



Essex start title defence with a hat-trick

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Reigning champions Essex emerged as leaders after the first weekend of fixtures in this season's county championships over-60s Premier Division with a perfect record of three wins from three when all premier county teams met up at Milton Keynes.

First up for the reigning champions were former champions Sussex, and it was Sussex who took an opening set lead as Johnny Clarke beat Peter Radford 3-0 (11-8, 11-6, 11-8).

But Essex hit back straight away when Terry Guymer beat Robin Stace in three (11-8, 11-6, 11-8) and Essex then took the lead as Stuart Gibbs beat Barry Gilbert in a hard-fought four-gamer (11-9, 11-8, 6-11, 12-10) to give Essex a 2-1 lead.

Essex moved further ahead as they took the next two sets – firstly the first mixed doubles when Gibbs & Marjorie Dawson beat Clarke & Sheila King 3-1 (13-11, 9-11, 11-7, 11-9), which was followed by a win from Radford, who opened his account with a four-game win over Stace (11-2, 8-11, 11-6, 11-7) as Essex now lead 4-1.

King beat Dawson in the ladies' singles (11-8, 11-5, 11-9), which was followed by a 3-1 men's doubles win by Gilbert & Clarke over Gibbs & Dave Bowles (11-9, 9-11, 11-5, 11-9) to bring the sides to within a set as Essex saw their lead now reduced to 4-3.

The next set proved to be pivotal in the match and was a corker as Guymer just beat Gilbert 3-2 (11-5, 9-11, 9-11, 11-8, 14-12), which saw Essex establish an unbeatable 5-3 lead.

The penultimate set of the match saw Clarke beat Gibbs 3-1 (11-7, 4-11, 11-8, 11-8) as the sides were now back to within a set with Essex now leading 5-4, and in the final set it was Radford & Dawson who took Essex to victory with a mixed doubles win against Stace & King, coming from behind to win 3-1 (10-12, 19-17, 11-9, 11-9) as Essex took the match 6-4.

Second up for Essex was a difficult clash with Oxfordshire and they found Oxon skipper Karl Bushell leading from the front, winning all four sets he played in, but the Essex squad all contributed to the scorecard as Guymer scored two wins with Gibbs, Radford and Dawson each recording one win, and it took a final set mixed doubles win by Radford & Dawson over Janet Brown & Nat Richardson (11-4, 11-2, 11-9) to snatch a 6-4 victory.

The final match for Essex proved to be more straightforward as they beat Lancashire. The contest was over as early as the seventh set as they reeled off set after set and soon had established a 6-1 lead which was extended into a 7-3 win and a 100% record which they take into the second weekend in March next year.

Standings:

Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Essex	3	3	0	0	19	11	6
Kent	3	2	1	0	19	11	5
Sussex	3	1	1	1	17	13	3
Cheshire	3	1	1	1	15	15	3
Lancashire	3	1	1	1	15	15	3
Oxfordshire	3	1	0	2	14	16	2
Yorkshire	3	0	1	2	12	18	1
Hampshire	3	0	0	3	9	21	0

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