

County Championships: Warwickshire on the up after thrilling battle

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Cheshire and Warwickshire fought a weekend battle at Draycott to determine promotion to the senior Premier Division next season as Division 1A was played out.

With the two counties fighting tooth and nail all weekend and playing out a draw when the sides met on Sunday morning, it came down to sets and they were so close it was determined on their final matches before Warwickshire were declared champions.

Saturday morning started with Cheshire beating Northants 7-3 with Warwickshire recording a 9-1 win over Norfolk and in the second round of fixtures it was Warwickshire again who had the better result with a 7-3 win over Bedfordshire, while Cheshire just edged home against Yorkshire coming from 3-4 down to reel off the final three sets to take a 6-4 victory.

Cheshire hauled themselves back into the equation as they matched Warwickshire's earlier 9-1 win over Norfolk whilst Warwickshire just beat off a determined challenge from Leicestershire with a 6-4 victory. In the final round of Saturday matches, Warwickshire beat Lancashire 8-2 and with Cheshire defeated Bedfordshire 7-3 as both counties went into Saturday night level on eight match points but with Warwickshire holding a slender one-set lead.

Warwickshire started the better in the Sunday morning match-up and took the first three sets which saw Loz Sweeney beat Joe Pilkington 3-1 (11-6, 7-11, 11-8, 11-7), followed by a three game win by Matt Outhwaite over Jonathan Taylor (11-8, 11-6, 11-6). When Rachel Pilgrim beat Janay Gibson 3-2 (7-11, 8-11, 11-8, 11-9, 11-8), it was Warwickshire who were in a commanding 3-0 lead.

Cheshire hit back in the next set as Kevin Dolder beat Ian Ferguson 3-1 (11-8, 8-11, 11-7, 11-2), and when Rachel Baker took a hard-fought victory over Kate Hughes, coming from behind to win 3-2 (3-11, 7-11, 11-6, 14-12, 11-7), Cheshire had pulled to within a set at 2-3 down as all players had now played their first set.

Warwickshire restored a two-set lead when Outhwaite recorded his own personal maximum by beating Pilkington 3-1 (11-6, 11-4, 2-11, 11-7) as the Midlands led 4-2, but this was reduced to a one-set lead in the next set as Baker eased past Pilgrim in three (11-8, 11-3, 11-4).

Warwickshire guaranteed themselves at least a share of the spoils in the next set when Sweeney completed his own personal maximum when he beat Dolder in four (11-7, 10-12, 11-5, 11-7), but a draw was all they got as in a splendid final push Cheshire took the final two sets as Gibson beat Hughes 3-0 (11-5, 11-4, 11-9) and in the final set Taylor just beat Ferguson in five (8-11, 12-10, 11-7, 8-11, 11-8). So the match ended in a draw, with Warwickshire holding a slender one-set lead.

With two matches left to play for each county Warwickshire had to match the results of Cheshire while Cheshire just had to better the results of their adversaries and in the next round of matches Cheshire beat Lancashire 6-4, which was matched by Warwickshire as they beat Northants by the same score.

Both counties now faced their final matches and with all matches being played on two tables it proved difficult for each county to see how the other was faring. But when all scores were in, the two counties had once again matched the other's result as Cheshire beat Leicestershire 6-4 as did Warwickshire over Yorkshire.

That gave Warwickshire the title by one set – 47-23 against the 46-24 of Cheshire – and a place in next season's Premier Division. They will be joined by Devonshire, who won Division 1B by two points over Essex. The two counties will be replacing Dorset and Glamorgan, who say goodbye to the Premier for next season.

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