in the Junior Singles were Harry Beezer, who'd unexpectedly reached this stage having defeated Tom Wilkin in his group, and Morgan Harvey.

In a competitive field of 37 entrants, Peter Burrows retained his Veterans Singles title, giving a pumped-up performance in the final to defeat Gary Young 3-0 (11-8, 11-6, 11-7).

But the outcome could have been very different had not Burrows saved no fewer than 12 match points in his quarter-final tie with former-champion Alan Burgess. In what was undoubtedly the best match of all the qualifying rounds of the Championships, Burrows clung on by his fingertips, eventually winning 3-2 (11-8, 4-11, 11-6, 10-12, 19-17).

Ironically, Burgess had won this title in 2011 by beating Burrows in three-straight.

Much credit goes to Young for reaching the final, beating Derek Willis – who caused so many other players such trouble in the Tournament – with comparative ease in three-straight before disposing of second seed and soon-to-be Men's champion Colin Stallwood 3-1 (11-8, 11-9, 8-11, 12-10) at the semi-final stage.

A special mention in this event should go to Graham Parkes who got through his group to the knockout stage by beating Grant Sharpe 11-9 in the fifth, to Paul Woolnough who did the same with a 13-11 in the fifth victory against Colin Dearman, and to Martyn Green who won on countback in a group with Phil Smith and Lee Harvey, as did Martin Edwards in the toughest group of all that included Gavin Price and Paul Meikle.

Derek Willis had been runner-up in the Super-Veterans Singles in 2014 but this year, ranked third-equal, he went one better, by beating the always-competitive Colin Webber 3-0 (12-10, 11-9, 11-5) to take his first-ever Closed Championships title.

And Willis' victory was no fluke, having eliminated top seed and reigning champion Alan Burgess 3-1 (11-6, 7-11, 12-10, 13-11) in the semi-final.

All credit to Webber who, despite being seeded No 2 and expected to reach the final, had negotiated an equally-tough route, having had to beat quality opponents Paul Meikle, Colin Dearman and Martin Edwards.

Not content with taking a first-ever Closed Championships title in the Super-Veterans' event, Willis went on to chalk up a noteworthy double by taking the Restricted Singles, in the final defeating Martin Edwards who'd won this event way back in 1994.

The absence of seeds in the Restricted adds to its fascination but Willis, arguably the best player in the field, won the day with yet another impressive display of resolute chopping and defending. But he won the title the hard way, beating a series of top-flight players – Paul Meikle, John Owen, Gavin Price and then John Hatley 11-7 in the fifth in the semi-final on his way to success.

Although the final proved to a one-sided affair, with Willis winning in a three-straight, it did not do justice to Edwards, a never-say-die player who never gives anything less than 100 per cent.



Second Division champion Frank Burbidge

Frank Burbidge has been a stalwart Second Division player for many years but he has only once – in 2006 – appeared in a Division Two Singles final.

This year, starting as favourite, Frank wrapped up the title with a typically gritty performance, wearing out the not inconsiderable challenge of Lee Harvey, playing in his first Championships final. In a match that see-sawed throughout, Burbidge took the title 3-2 (5-11, 11-5, 5-11, 11-9, 11-6).

But neither player had experienced an easy day, Burbidge having to fend off a determined challenge from Grant Sharpe 3-2 in the semi-final (11-5, 7-11, 11-3, 7-11, 13-11), whilst Harvey had an equally tough last-four battle, edging out second seed Russell Hillier in five (11-4, 7-11, 7-11, 11-2, 12-10).

If the Division Two Singles went to form with the top four seeds reaching the semi-finals, the Division Three Singles went in the opposite direction with the two top seeds unexpectedly eliminated in the quarter-finals.



Division Three champion Rivhu Khan

The consistent Rivhu Khan took out No 1 seed and hot favourite Ray Chillingworth in an attritional encounter 3-2 (11-7, 6-11, 6-11, 11-8, 11-9). And this was followed soon after when 14-year old Woody Fitzpatrick surprised veteran Mike Hillier, the young junior showing composure beyond his years to defeat the second-seeded player 3-0 (11-6, 11-9, 17-15).

Alas for Fitzpatrick, he then fell foul of fellow-junior, 15-year old Harry Beezer, in the semi-final. And although Beezer – who enjoyed an excellent Tournament – displayed excellent attacking ability in the final, the obdurate Khan, playing in his first-ever Closed Championships, finally got the better and ran out a 3-2 (10-12, 13-11, 7-11, 11-8, 11-4) winner in an entertaining final between two surprise finalists.

Once again, the League is indebted to Paul Newbould Planning and Building Design Services who were the main sponsors of the Championships for a 22nd year. And thanks also go to the Skelmersdale Centre for their sponsorship of the Ladies' Singles.

And finally a collective compliment should go to all 68 competitors who took part, especially as they had to adapt quickly to the unusual playing conditions caused by the enforced last-minute change of venue from the Coastal Academy Sports Hall to the Main Hall. But each one played throughout the tournament with total sportsmanship and friendliness which, allied to the competitiveness and good play over the weekend, produced a memorable 2015 Championships.

2015 CHAMPIONSHIPS RESULTS

Men's Singles: C Stallwood beat S Hume 3-2 (11-5, 8-11, 5-11, 11-8, 13-11).

Ladies' Singles: G Edwards beat A Rodriguez 3-1 (11-8, 11-9, 9-11, 11-3).

Men's Doubles: G Green/C Stallwood beat P Hume/S Hume 3-1 (11-9, 8-11, 12-10, 11-2).

Ladies' Doubles: I Barton/J Higgins beat G Edwards/S Isaac 3-2 (8-11, 11-6, 6-11, 11-9, 11-8).

Mixed Doubles: C Stallwood/A Rodriguez beat P Hume/G Edwards 3-0 (11-9, 11-7, 11-7).

Veterans Singles: P Burrows beat G Young 3-0 (11-8, 11-6, 11-7).

Super-Veterans Singles: D Willis beat C Webber 3-0 (12-10, 11-9, 11-5).

Junior Singles: S Hume beat G Edwards 3-0 (11-6, 11-5, 11-3).

Division Two Singles: F Burbidge beat L Harvey 3-2 (5-11, 11-9, 5-11, 11-9, 11-6).

Division Three Singles: R Khan beat H Beezer 3-2 (10-12, 13-11, 7-11, 11-8, 11-4).

Restricted Singles: D Willis beat M Edwards 3-0 (11-4, 11-6, 11-3).

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