



## Clacton & District: Condors cup glory

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**Posted On:** May 08, 2017

Windsor Condors grabbed the Cup glory for the 2017 season with a 5-3 win over Nomads Panthers in the Handicap Knock-Out Cup final held this week at Clacton's Brotherhood Hall.

In the last match of the Clacton & District Table Tennis League season, Colin Stallwood, Greg Green and Annabelle Rodriguez – a team with no less than eight Closed Singles' titles between them – triumphed over Sam Hume, James Denyer and John Hatley of the Panthers, current champions and five-times Division One winners.

And, as befitted an encounter between the League's top two teams, it was a match high on both quality and entertainment.

The Condors took the early lead by winning the opening doubles, Green and Rodriguez (+1) never conceding their handicap advantage against Denyer and Hatley (-3). It was only in the third set, with the score at 5-4 to the Condors, that it seemed possible the Panthers' pair might retrieve their handicap deficit. But the Windsor pair stepped up a gear to take five of the next six points to eventually take the match 3-0 (11-6, 11-4, 11-9). First blood to the Condors.

The second match of the evening saw the eagerly-awaited encounter between Men's Singles champion Stallwood (0) and 16-year-old Hume (0), a Men's Singles finalists in 2015 and 2016, and unbeaten in League and Cup Singles matches all season. Hume set off like a steam train to race through the first set but was pegged back by the experienced Stallwood in the next two.

However, Hume re-grouped and, point by point, gradually exerted his dominance, taking the fifth with unexpected ease in a set uncharacteristically littered by three foul serves from Stallwood. It was a typically bravura, livewire performance from Hume, winning 3-2 (11-4, 8-11, 3-11, 11-6, 11-2).

The Panthers moved into the lead – for the first and only time in the final – when Denyer (-6) defeated Rodriguez (+1) 3-0 (11-8, 11-6, 11-8) in match three. Denyer was always in command, pacing his handicap recovery with consummate ease, levelling at 8-8 in the first set, 6-6 in the second and 8-8 in the third.

So it was up to Green (-1), celebrating his 27th birthday on the day of the final, to level the scores at the interval, which he did with a four-set victory over Hatley (+1). Green appeared to be cruising after winning the first two sets but Hatley, seemingly from out of nowhere, produced a blistering third set performance in which he could do little wrong. But he was unable to maintain the momentum, the Windsor birthday-boy levelling the match-score with a 3-1 (11-8, 11-8, 4-11, 11-8) victory.

Match five always looked likely to be pivotal – and so it proved. The Condors, who've only lost one Cup doubles match all season, continued their excellent run with Stallwood and Rodriguez (0), an established Championship-winning Mixed Doubles pairing, taking it 3-0 (18-16, 12-10, 11-8) against Hume and Hatley (0). The match was even better and closer than the scoreline might suggest, with the opening set see-sawing this way and that, Stallwood and Rodriguez coming back from 9-5 down and 10-9 down, and then spurning four set-points before eventually taking a set full of excellent rallies 18-16.

And it was a similar story in the second where the Hume and Hatley led 10-7 before the Windsor pair won five consecutive points to take the set, a position from which they were never headed.

Stallwood (0) extended the Condors' lead with a four-set win against Denyer (0) who was rejecting his hard bat of recent seasons for a more conventional blade and rubbers. Both players produced a feast of rat-a-tat table tennis which elicited spectator applause for almost every point.

But Stallwood it was who repeated his four-set success in their recent meeting in the Men's Singles semi-final at the Closed Championships, on this occasion winning 15-13, 11-6, 7-11, 11-5, Stallwood grateful for an 8-0 whirlwind start in the fourth aided by three fortuitous nets.

It left the Panthers needing to win all three remaining matches. And they started well with Hume (0) defeating Green (0) 3-1 (7-11, 11-7, 11-8, 11-8), the athleticism of Hume and the retrieving of the stylish Green providing a match brimful of class and panache. Green took the first set as Hume struggled to find his range but the younger player imperceptibly took control, Green uncharacteristically conceding two foul serves at 7-7 in the third set, and faulting on his final serve to give Hume the winning point in the fourth.

So to the tensest match of the evening between the two team captains, Rodriguez (+1) and Hatley (-5). And although it may have lacked the outstanding quality of the earlier matches, it made up for it with a rich tenseness that permeated from the table to the spectators, with Hatley torn between the need for defence to retrieve the handicap and his desire for natural aggression.

It made for a fascinating tussle where, in the third set, Hatley got back to parity at 8-all and then edged into a 10-8 lead to give the Panthers a glimmer of a chance to extend the final to match nine. But Rodriguez, showing gritty determination, dug in to force two errors from Hatley, to clinch the match 3-0 (11-5, 11-6, 14-12) – and with it the Cup for the Condors.

It was a first Cup success for both Green and Rodriguez but a second for Stallwood, a winner with the Condors six years ago in 2011.

And the victory extended the dominance of the Windsor Club in this competition over recent years, a Windsor team having won the Cup in seven of the last 10 seasons, on three of those occasions beating a team from the Nomads club.

Alas for the Panthers, their hopes of a League and Cup double was dashed, the 'double' achieved previously by only six teams in the League's history – but only once since 1987, when the handicap system was revised, by the all-conquering Brotherhood A side in 2006.

**Cup Final results:** (*Windsor Condors' players named first*): G Green/A Rodriguez (+1) beat J Denyer/J Hatley (-3) 11-6, 11-4, 11-9; C Stallwood (0) lost to S Hume (0) 4-11, 11-8, 11-3, 6-11, 2-11; Rodriguez (+1) lost to Denyer (-6) 8-11, 6-11, 8-11; Green (-1) beat Hatley (+1) 11-8, 11-8, 4-11, 11-8; Stallwood/Rodriguez (+1) beat Hume/Hatley (-3) 18-16, 12-10, 11-8; Stallwood (0) beat Denyer (0) 15-13, 11-6, 7-11, 11-5; Green (0) lost to Hume (0) 11-7, 7-11, 8-11, 8-11; Rodriguez (+1) beat Hatley (-5) 11-5, 11-6, 14-12.

\* The League's 'Come and Try' table tennis taster sessions begin on Friday 2nd June at the Brotherhood Hall,

Clacton-on-Sea. They continue at 7.30pm on every Friday evening during June. Anyone, young or old, who is thinking about take up competitive table tennis is welcome to attend on one or all of the sessions 'to have a go'. All equipment is provided and there's no charge – everything is free. For more information, ring Ferdy Rodriguez on 01255 830951.

\* The League's Annual General Meeting takes places on Tuesday 6th June at the Brotherhood Hall. The presentation of trophies for the 2016/17 season will take place at this meeting.

\* Finally, congratulations to Gavin Price who, with former Clacton League player Chris Jacob, won the Veterans Mens Doubles title at the recent Police National Championships.

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