

## Friday Photos 94: Chester Barnes, the great enigma

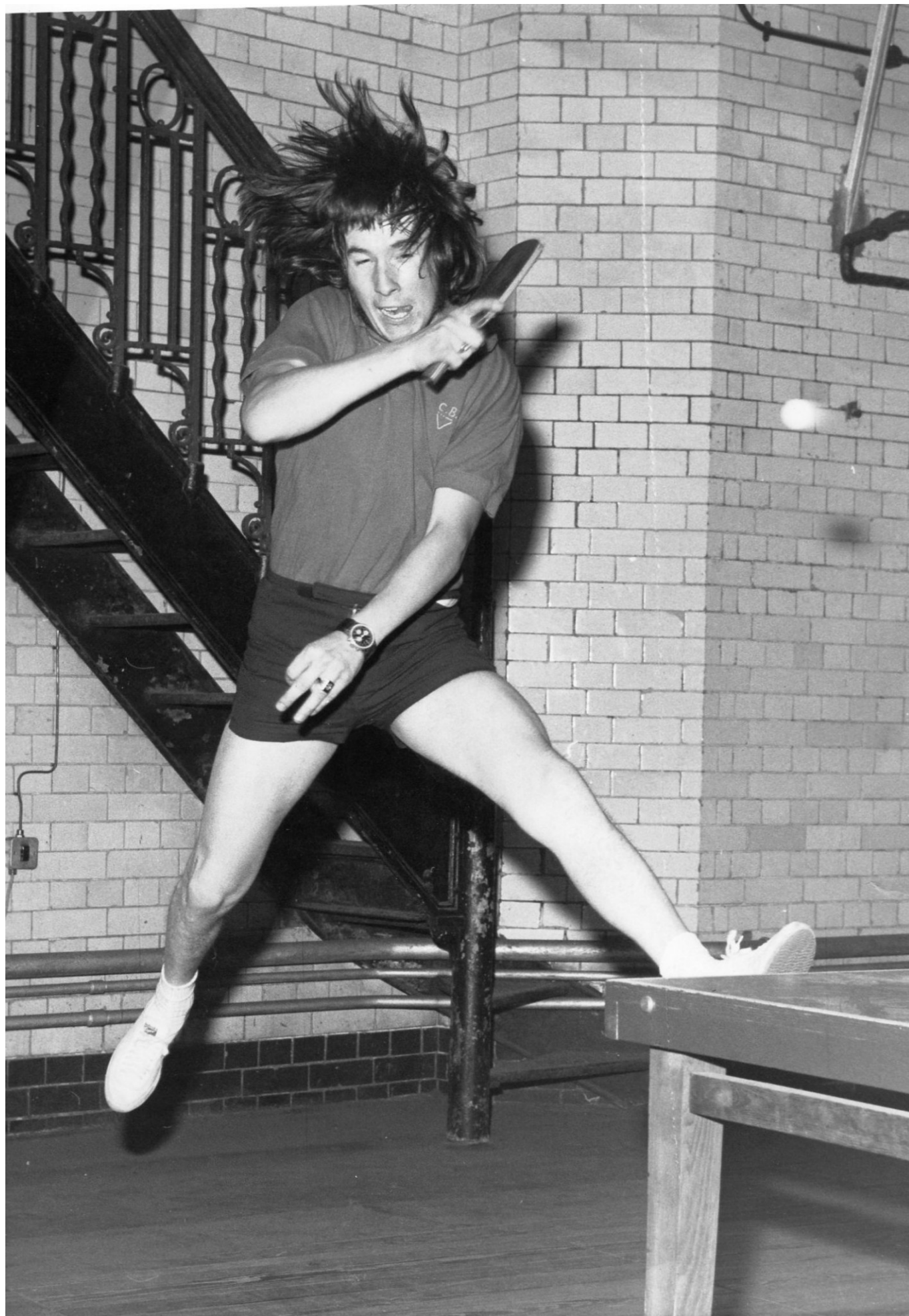
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George Barnes doesn't have quite the same ring about it but that is how the table tennis player known as Chester Barnes was christened.

Chester was the wonder boy of the 1960s and early 1970s. An Essex lad born in the East of London in 1947 his England debut was in 1963, the same year he won his first England Men's Singles National title at the tender age of 15 years.

Two years later Chester was 16<sup>th</sup> in the world, a meteoric rise of a player who often courted controversy. At his height Chester was one of the most recognised sportsmen in England and along with the likes of George Best and Alex 'Hurricane' Higgins his antics off as well as on the table led to many pages of press coverage and a reputation that transcended table tennis.



## Chester Barnes

So where did it start? When he was 12 years old Chester had a holiday at Butlin's in Clacton. He was taken by Len Hoffman with a group of lads from his youth club. Although Chester didn't win the weekly tournament he was rewarded for all his hard work and progress by coach, Harry Venner, by being made the 'Boy of the Week'. This was the start of Chester playing seriously.

Harry had a good eye for talent and asked Chester to train at his club in Putney. Less than three years later that talent had developed to make him number one in the country and National Champion.

In those days the winners of the Boy and Girl of the week were invited to a week, free, at Butlin's in Bognor. A disgruntled Chester didn't win the coveted title of 'Boy of the Year' in 1959 but he was back the following year.

A two-week holiday in 1960 with Mum and Dad, again at Clacton, this time with England number one, Ian Harrison, as coach. Chester had seen Ian win the English Open Men's Singles title at the Royal Albert Hall and he was his hero. This time at Clacton, Chester won the tournament as well as the 'Boy of the Week' accolade.

Another trip to Bognor for the finals and although not the best player there, once Chester's tender years were taken into account he was nominated as 'Boy of the Year', making it an Essex double with Lesley Bell the 'Girl of the Year'. The pair graced the front cover of *Table Tennis*.

This year saw another impressive win for Chester too as the *Eagle* U13 Champion. The tournament had attracted 11,000 entrants.



# Table Tennis

*The Official Magazine of the  
English Table Tennis Association*

NOVEMBER, 1960

ONE SHILLING



CHESTER BARNES and  
LESLEY BELL, winners of the  
"News of the World" Boy  
and Girl of the year trophies.

Chester, News of the World 'Boy of the Year' with Lesley Bell 'Girl of the Year'

Chester's play was making people sit up; he worked hard and as well as his coaching, training and tournament



play, played in a different league every night of the week. The reward was being named as Essex County Number 1 Junior and Number 3 Senior in the 1961-62 season; Chester became the youngest ever senior county player.

However, the rewards at national level did not appear. Despite winning all 10 matches at the England Junior Trials a less than happy Chester was only ranked fifth by the ETTA. He gave a rather forthright interview to the press which probably cost him the opportunity to represent his country that year.

However, results have a way of talking and becoming *Eagle* U15 champion and winning nine Open Junior tournaments, more than anyone else that season, meant Chester could not be ignored for long. Incidentally, Brian Brumwell, who was England Non-Playing Junior Captain and also on the ETTA Selection Committee, resigned as a result of Chester's non-selection. A man of principle.



Cheshire v Essex. Judith Heaps, Derek Schofield, Chester Barnes, Roger Hampson, Mike Johns, Brian Kean.

The 1962-63 season was more promising and Chester became England Number 1 Junior and was selected for his first Junior International against Belgium in Folkestone. A fixture England won 8-2 with Chester winning both his matches. He also won the first of many senior Open tournaments at Portsmouth.

All the playing and travelling was becoming more expensive and when Chester left school two weeks before his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday – as you could in those days – with his parents' support it was decided that Chester would concentrate on playing table tennis full time to enable him to be the best he could be. His parents' support included his Mum going out to work to help finance all the expense of tournaments, leaving Chester as much time as possible to practise and play.

The reward for this sacrifice and the hundreds of hours Chester put into his playing came at the National Championships, a tournament that Chester didn't want to enter, preferring to try for the Yorkshire Junior Open title. Parental pressure won and at 15 years old, Chester is still the youngest ever winner of the National Championships Men's Singles.

It is hard to imagine anyone ever improving on this achievement. Chester defeated five England Internationals



on the way to the title: Terry Densham, Jeff Ingber, Michael Thornhill, David Creamer and in the final, Alan Rhodes. He had definitely arrived.

FEBRUARY, 1963  
ONE SHILLING

# Table Tennis

*The Official Magazine of the  
English Table Tennis Association*



CHESTER BARNES,  
the new  
ENGLISH CLOSED  
CHAMPION

*Picture by Peter Madge*



## National Champion at 15

The win at the Nationals saw Chester selected for the World Championships Swaythling Cup team, a tour of Jersey and an international match against the USA. He was ranked on the England Senior list for the first time, at number 3.

However, these selections were not the only result of his win. At the end of finals day Chester was approached by Victor Barna who introduced him to Alec Brook, himself a former international, and before long a management contract had been signed. Unlike the usual percentage fee it was agreed that Chester would receive £15.00 per week, the contract was for five years. A delighted Chester had a regular income. However, after a disastrous trip to Nigeria later in the year the contract was terminated and Chester wisely decided to manage his affairs himself.

Despite all the success on the table Chester's reputation off court wasn't always a good one. The interview after his non-England Junior selection in 1961-62 was a definite black mark which was exacerbated by his attitude when he lost. A bad loser by his own admission he often wouldn't shake hands with his opponents when he wasn't on the winning end of a match in his earlier days. It was the start of a love/hate relationship with the press and officialdom that continued throughout his playing days.



England Team Captain Ron Crayden with Mary Wright, Karenza Mathews, Chester Barnes, Ian Harrison

In 1963-64 Chester did not attend the Ranking Meeting for the top 10 players. Although at the time of notification it was not compulsory to attend it later became so. Chester's non-attendance meant there was no international selection for him despite being England Number 3. Another black mark.

Building up his profile, Chester had a clothing contract with Fred Perry and had his name emblazoned on his bat case, holdall, shoulder bag for all to see.



He made sure all his kit was in a prominent position for the television cameras at the England v Sweden international. In this match Chester beat Kjell Johansson who was considered by many to be the top player in Europe and at 17 years old had just won the Hungarian Open. A most impressive win.

More publicity followed and Chester set up his own Fan Club although it only lasted about a year, not quite the same status as the pop stars of the day. There were television appearances, interviews and exhibition matches, a spot on 'Sportsview' with David Coleman with viewing figures of 12 million. Later Chester had a contract with Lou Hoffman for a whole range of clothing and a continuation of that famous square bat that was such a trademark.



Chester advertising his wares

Chester Barnes Bat	57/- each
Chester Barnes Bat Cover	10/- each
Chester Barnes Shorts	52/6 each
Chester Barnes Men's Shirts	31/6 each
Chester Barnes Ladies' Shirts	31/- each
Chester Barnes Track Suit Men's	191/- each
Chester Barnes Track Suit Ladies'	175/- each
Chester Barnes Track Suit Junior	155/6 each

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Chester's play on the table continued improving, although at times it was erratic, with a string of Open titles, numerous international caps and two further Men's Singles National titles in 1964 and 1965. In 1964 Chester teased the Press by saying he would not drop a game during the English Closed, a feat he almost achieved. It was only in the final against Brian Wright that he lost one end to take the title with a 3-1 victory. The 1965 win made it three in a row, aged 15, 16 and 17 years old.





National Champion Men's Singles Number two . . .





... and number three

Chester first played in the English Open in 1962 when he reached the semi-finals of the Junior Boys. The following year he got to the final but lost to Walter Dahlman of West Germany. In that year of 1963 Chester alongside Harry Venner reached the quarter-finals in the Men's Doubles.

No medals that year but it was gold in 1970 and 1971 in the team event with Denis Neale and a silver in 1965 with Ian Harrison. In the individual events Chester got as far as the semi-finals in the Men's Singles in 1970 and was runner-up with Denis Neale in 1971 in the Men's Doubles. Three silvers were added to the collection in the Mixed Doubles – with Mary Wright in 1967 and Karenza Mathews in 1970 and 1971.





English Open Team Champions with Denis Neale – Bryan Merrett is Team Captain – 1970

In the Quadrangular tournament (later the Home Countries/ Six Nations) Chester never lost a match in the four years he played, 1963, 1965, 1966, 1967 and was rewarded with a further four team golds.

At the World and European Championships Chester never seemed to quite reach his potential, on some occasions there were some outstanding results at other times it was felt he put no effort in and even threw matches. Chester played in the Swaythling Cup team in 1963, 1965, 1967 and 1969 with a highest finish of sixth in 1969. In the individual events Chester never finished above the round of 32 in the Singles although with Denis the pair were quarter-finalists in 1967 in the Men's Doubles.

It was a similar story in the European Championships playing in the team event in 1964 (eighth), 1966 (sixth) and 1970 (seventh). Chester only reached a high of the round of 16 in the Men's Singles in 1964 and 1966 although he did get as far as the quarter-finals in the Men's Doubles, again with Denis Neale and was runner-up in the Mixed Doubles with Mary Wright in 1966.

As well as these major tournaments Chester played in many European League matches from 1968-1972 and also in many international matches and Open tournaments abroad.



Royal Albert Hall, Chester Barnes, Denis Neale, Karenza Mathews, Jill Shirley, Bryan Merrett, 1970

In 1969 Chester brought out his biography 'More Than a Match' which is a most entertaining read.

National Men's Singles titles number four came along in 1971. It was the year of another triple title with Trevor Taylor in the Men's Doubles and Karenza Mathews in the Mixed. In total Chester won five Men's Doubles titles – four with Ian Harrison in 1965, 1966, 1967 and 1968 and one with Trevor Taylor in 1971. Winning two Mixed Doubles titles, with Diane Rowe in 1965 and Karenza Mathews in 1971, made it a round dozen of Senior titles at the National Championships – or English Closed as it was titled in those days.





Chester Barnes and Karenza Mathews new National Champions 1971

1971 was also the year that Chester was selected to play in the first Commonwealth Championships followed immediately by the World Championships. The Japanese Association had asked England to tour on their way back from the Worlds and due to contractual obligations neither Chester nor Denis could extend their stay. After some dispute neither Chester nor Denis played in those Commonwealth or World Championships.





The team selected for the first Commonwealth Championships, Alan Hydes, Trevor Taylor, Denis Neale, Chester Barnes

Chester did, however, take part in the China tour to England later at the end of 1971.





China Tour 1971. At 10 Downing Street with Prime Minister, Edward Heath

In 1974 despite being suspended from Essex County for 12 months and not playing in any major tournaments that season Chester entered the Nationals and took his fifth Men's Singles title. He was reinstated at Number 1.

Later in May 1974 an early exit from the English Open and the non-appearance at Open tournaments saw a slide to Number 5 and with a whimper rather than a bang Chester disappeared from the table tennis scene.



England Champion for the fifth time in 1974

The announcement of Chester's retirement came in the April 1975 issue of 'Table Tennis News' by way of an article headed "What the Papers Say" giving a quote from the London Evening News. After all Chester had brought to the game – good and bad – it seemed a very damp squib to have no further comment from the establishment or any table tennis writers in the official magazine. Table tennis was undoubtedly enhanced by Chester's presence and his high profile brought a huge amount of publicity and recognition not only to Chester personally but also to the game of table tennis.





Chester in action

The records show Chester's achievements, however, no record can show the impact that Chester had on the game nor the fact that he was a household name throughout the country and not just within table tennis circles.

As Stuart Gibbs, fellow England international and Essex team-mate said: "County matches in Essex at venues holding 6-7,000 people used to be sold out the season before when Chester was playing and people would queue for hours to watch him because you never knew what would happen next."

A brilliant star that maybe burnt out too quickly.

Do you have any Chester stories or any photographs from his playing days? If so please contact me at [DianeK1414@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:DianeK1414@hotmail.co.uk)

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