

Braintree and District Table Tennis League

All reports by Ron Fosker

7.10.07 - Relegated Liberal A have as anticipated established themselves as the team to beat in division two of the Braintree Table Tennis League, but they have no by means been having things their own way.

They followed up their 7-3 win of the first week with two more close encounters, a 7-3 win over Black Notley E and then an even tighter 6-4 against Rayne C.

Robin Armstrong and Barry Pritchard remained unbeaten against Notley although Simon Churchman came about as close to beating Pritchard as he could. He won the first two games then lost the third at deuce, the second 11-8 and then stretched it all the way to deuce again in the fifth before Pritchard held out at 13-11.

Armstrong and Pritchard found life tougher against Rayne where Brian Riedling beat both of them and Armstrong also lost to Dave Punt.

In the end it was effectively Frank Neill's win over Riedling that gave them victory.

Without Punt or Riedling, Rayne C did not find Notley D quite so accommodating. Larte and Philip Lawson remained undefeated for the second week as Notley won 8-2.

Pillar House A and Rayne E, who both won their opening match in division three, followed it up with a second in week two.

Pillar House only had two players but Duncan Elloy and Sean Clift were only once stretched beyond three games to beat Nomads 7-3.

Rayne E dropped just the one set, Keith Perrins' win over Phil Wade at 12-10 in the fifth game, against Notley F. Simon Fleming and Richard Whiteside were unbeaten.

Black Notley H have started with two 8-2 wins in division four. They followed up their success over their own I team with a win by the same score against Pillar House B.

New signing Keith Flowers showed he will be a force to be reckoned with in this division by taking his three sets in both matches.

Panfield also scored their second win in two weeks, 7-3 over Rayne F.

Rayne G, who lost all ten matches in the main league last season, ensured that will not happen this year when they got the better of Notley I 6-4.

Barry Mouser led with way with his three sets while Ian Rubins and Jason Hearn chimed in with one each.

14.10.07 - Black Notley B proved again last week that they are going to have a say in this year's Braintree Table Tennis League championship when they took three points off their A team.

As with the previous match against last year's winners Cressing, the wins were shared around. Once again Andy Doshier won two but lost to a player who was beaten by Andrew McEwan.

This time Doshier beat both Ian Brown and Ken Lewis while McEwan got the better of Gary Young.

The B team were not far off a draw. Both the doubles and Doshier's defeat by Young were narrow five-game affairs.

Notley B went on to defeat Rayne B 7-3, a match in which McEwan was unbeaten. Rayne's new signing Peter Hance won twice.

Hance also won one against Cressing as did Brian Riedling. They added the doubles but had no third player so were unable to embarrass the champions further.

Kevin Gowlett and Paul Davison took all the sets between them in Bocking's 7-3 win over Rayne A.

Black Notley D racked up their third 8-2 win in their first three matches in division two. Dave Punt took two for Rayne D but he could not find a way past Larte Lawson.

Notley's main test comes tomorrow (Thursday) when they tackle their main promotion rivals Liberal A.

In division three, Tony Bamsey took all three singles for Black Notley F against Nomads but the Sudbury side's team strength took them through 6-4.

Black Notley H matched their D team exactly by registering their third 8-2 win in division four. Theirs was against Rayne G and featured three wins from Bruce Wickham. Barry Mouser took the two for Rayne.

Rayne F appeared to be sailing towards a comfortable victory over Notley I before they stuttered in the middle. But Mike Smith's win over Tim Gowers was merely a blip. Although Peter Taylor was taken all the way to 12-10 in the fifth by Harold Jones, now 81, the rest followed in orderly fashion for a 9-1 victory.

21.10.07 - Steve Kerns' incredible unbeaten run of 165 sets in the Braintree Table Tennis League has finally come to an end.

He was beaten last week by current men's singles champion Peter Hayden – seven and a half years since he last tasted defeat, at the hands of the then reigning champion Steve Dettmar.

Hayden triumphed in four games 11-8, 9-11, 11-6, 11-8.

Kerns did not play in the league last season but he remained unbeaten in six successive campaigns from 2001 to 2006.

One of his last appearances in the league was a narrow deuce-in-the-fifth win over Hayden in the 2006 individual championships.

That came after Hayden had only just returned to the game. Eighteen months further on the Cressing player has rediscovered much of the form that brought him three titles during the 1990s and had recently beaten Kerns in the Chelmsford League.

A repeat in the Braintree League brought an end to an achievement that will be hard to match.

The historic encounter was the last but one in the battle between this season's two expected title contenders, Cressing and Black Notley A, that ended with five sets each.

Hayden won his other two sets and the doubles with brother Ian who also contributed a singles win. Ken Lewis matched Kerns with two wins while Graham Farmer added a valuable victory over Trevor Carter.

But Hayden will not be able to post his own unblemished performance this season. In an earlier match he was found wanting by Bocking's Paul Davison.

A top-form Davison got the job done in three straight games 11-8, 11-5, 11-7.

He added his other two singles but Bocking's strength in depth gave them a 6-4 victory. Lisa Ashdown, off sick for much of last season, gave warning that she is beginning to find her feet with a good win over Richard Jennings.

Like Kerns, Jon Hill did not play in the league last season but, after spells at Bocking and Notley, he has now moved over to Rayne where he marked his debut for the A team with a win over Notley's Ian Brown.

This was one of those curious matches where Notley's trio all won two sets but each lost to a different opponent. Lewis was bettered by Steve Pennell while it was Steve Elmes who found a way past Andy Doshier.

They added the doubles to make it 7-3.

After defeat in their first match, Black Notley C have quickly moved into the promotion picture with two victories in division two.

They beat Notley E 7-3 and Rayne C 8-2. Dacre Pell won his three singles in the first match but he was outscored by his sister Stevie who won her three in the second.

Pillar House A and Rayne E continue to dominate division three. Pillar House took all ten sets – and were only once stretched to a fourth game – against Notley G while Rayne E suffered only one blemish against Liberal B, Phil Wade's defeat by Derek Finch.

Matt Shelley had an excellent win over Danny Canning in Pillar House B's 6-4 defeat by Panfield in division four while Rayne F gave away nothing against their own G team.

28.10.07 - The fixture chart threw up three top-of-the-table clashes in the Braintree Table Tennis League last week and as a result two unbeaten records are no more.

After three 8-2 wins in division four, Black Notley H took on Panfield with a two-point advantage. A 6-4 win to Panfield means the two teams are now bracketed together at the top with 28 points.

It was not just Notley's unbeaten record that tumbled, but Keith Flowers' personal one too. He fell to Nick Readhead who lost his own unbeaten tag later in an unexpected defeat to Peter Foster.

Notley's D team had also started with three 8-2 wins in division two. They were four points ahead of Liberal A when the two met but the 8-2 scoreline was the other way round at the end, leaving Liberal two points clear.

It was Larte Lawson's unbeaten run that ended in this one, taken in five games by Mike Johnston.

There was no separating the table-toppers in division three. Rayne E and Pillar House A started and ended the evening level at the top after sharing the points.

Rayne's Richard Whiteside and Simon Fleming tasted defeat for the first time as did Pillar House's Sean Clift. Rising above the carnage was Duncan Elloy, now the division's only unbeaten player.

Whiteside was called in to help out Rayne's D team in division two the day before and responded by taking all three singles. Keith Martin matched him as Rayne beat Notley E 7-3.

Notley F recorded their first win in division three, a 6-4 triumph over Liberal B. Tony Bamsey, Keith Perrins and Simon Pohl all won two singles.

But Notley's G team could not follow suit. They recorded their third successive defeat, 6-4 at home to Nomads. Barrie Applegate was unbeaten for Nomads.

Pillar House B scored their first win in division four when they put eight past Notley I. Adam Clift and Matt Shelley were unbeaten.

In division one, Rayne A and Black Notley B fought out a draw in which Rayne's doubles win at 14-12 in the fifth game kept the visitors from victory. Andy Doshier won his three singles for Notley.

Bocking - inaccurately credited with a win over Cressing in this column last week (Cressing actually won 6-4) - were 7-3 winners over Rayne B.

Richard Jennings registered his first unbeaten evening of the season – but only just. His win over Brian Riedling was the season's closest so far – 19-17 in the fifth.

Braintree veterans A team got off to a sound start in the Essex League division one with a 7-2 victory over Southend A.

Steve Kerns won his two singles while Steve Pennell lost to Nigel Lamb and Peter Hayden surprisingly missed out against former Witham FC A player Chris Jacob, clearly as awkward as ever.

4.11.07 - After his epoch-ending win over Steve Kerns in the Braintree Table Tennis League, Peter Hayden's world was sent tumbling in his next match when he twice ended on the losing side.

A defeat by Steve Pennell was not entirely unexpected – the former men's singles champion has always caused him problems – but few people would have bet on Dean Andrews finding a way past him.

It was close but the Rayne A man wore him down eventually 5-11, 11-9, 12-10, 9-11, 11-9.

Pennell followed that with a win at 11-8 in the fifth while Andrews also added the scalp of Trevor Carter to leave Cressing with a 7-3 win.

That is not the kind of scoreline Cressing need if they are to prevent Black Notley A earning a swift return of the championship trophy they won in 2006.

Notley beat Rayne B 9-1 and have opened up a seven-point gap at the head of division one after the completion of the first round of matches.

Apart from three postponements, all teams have now played each other once in the four-part season so the league positions below begin to reflect the relative strengths of the teams.

And not only are Notley A well clear but Cressing are being challenged for second place by Bocking who had a 6-4 win over Notley B.

Liberal A remain clear in division two after their 9-1 win over Rayne D – Keith Martin's win over Frank Neill spoiling the clean sheet – while Notley D continue to outperform their own C team, proving that their higher placing is no fluke by beating them 7-3.

And this was despite Mark Lewis's first appearance for the C team this season. He found Larte Lawson too strong for him.

At the other end of the table, Notley E scored their first win of the season and jumped two places off the bottom as a result. With the help of three wins from Lyndon Griffiths, they overcame Rayne C 6-4.

Rayne E sneaked a point ahead of Pillar House A in division three after their 7-3 win over Nomads while Pillar House were beating Liberal B 6-4.

Pillar House might have taken top spot themselves had Sean Clift been in his usual commanding form. He missed out in the fifth game on all three occasions.

Notley's F and G teams proved there is no question over their ratings as the higher ranked side won 8-2. Tony Bamsey and Keith Perrins were undefeated.

Panfield and Notley H remained locked together at the head of division four after both won 7-3.

Panfield beat Notley I while Notley H overcame Rayne G, Keith Flowers depriving Charles Wilkinson of his unbeaten record in the process.

11.11.07 - Two more unbeaten records fell in the Braintree Table Tennis League last week, leaving no one undefeated in the top two divisions, an unusual situation at this early stage of the season.

Paul Davison, the first person to put a dent in town champion Peter Hayden's record, lost his own unbeaten tag to Black Notley A's Gary Young 12-10, 12-10, 7-11, 11-9.

It was an important win too as it gave Notley victory over Bocking by 6-4. Young won his other two sets as well.

Crossing crept two points closer at the top after an 8-2 win over Notley's B team, who had beaten them in the first match of the season, while Rayne A picked up a 9-1 victory over their own B team.

Mike Johnston was the man to lose his impregnability in division two. Notley C's Mark Lewis beat both him and Barry Pritchard but Robin Armstrong held firm to give Liberal A an 8-2 win.

Second-placed Notley D ensured the gap at the top grew no bigger by matching that score against their own E team.

At the other end of the table, Rayne's C and D teams shared the points for the second time this season. That reflected greater credit on the C team who had only Cec Butcher and Mo Hardy on duty. They won two each.

The gap also remained the same at the top of division three where both Rayne E and Pillar House A won 9-1, Rayne against Notley G and Pillar House against Notley's F team.

Following Tim Gowers and Peter Taylor, Rayne have persuaded another of their former players to pick up his bat again. Nick Hasler was back in the fray for the first time for some years and quickly got back in the groove with two wins.

It was Tony Bamsey who prevented Pillar House registering a maximum win with victory over Bob Keefe.

Liberal B registered their first win of the season, 7-3 over a two-person Nomads team. Diane Garner beat them both.

Black Notley H moved a point clear of Panfield at the top of division four after their 8-2 win over Notley I

Eighty-one-year-old Harold Jones's win over Terry Davies was a triumph of experience over youth: his opponent is all of eight years younger.

Panfield's Darrin Cann and Roy Dickson are at the other end of the scale in experience terms. Cann is in only his third season of competitive play while Dickson was playing league table tennis for only the second time when they faced Rayne G.

But Cann picked up two wins and Dickson got a tick in the win box for the first time as they helped their team to a 7-3 victory.

Pillar House B jumped over Rayne F into third spot by beating them 7-3. Both Matt Shelley and Adam Clift were unbeaten.

17.11.07 - Rayne E's position at the head of division three of the Braintree Table Tennis League owes much to their ability to cover for each other.

They seem to be able to take it in turns to be on form so that if wins do not come from one source they will come from another.

Their contrasting styles – the attack-minded Richard Whiteside, defensive Phil Wade and unorthodox Simon Fleming – mean that some opponents are more suited to them than others.

Their 8-2 win over Black Notley F was a case in point. Twice this season Wade has been the only one to lose a set. This time he was the only one not to.

And, typically, Whiteside and Fleming lost to different opponents.

It was Keith Perrins who got the better of Whiteside while Tony Bamsey found a way round Fleming, both in five games.

The result doubled their lead over Pillar House A to two points after Nomads took three sets from the Notley-based team.

Barrie Applegate won twice for Nomads but his 11-2, 11-4, 11-5 defeat by Duncan Elloy shows how far the Pillar House No.1 is ahead of his opponents in this division.

After failing to win any of their first four matches, Liberal B have jumped up to third place after a 10-0 victory over Black Notley G.

In division one, Cressing's 9-1 win over Rayne B moves them two places closer to the top after leaders Notley A were restricted to 7-3 by their own B team. Mark Lewis will be particularly pleased with his win over his father Ken.

In the battle between the third and fourth teams, Rayne A came off best 7-3 against Bocking.

Although Liberal A have dominated division two from the outset, they had not registered a 10-0 victory until last week. Notley E were the ones to suffer.

It took them three points further away from Notley D who beat Rayne C 7-3.

Thirteen-year-old Phillip Lawson, No.3 on the under 15 Essex ranking list, again outscored his father Larte. He won all three while the elder Lawson lost to Paul Wellington.

Rayne D could only muster two players, one of them playing up from division four, against Notley C. Keith Martin beat Rob Stannard but that was all.

Division four has broken into three segments. While Black Notley H and Panfield contest the top slot and Notley I and Rayne G fight with each other to avoid finishing bottom, Pillar House B and Rayne F continue to swap places in the middle.

The two middle teams were playing the top two last week. Panfield's 10-0 victory over Rayne F enabled them to make up the one point deficit on Notley H who beat Pillar House B 9-1.

Matt Shelley, beaten only once this season, was found wanting by both Keith Flowers and Peter Foster.

Things are no clearer at the bottom after the two teams anchored there shared the points. Mike Smith was unbeaten for Notley I.

25.11.07 - Perhaps the excitement will come in the semi finals.

There was very little to make the pulse race as the last eight teams in both the team knockout and the restricted knockout cups in the Braintree Table Tennis League met to contest the last four places.

The lack of shocks is no surprise as all eight matches featured a team playing one from a lower division. None of the higher placed sides experienced any difficulty.

League champions Cressing took all nine sets against Black Notley E while current league leaders Notley A were prevented from following suit only by a win for Mike Johnston over Graham Farmer.

Rayne A had to work harder against Notley C. They lost the first doubles then were taken to four games in each of the first three singles.

Mark Lewis then scored an excellent win over Steve Pennell before Steve Elmes ensured their passage through to the next round by beating Dacre Pell.

Notley B declared at 5-0 against Notley D in a match in which only the first doubles was stretched to five games.

In the restricted cup, Rayne E and Notley F also ended at 5-0, against Notley I and Rayne G respectively, while Nomads had a walkover from Notley H.

Pillar House A (with two B team players in the side) were the only team to concede more than two sets, but they had already secured a winning 5-1 lead before letting two more slip away against Rayne F.

Brothers Sean and Adam Clift were unbeaten.

In the league, two postponed matches have now been played to bring the fixtures almost up to date.

In division three, Liberal B beat Notley G 6-4. Clare Johnson scored a particularly good win over Diane Garner but Derek Finch remained unmoved.

In division four, Rayne F beat Pillar House B 7-3 to bring the two teams level in third place. Peter Taylor and Charles Wilkinson were unbeaten.

29.11.07 - Braintree veterans B team have taken place in one of the most remarkable games of table tennis ever seen in the area.

Of the ten sets played in their Essex League match against Burnham B, no fewer than seven went the full five games.

And two of the remaining three sets almost joined them. One was decided at 14-12 in the fourth game and the other at 12-10.

The other set also went to four and included two deuces, including a game that ended 19-17.

So out of a possible 50 sets, 47 were needed to arrive at the final result, a suitably tight 5-4 defeat.

Braintree's persistent and somewhat exhausted trio were Dean Andrews, Mike Johnston and Robin Armstrong.

Andrews won his two singles, 11-8, 11-3, 8-11, 14-12 against Pete Lazell and 11-13, 11-8, 11-6, 7-11, 11-9 against Ken James.

He and Armstrong took their doubles set 11-9 in the fifth while Armstrong and Johnston won theirs at 11-4 in the decider.

With the score at 4-4, the final doubles predictably went the full distance before Andrews and Johnston succumbed 11-6 to James and Lazell.

In the Braintree League division four Black Notley H put clear water between themselves and Panfield when they had a 10-0 win over Rayne G while Panfield were held to 7-3 by Pillar House B.

Third-placed Rayne F also registered a 10-0 scoreline, all in straight games, against Notley I, the first time the I team have lost by that score this season.

Division three leaders brought in reserve Ash White from division four for their match against Notley G and he played his part with a win over Adam Purslow in the 8-2 victory. Duncan Elloy and Sean Clift played a bigger part by taking all their sets.

Nomads sneaked a tight win against Notley F. They were 3-2 down but came back to win 6-4 despite three wins for Notley's Tony Bamsey.

9.12.07 - Just as Black Notley A appeared to be creeping their way to the Braintree Table Tennis League title, current champions Cressing have fought their way back into the race in the most emphatic fashion.

They crunched their rivals 8-2 in the second match between the two and now stand only six points adrift with a match in hand.

Cressing brought in Rik James for his first match of the season to join the formidable alliance of Peter and Ian Hayden, and the odds were further stacked against Notley when they took to the table without Steve Kerns.

In the circumstances a 10-0 result would not have been out of the question, but both Gary Young and Ken Lewis brought off good wins over Ian Hayden to keep themselves in the hunt.

After all, the two teams have to meet each other again twice.

Notley earlier had an 8-2 win over Rayne A in which Young and Kerns were unbeaten.

The middle of the table has been muddied further by Black Notley B's 6-4 win over Rayne A which leaves the two teams level on points.

Andrew McEwan illustrated his increasing stature with three wins. John Andrews, Jon Hill and Ian Whiteside never surrender lightly, as Andrews in particular demonstrated by overcoming Andy Doshier.

Notley B also beat Rayne B 9-1, but the division's bottom team went on to register their first win of the season after eight defeats. Bocking were the victims despite three wins from Richard Jennings.

The top two were pitched together in division two as well but in this case the leaders came out on top.

Liberal A were given a tough time of it though. Father and son Larte and Philip Lawson both scored excellent wins over Barry Pritchard and Robin Armstrong but Mike Johnston stood firm to give Liberal a 6-4 win.

Liberal also had a 10-0 win over Rayne C while Notley D were almost as dominant, beating Rayne's D team 9-1. Dave Punt's win over Tim Huxtable prevented the full house.

But Rayne C have at last picked up their first win of the season. Two wins each for Paul Wellington and Cec Butcher and one for Tony Hammond, plus the doubles, gave them a 6-4 victory over Notley C – despite the best efforts of Mark Lewis, who won his three singles for the visitors.

Rayne D have registered their second win, and like the first it came against Notley E. It was a tight affair, 6-4 to the home team with everyone winning at least one and losing at least one.

Notley E found their own C team a bit more of a handful. Only Lyndon Griffiths' win over Stevie Pell prevented all ten escaping.

16.12.07 - Having held the top spot in division three of the Braintree Table Tennis League since the first match of the season, Rayne E were unceremoniously bundled off it when they came up against second-placed Pillar House A for the second time.

The first match between the two teams had resulted in a draw. Not this time. This time Pillar House won 10-0.

There were two changes since the first encounter between the two teams. One was that Pillar House have re-signed former second division player Chris Ciniglio, on their books in the late 1990s. The second was that Sean Clift hit top form.

Clift won only once first time round but this time went through all three, dropping only one set in the process.

Ciniglio took his three singles and Duncan Elloy added his customary three to produce a result that leaves the Witham side in the driving seat for the second half of the season.

Liberal B remain in third place with their fourth win in a row – and this after failing to win any of their first four.

Their latest success was against Black Notley F, Diane Garner contributing three singles to the 7-3 scoreline.

Nomads, in fourth place, had to work hard for their 6-4 win over last-placed Notley G.

Barrie Applegate won his three singles but this included wins at 14-12 in the fifth game against Adam Purslow and 11-9 in the fifth against Steve Ascott.

The leading two in division four also came up against each other where Panfield's 8-2 win over Black Notley H turned a three-point deficit into a three-point lead.

Keith Flowers took the two for Notley, inflicting only the second defeat this season on both Nick Readhead and Danny Canning.

Rayne F are ten points behind Notley H after their 9-1 win over their own G team.

They were sailing along nicely until Jason Hearn spoiled things by winning the final set against Geoff Long.

Black Notley I, still without a win, stretched Pillar House B but in the end could do no better than a 6-4 defeat.

Mike Smith and Yen Tran won two singles each but Matt Shelley's unbeaten evening saw Pillar House home.

23.12.07 - After 27 sets unbeaten, Duncan Elloy has finally met his match in division three of the Braintree Table Tennis League.

The wily Diane Garner was the one to end his winning run – and she did it the hard way, coming back from two games down.

Elloy, who beat Garner earlier in the season, looked set to continue his run when he won the first two games 11-9, 11-4. But Garner dug in. The next three games were all tight, but she won them 11-9, 11-8, 11-8.

It was not quite enough for Liberal B to inflict defeat on Pillar House A, the division leaders, but it helped produce a close match which finished 6-4 in the Witham side's favour – but only after they had won two sets at 11-9 in the fifth.

Garner also beat Chris Ciniglio but lost out to Sean Clift. Clift in turn lost to Paul Lombardi who also beat Ciniglio.

Second-placed Rayne E closed the gap at the top by beating Nomads 9-1. Barrie Applegate's win over Phil Wade gave Nomads their single point.

Also in division three, Black Notley F beat their own G team 7-3, with the help of three singles from Tony Bamsey.

Division two leaders Liberal A were little troubled in their match against bottom team Rayne D. Dave Punt beat Frank Neill but Liberal won the rest.

The Black Notley club were uncertain at the beginning of the season which way round to rate their third and fourth teams. And further proof that they got it wrong came with the D team's 8-2 victory over the C team which leaves them comfortably in second place.

Rob Stannard won two for the C team and almost made it three when he took Larte Lawson to 12-10 in the fifth.

Notley E won for only the second time this season, and like the first it was against Rayne C. Cec Butcher won twice in Rayne's 8-2 defeat but was unable to overcome Simon Churchman.

After nine successive wins, division four leaders Panfield were held to a draw by Black Notley I, a team who have yet to win.

The result was not such a surprise as Panfield fielded their two less experienced players, Darrin Cann and Roy Dickson. They both beat Tony Murray but Yen Tran and Mike Smith took two each as well as the doubles.

Notley H missed the chance to go back to the top when they dropped four points against Rayne F.

Newton's law of table tennis – what goes up must come down – is alive and well in the Braintree League.

Rayne B went up to division one last year and barring a miracle will come back down again while Liberal A, comfortably relegated last season, are heading back in the opposite direction.

Liberal - Robin Armstrong, Mike Johnston, Frank Neill and Barry Pritchard - are the only team throughout the four divisions to have won every match, although they have been stretched twice to 6-4, once by Black Notley D and once by Rayne C.

Notley D had the misfortune to have only two players in their first meeting with the leaders otherwise they might have been closer. As it is, they are well clear of their C team and should hold on to second place.

Larte Lawson as expected has been their mainstay but it is his son Philip who has been the revelation of the season, beaten only three times out of 24 so far, an excellent record at that level for a 13-year-old.

For most of the season division three was a much closer race – until, that is, Pillar House A thumped second-placed Rayne E 10-0.

That should be enough to keep their noses in front, especially with the re-signing of Chris Ciniglio. Rayne have a match in hand, but that is against the never easy Liberal B, and will need a very consistent run in the second half of the season if they are to climb back to the top.

Division four is the closest of the three lower divisions with only two points separating the top two.

Panfield's leading three players have dropped only four sets between them but their policy of bleeding inexperienced players has kept them within distance of second-placed Notley H.

Their 8-2 win over Notley H and subsequent draw with second-bottom Notley I neatly illustrates their two faces.

In what must be a unique occurrence, the Braintree Table Tennis League's two cup competitions were both decided in the fifth game of the final set. And for good measure so was one of the semi finals.

At the end of a tough week, it was the cup holders Cressing who emerged with the team knockout trophy. But they could not have expected such a journey to get there.

In the semi final against old rivals Black Notley A, they surged into a 4-0 lead in the best-of-nine competition and must have been expecting an early finish.

But Notley were not going to give up the fight that easily. They won the next doubles and then against the odds won all three return singles.

Ian Brown scored an unexpected win over Ian Hayden, then Ken Lewis overcame Trevor Carter – victor over Brown earlier – at 11-7 in the fifth game and in a major upset Gary Young overcame men's singles champion Peter Hayden 8-11, 11-8, 11-8, 8-11, 11-8.

Things looked bleak for the holders when Lewis and Brown moved into a 2-0 lead in the final doubles against Carter and Ian Hayden. But the Cressing pair just held on to win the third game 11-9, then took the final two 11-7 to claw their way into the final.

It was there that they met Rayne A, currently fourth in division one and beaten twice by Cressing in the league.

A straightforward victory looked on the cards. That was not how Rayne saw it.

The match started as expected with Cressing easing into a 2-0 lead before Jon Hill upset the form book with a win over Ian Hayden.

A win for Peter Hayden over Dean Andrews restored Cressing's two-set lead but then Rayne struck back.

First Hill and Steve Pennell got the better of Peter Hayden and Trevor Carter at 11-8 in the fifth game and then Pennell, lacklustre against Carter earlier, upped his game several notches to get the better of Ian Hayden in another set that went the full distance – 12-10 in the fifth.

Andrews then overcame Carter and suddenly Rayne were in front and scenting victory.

Peter Hayden brought them down to earth with a comfortable win over Hill and the stage was set for the final doubles.

In keeping with the rest of the match, this went the full distance and at two games each (11-8, 8-11, 12-14, 14-12) it was anybody's cup. But Carter and Ian Hayden settled in the final game and an 11-4 win kept the cup on their shelf for another year.

In the other cup competition, for teams in divisions three and four, the tightness of the final was even less expected.

The match featured the top two teams in division three, Pillar House A and Rayne E, who had met in the league only a couple of weeks earlier when Pillar House had stormed to a 10-0 victory.

With the same six players on view, a similar outcome might have been expected in the cup final. But the 'magic of the cup' is not reserved for football. Rayne E almost brought off a stunning victory.

The match followed an almost identical path to the main final. The favourites, Pillar House, looked like sealing victory early on as they moved into a 3-0 lead. But then they hit the buffers.

Rayne took the next four - they won the middle doubles, Phil Wade beat Sean Clift, and Simon Fleming and Richard Whiteside both got the better of Chris Ciniglio - to put themselves into a conceivable appplecart-upsetting position.

Duncan Elloy then beat Fleming to level proceedings but Rayne refused to lie down.

They took the first game of the final doubles, levelled again after Pillar House had taken the next two, and finally succumbed at 11-9 in the fifth.

So the trophies ended up when they were expected to go, but not in the way they were expected to get there.

Ron Fosker

20.1.08

table tennis

It is fair to say that Ray Fairless's best table tennis days are behind him.

A former first division player and three times runner-up in the veterans' singles, he continues to play regularly but recently wins have eluded him. He did not win any of the 15 sets he played during 2007.

As the oldest player in the top three divisions – he is now 78 - there was no disgrace in that.

So it was a surprise of the first order when he picked up his bat for the first time in 2008 – and promptly won all three singles.

Not only that but he out-performed his two teammates in Liberal B's 8-2 win over Nomads in division three of the Braintree Table Tennis League.

Diane Garner, seventh in the division's individual averages, lost to Barrie Applegate and Derek Finch succumbed to Arthur Wilson.

But Fairless beat them both, as well as Lorraine Burgess.

He proved his fitness too, fighting out tense five-game battles to win his first two singles before coasting home in straight games in the final one.

At the top of the division Pillar House A coasted to a 10-0 victory over a two-man Black Notley F.

In division four, Notley H caught up with Panfield at the top. Notley beat their own I team 10-0 while Panfield dropped two points in beating Rayne G.

Braintree's veterans' team have put themselves in a reasonable position for a tilt at the title in the Essex League division one.

They had a solid 7-2 win last week over Harlow with two wins each for Ian Brown and Steve Kerns, plus three doubles wins.

They had earlier lost 6-3 to a strong Ilford side but Ilford's 6-3 win over Southend was turned into a 3-6 defeat as they played their team out of order.

The three sets Braintree picked up in that match – a singles win for Kerns plus two doubles - mean that strong performances in their remaining matches could put them in a strong position.

Ron Fosker

27.1.08

table tennis

The first round of the handicap knock out cup in the Braintree Table Tennis League produced a series of matches that could hardly have been closer.

Of the six matches played, five were decided at 5-4, and in four of those cases the team that won had to come from behind to do so.

Perhaps the most exciting match was league champions Cressing's win over Black Notley C.

Not only did Cressing come back from 4-2 down, but in the final set, Ian Hayden, playing off -5, trailed Rob Stannard (+4) 10-2 in the final game.

Yet he won the next ten points for an improbable victory that took his team through to the next round.

But it was an incident earlier that effectively tilted the match Cressing's way.

In the first set of the evening, Hayden was trailing Mark Lewis 10-4 in the final game and hit a ball that both he and the umpire were convinced had missed the table.

He prepared to shake hands, but Lewis pointed out that the ball had just snicked his end of the table. Hayden then won the next seven points to take the set.

‘It was a very sporting gesture,’ said Cressing captain Peter Hayden afterwards. ‘But for that we’d have been dead and buried by halfway.’

The Haydens won two singles each with sister Lisa Ashdown picking up the other one.

Another match that went to the wire was Rayne G’s win over Panfield. They came back from 4-3 down and in the final set Jason Hearn (+1) just held on to beat Roy Dickson (-2) 11-9 in the fifth. It was Hearn’s third victory of the evening.

Second division leaders Liberal A were another team to come back from 4-2 down against Rayne E. Mike Johnston (two wins), Robin Armstrong (two) and Frank Neill (one) clawed their way back to take them through to the next round.

Rayne C were also 4-2 down against Nomads. But they settled down to win the final three sets in straight games. Tony Hammond (two wins), Mo Hardy (two) and Paul Wellington (one – at 4-4, when it mattered) gave them the win.

Notley G were pulled back from 3-1 up to 4-4 before taking the final set to get through against their own E team. Five of the nine sets went to five games and the other four to four. The E team’s Lyndon Griffiths (-4) went into the final set of the evening unbeaten but Steve Willis (+2) got the better of him by the slightly curious scores of 11-8, 9-11, 11-0, 11-8.

Breaking the trend of 5-4 results, Notley H registered a 6-3 victory over Pillar House B in the other match. Keith Flowers won his three singles for Notley.

In the league programme, Cressing cut Black Notley A’s lead to one point at the top of the first division.

Cressing had a 7-3 win over Notley B, who had beaten them in the first match of the season, while Notley beat Bocking 6-4.

In the first match, four sets went the full distance, and Cressing won them all. Peter Hayden was unbeaten but was stretched all the way by 17-year-old Andrew McEwan who surrendered only at 11-9 in the fifth.

Kevin Gowlett was the thorn in Notley’s flesh. He took all three singles in straight games, 11-3, 12-10, 11-8 against Ken Lewis, 11-5, 11-3, 11-9 against Ian Brown and 11-8, 11-9, 11-4 against Graham Farmer.

Gowlett also won his three in Bocking’s draw with Rayne A who went on to beat their own B team 9-1 though not before Paul Mitchell had scored his first ever win over Jon Hill.

The last remaining 100 per cent win record in the Braintree Table Tennis League has tumbled.

After winning all ten matches in the first half of the season, Liberal A were not able to carry that form into 2008.

Surprisingly it was not, as might have been expected, their closest rivals Black Notley D who held them to a draw, but Notley C, the team in third place, 12 points behind their clubmates at the turn of the year.

Nor was it a weakened Liberal side. Both Mike Johnston, beaten only once before, and Barry Pritchard, with five defeats behind him, were there.

The telling factor was a sparkling display from Mark Lewis. After losing a singles in each of his first two matches, Lewis has remained undefeated since, and he kept up that record by taking all three off the league leaders.

Rob Stannard chimed in with a victory over Frank Neill and the two combined to win the doubles to earn a share of the points.

And it was so nearly Liberal's first defeat as Johnson found himself in all sorts of trouble against 15-year-old Stevie Pell.

Pell took the first two games, narrowly lost at 12-10 in the next, then took it all the way to 12-10 again in the fifth.

In their next two matches Liberal showed why they are where they are by beating both Notley E and Rayne C 10-0.

Notley D remain some distance behind the leaders after a 6-4 win over their own E team. Keith Flowers was asked to step up two divisions when he was called in as a reserve and responded excellently by taking two singles.

Pillar House A continue to show they mean business at the top of division three: they were merciless in demolishing Nomads 10-0.

Rayne E kept vaguely within touching distance with two convincing wins of their own, 9-1 over Black Notley G and 8-2 against Notley F.

Notley G also found Liberal B too strong. Paul Lombardi and Diane Garner were unbeaten in Liberal's 8-2 victory.

Down in Gore Road, something stirs.

Dormant for much of the first half of the season in the Braintree Table Tennis League, Rayne D have suddenly woken up.

They were bottom of the division two table going into the new year, but two wins in two matches have jumped them up two places.

A win over their own C team, with whom they drew twice in the first half, was not a total surprise, but their victory over Black Notley C, who had beaten them 9-1 and 10-0, certainly was.

The most notable feature of the win against the C team was that Dave Punt made a minimal contribution. Normally their most reliable player, Punt had an off day and won only one singles.

Instead it was Keith Martin – nine wins in 26 sets up to that point - and Alastair Brown – who had won only two out of 23 – who rose to the occasion. Both won their three sets to give their team a 7-3 victory.

That scoreline was repeated the following week against third-placed Notley C, and this time the normal order was resumed. Punt won his three and Martin and Brown two each.

Against a team of Dacre Pell, Rob Stannard and Stevie Pell, that was a sizeable achievement.

Punt also played up for the C team and was the only one to make a mark against Notley D. He won two singles and shared in the doubles win with Tony Hammond.

Black Notley H have pulled out a lead at the top of division four. They beat Pillar House B 9-1 while Panfield were held to a draw by Rayne F.

It was a first class performance from Charles Wilkinson that led to Rayne sharing the points. He had comfortable wins over both Nick Readhead and Danny Canning, both beaten only twice up to that point.

He was also unbeaten in Rayne's 7-3 win over Pillar House B and their 10-0 win over Notley I.

At the wrong end of the table Notley I recorded their first win. Three wins from Mike Smith and two from Yen Tran enabled them to overcome Rayne G 6-4.

Kevin Gowlett firmly imprinted his name on the list of possible Braintree Table Tennis League men's singles winners when he ran through the entire Hayden family.

The Bocking man appears to be running into form at the right time for the championships, which begin on March 7. This was his third consecutive unbeaten evening following successes over second-placed Black Notley A and former champions Rayne A.

Only last year's men's winner Peter Hayden stretched him beyond three games in the encounter with Cressing, the current champions.

Gowlett just held on in each of the last three games after losing the first two to win 8-11, 5-11, 11-9, 14-12, 11-8.

Against Lisa Ashdown it was 11-9, 11-7, 15-13 and against Ian Hayden 11-2, 11-7, 13-11.

They represented Bocking's only successes in the match, however, and a further 9-1 win over Rayne B enabled Cressing to stay clear of Notley, who won 8-2 against Rayne A.

In division two, father-and-son duo Larte and Philip Lawson took all the points in Notley D's 7-3 win over Rayne D.

Pillar House A are beginning to stretch their legs at the top of division three. They have now won all three games in the second half of the season by 10-0 after their latest win over Notley G.

Second-placed Rayne E slipped further back after they were held to a draw by the mercurial Liberal B.

Liberal's players take it in turns to sparkle. It was Diane Garner who captured the headlines earlier in the season by becoming the only person so far to beat Duncan Elloy, but on this occasion she missed out.

Instead the outstanding performance came from evergreen Derek Finch, who first played in the league more than 50 years ago. He was stretched to five games three times, but three times he came out on top.

Paul Lombardi added two more, including a fighting 11-13, 9-11, 11-5, 14-12, 11-9 against Simon Fleming.

Nomads and Notley F are sitting in the no man's land of the division, well clear of relegation but unlikely to challenge for third place. They fought out their own battle which ended with Nomads sneaking a 6-4 win after being 4-2 down.

Barrie Applegate and Lorraine Burgess won two each for Nomads while Tony Bamsey and Keith Perrins replied similarly for Notley.

In division four, Notley H strengthened their claims to the title with a 9-1 win over bottom team Rayne G. Barry Mouser got the better of Bruce Wickham, but the rest flowed in Notley's direction.

Ron Fosker

24.2.08

table tennis

Two unbeaten records tumbled in the Braintree Table Tennis League as both Liberal A in division two and division four Panfield tasted defeat for the first time.

Liberal, with a strong side of Mike Johnston, Barry Pritchard and Robin Armstrong, ran into the double battering ram of Larte and Philip Lawson at Black Notley D.

Both ran through all three of the opposition and with Gordon Fairchild registering a good win over Armstrong, Liberal went away 7-3 worse off.

At the other end of the table, Notley E and Rayne C are locked together on 47 points from 15 matches after the match between the two teams ended 6-4 in Rayne's favour.

Paul Wellington was unbeaten for Rayne.

Rayne had earlier lost 8-2 to Notley C while Notley E went down 6-4 to Rayne D for whom Keith Martin was unbeaten.

Notley C also beat Notley E 7-3 and sadly were the first side this season to fall foul of the seven-days rule for sending in scorecards.

Panfield's defeat in division four came at the hands of Pillar House B. Neither Nick Readhead nor Danny Canning was in action and Pillar House took full advantage to register a 7-3 victory. Derek Agent, Adam Clift and Dan Tordoff all won twice.

It left Panfield further behind leaders Notley H but they clawed back a small amount of ground by beating their rivals 6-4 where Keith Flowers took away Ron Fosker's unbeaten record.

Notley H had their work cut out in their following match against third-placed Rayne F who held them to a draw.

Rayne F also beat their own G team 8-2.

The top match of the week in division three illustrated perfectly the vagaries of table tennis.

When they last met Pillar House A crushed Rayne E 10-0. This time, with the same six players in action, the result was a draw. And Pillar House needed to win the doubles to stay afloat.

Duncan Elloy won his usual three singles but Richard Whiteside and Phil Wade both beat Sean Clift, and Chris Ciniglio, with seven wins out of nine behind him, drew a complete blank.

It was Paul Lombardi's turn to shine for Liberal B this week. He took his three singles and shared in the doubles win to help overcome Notley F 6-4.

Kevin Saunders made his first appearance of the season for Nomads against Notley G. The doubles was the only set to slip away as Nomads won 9-1.

And Gary Young has added his name to the list of contenders for this year's men's singles title. Just a week after Kevin Gowlett ran through the entire Crossing team in division one, Young followed suit.

They were vital sets too as they helped Black Notley A close the gap on the champions with a 6-4 win.

It leaves much to be played for in the final quarter of the season.

Ron Fosker

02.03.08

table tennis

The Braintree Table Tennis League handicap cup lived up to its reputation by producing another set of tight results in the second round.

While it could not match the excitement of the first round when four of the five matches finished 5-4, it came pretty close – two 5-4s, two 6-3s and an 8-1 plus three walkovers.

And it will be a wide spread of teams that line up in the quarter final, two from the first division, one from the second, three from the third and two from the fourth.

The closest tie in the second round was fourth division Black Notley H's excellent comeback to remove Rayne D from division two. They were 3-0 down and then 4-3 down before winning the final two sets to go through.

Keith Flowers and Peter Foster won two sets each and Bruce Wickham one. Particularly notable was Flowers' win over Alastair Brown which was played off scratch.

Rayne B's match with Liberal A mirrored the Notley H-Rayne D match precisely for the first eight sets – 3-0, 3-3, 4-3, 4-4. The vital difference was that this time the team that had led 3-0, Rayne B, got the decisive ninth set.

Brian Riedling and Peter Hance won two each for Rayne, Riedling (off +1) taking the vital final set against Mike Johnston (-3) 12-10, 11-5, 11-6.

Virtually the whole of the league separated the two teams in the Cressing-Notley I clash and it was the division one leaders who came out 6-3 better off against the team second from bottom of division four.

With handicaps up to +8 against -9, Cressing's team climbed several mountains before they emerged successful. Peter Hayden was unbeaten for the winners while Tony Murray, who has had a barren season so far, finally got off the mark with two wins.

Rayne G could only muster two players for their match against their own F team. They shared the six sets played but the three claimed sets cost them the match.

Jason Hearn won two and Barry Mouser one but it was Peter Taylor's wins over both of them (off +3 v -5 against Hearn) that effectively settled the tie.

Rayne C also had only two players for their match with Notley G but they were able to make less of a game of it, winning only one (Cec Butcher over Steve Willis). Adam Purslow and Steve Ascott remained unbeaten for Notley G.

Pillar House A, Notley D and Notley F had walkovers into the next round when their opponents were unable to raise a side.

The league's individual championships take place this weekend with finals night the following Thursday (March 13) at Black Notley Community Association.

Peter Hayden and Steve Kerns, who have both won the title three times, are seeded to battle it out in the final but there are plenty of others in the wings who may take advantage of any slip-up.

Hayden has been particularly vulnerable this year with defeats by Paul Davison, Kevin Gowlett, Gary Young, Dean Andrews and Steve Pennell. But he has shown in the past that he is at his best when the chips are down.

Kerns has lost only once – to Hayden – and will be hoping someone finds the chink in his rival's armour somewhere before the final.

Davison and the in-form Gowlett – runners-up in 2006 – are the No.3 seeds with Young, Andy Doshier, Ian Hayden and Ken Lewis at equal five.

The Haydens are seeded to retain their men's doubles title with Davison and Gowlett, last year's runners-up at No.2. Kerns and Brad Hudgell, and Doshier and Andrew McEwan may give them something to think about in the semi finals.

The restricted singles, as is often the case, could be the tightest event, with the top four seeds, Mark Lewis, Philip Lawson, Mike Johnston and Barry Pritchard all looking fairly evenly matched.

Seventeen-year-olds Brad Hudgell and Andrew McEwan demonstrated their increasing stature by making their mark at the Braintree Table Tennis League individual preliminary events at the weekend.

Hudgell won the major plaudits for beating two seeds in the men's singles while McEwan and his partner Andy Doshier upset predictions by knocking the holders and No.1 seeds Ian and Peter Hayden out of the men's doubles.

Hudgell's excellent win in the group stage over No.3 seed Paul Davison upset the order of things in the men's singles.

It meant that he was protected from meeting a seeded player in the second round while Davison was called upon to face Gary Young, the equal No.5 seed.

But fired up by his earlier reverse, Davison was in determined mood, removed Young and went on to put out his Bocking teammate and fellow No.3 seed Kevin Gowlett in the quarter final.

Hudgell meanwhile beat Ian Whiteside then came from two games down to conquer last year's runner-up Ian Hayden.

At finals night tomorrow (Thursday), Hudgell will be faced with the even sterner task of a semi final meeting with former champion Steve Kerns who had earlier been severely tested by McEwan before coming through 7-11, 11-8, 11-7, 12-10.

Kerns booked his semi final place with a quarter final win over Ken Lewis.

Davison will face champion Peter Hayden who had a comfortable win over Andy Doshier in his quarter final.

Doshier and McEwan's win over the Haydens (11-5, 3-11, 14-12, 12-10) earned them a place in the final against Davison and Gowlett, winners over Young and Lewis who were themselves stretched to 11-9 in the fifth game by Kerns and Hudgell in the second round.

If Hayden and Kerns make it through to the men's final it will be a repeat of the veterans' singles which will be played earlier in the evening.

Kerns put out the older Hayden in the semi final while Peter Hayden again met Doshier and again dealt with him in straight games.

The men's doubles will be McEwan's fourth appearance on finals night. He is through to the junior singles, where he faces Philip Lawson, the division one singles,

which will be against Lewis, and the junior doubles where he and Lawson take on Stevie Pell and Adam Pitt.

Lawson is in action three times as he also won his way through to the restricted singles final with a semi final win over Duncan Elloy.

He faces No.1 seed Mark Lewis who needed five games to come past Mike Johnston.

The division three singles between Stuart Ascott and Chris Ciniglio will also be played on finals night but the other two divisional events were settled at the weekend.

Johnston beat Robin Armstrong in the division two final while in the division four singles Peter Foster saved four match points before coming past Adam Clift 11-6, 9-11, 8-11, 14-12, 11-8.

Three other events were also decided at the weekend.

The over 50s singles was won by Ken Lewis, the holder, over Ian Whiteside, while the consolation singles was won by Larte Lawson. He had a win in the final over Keith Martin who had earlier scored an excellent win over first division player Laurie Sapiano.

The handicap singles as usual produced some of the more interesting matches before the trophy ended up with Duncan Elloy. He had a comfortable win over Mark Lewis in the final but was stretched considerably further by Trevor Carter in the semi final before emerging 11-3, 12-10, 9-11, 7-11, 13-11.

Ron Fosker

16.3.08

table tennis

When Paul Davison won the Braintree Table Tennis League cadets' singles at the age of 12 in 1989, there was a general assumption that he would one day lift the men's singles.

It took him 19 years, but at the league's finals night on Thursday he finally achieved his ambition.

He hit the top of his game to come past not only defending champion but also past Brad Hudgell, who had beaten him in the group stages of the competition.

With a fast game of quick loops and a forceful backhand, Davison had just a little too much for 17-year-old Hudgell who ended the set looking deflated but had contributed much to the championships.

After beating Davison and putting out last year's runner-up Ian Hayden at the preliminary weekend, he went one better in the semi final to overcome former champion Steve Kerns.

Hudgell settled straight away against his more experienced opponent whose form was back to the bad old days when nerves got the better of his finals night appearances. He has won the title the last three times he has entered but there seldom looked like a repeat this year as Hudgell bludgeoned his way through 11-4, 11-8, 11-9.

Davison meanwhile took on Hayden at his own game, using his speed over the table to unsettle an opponent hampered by an arm injury. He grew more aggressive and more confident as the semi final progressed and then took that approach into the final.

Again he got better as the match wore on and after four semi final appearances, marked his first appearance in the final by lifting the trophy.

The semi finals, the opening matches of the programme, set the tone for the evening in which five of the ten matches on view went against expectations – and two that went to form did so only after five-game battles.

Andrew McEwan was responsible for two of the upsets, but then found himself on the wrong end of the other.

He played an excellent patient controlled game to beat the holder Ken Lewis in the division one final. He never allowed his opponent's steady defence or his odd bat surfaces to disturb his concentration and ran out a comfortable straight-games winner.

In the men's doubles he and Andy Doshier, having already dispatched the holders and No.1 seeds Peter and Ian Hayden, proceeded to put out the No.2 seeds as well.

Davison and Kevin Gowlett had lost in the final for the past two years but looked on course to end that sequence when they took the first game.

They then went 2-1 down but equalised to take the game to a fifth end where they again came back, this time from 5-1 to 6-6. But the Notley B pair dug in and just held out to take the title at 11-9.

With those victories and a comfortable win with Philip Lawson in the junior doubles over Stevie Pell and Adam Pitt, McEwan took to the table for the fourth time in the evening as favourite to add the junior singles to the list.

But 13-year-old Lawson had other ideas. He had made his mark earlier in the evening with an excellent display against the defensive skills of Mark Lewis in the restricted singles before Lewis eventually wore him down to win in five games.

Fired up by that, he took the game to McEwan in the junior singles and stormed through the first end 11-2.

It looked as if normal service had been resumed when McEwan, in his final season as a junior, took the next two games, but Lawson stormed back. With a fast strong attack on both wings and an admirable temperament, he held on to take the last two games and become one of the youngest winners of the title.

It also took the veterans five games to sort out their differences. After their men's singles semi final disappointments Peter Hayden and Steve Kerns had something to prove and both raised their game to produce the tightest set of the evening.

Hayden used his quick pick-ups over the table to send his opponent scurrying all over the court – not a strategy he himself favours – but Kerns had rediscovered some of his lost fire and gave as good as he got.

Kerns had match points in both the fourth and fifth game but it was Hayden who edged it at 12-10 in the fifth.

Chris Ciniglio needed only three games to stamp his authority on the division three final. He was far steadier than Stuart Ascott who pulled off some excellent big shots but it was the looser ones he mixed in as well that cost him too many points.

Results:

Men's singles: Final: Paul Davison beat Brad Hudgell 11-9, 11-9, 11-4. Semi finals: Davison beat Peter Hayden 11-7, 8-11, 11-6, 11-4; Hudgell beat Steve Kerns 11-4, 11-8, 11-9.

Men's doubles: Andy Doshier and Andrew McEwan beat Davison and Kevin Gowlett 5-11, 11-3, 11-8, 7-11, 11-9.

Veterans' singles: Hayden beat Kerns 11-9, 7-11, 10-12, 12-10, 12-10.

Junior singles: Philip Lawson beat McEwan 11-2, 7-11, 9-11, 11-6, 11-7.

Junior doubles: Lawson and McEwan beat Stevie Pell and Adam Pitt 11-7, 11-2, 11-3.

Restricted singles: Mark Lewis beat Lawson 11-9, 6-11, 15-13, 8-11, 11-4.

Division 1 singles: McEwan beat Ken Lewis 11-9, 11-7, 11-9.

Division 3 singles: Chris Ciniglio beat Stuart Ascott 11-7, 11-8, 11-9.

Umpires were Arthur Clark and Ryan Pitt and trophies were presented by league president Len Woolmer.

Ron Fosker

23.3.08

table tennis

The Braintree Table Tennis League's most exciting title race for many years was due to reach its crunch point last night (Tuesday) when the top two teams met head on.

The top two, champions Cressing and 2006 winners Black Notley A, are divided by a whisker.

With one match each left after they play each other, Notley have 123 points and Cressing 122.

Notley's last match is against Rayne B, whom Cressing have just beaten 9-1 and Cressing's last one is against Rayne A, whom Notley have just beaten 9-1.

The match between the two, as has looked possible all season, should therefore decide the destination of the title.

The two contenders' passage to this stage has been rather less smooth than their victories over the two Rayne teams.

The title appeared to be moving slowly towards Cressing after they recorded wins of 8-2 over Rayne A, 8-2 against Notley B and 9-1 against Rayne B.

Notley meanwhile fell into something of a trough.

After a 9-1 win over Rayne B (yes, everyone beats Rayne B 9-1 – it's been the score in 10 of their last 11 fixtures), Notley had a 7-3 win over their B team in a rearranged fixture, but were held to a draw in a second match against their B team and by Bocking.

It could have been worse against Bocking. Kevin Gowlett won his three singles but Paul Davison, who had won both his, had another engagement and had to leave before completing the match. He therefore conceded his final set and could not play in the doubles.

A strong team performance denied them a win against their own B team. Gary Young won three for the A team but two from Andy Doshier and one each from Andrew McEwan and Greg Green, plus a McEwan/Green doubles win levelled the scores.

Then it was Cressing's turn to face Bocking. The home side were without Davison this time so even in the absence of Peter Hayden, still troubled by the tennis elbow that restricted his performance in the individual tournament, should not have debilitated them over much.

But they reckoned without a strong performance from Richard Jennings who scored excellent wins over both Trevor Carter and Lisa Ashdown. With Gowlett again remaining unbeaten and joining with Jennings to take the doubles, Cressing suffered their third defeat of the season.

Notley's 9-1 victory over Rayne A later in the week – they lost only the doubles – gave them the one-point advantage that they took into last night's match.

In the race for third place, which could still go one of three ways, Notley B beat Rayne A 6-4 but were held to a draw by Bocking while Rayne A had the regulation 9-1 win over Rayne B.

Green won his three singles to steer Notley B to victory over Rayne while in the Notley B-Bocking clash, the most notable result was a victory in the doubles for Paul Davison and David Edwards over Andy Doshier and Andrew McEwan, crowned only a short while later as the league's men's doubles champions.

Ron Fosker

30.3.08

table tennis

Liberal A and Pillar House A have clinched the division two and three titles in the Braintree Table Tennis League.

With two matches each to play, neither Black Notley D in division two nor Rayne E in division three can now catch them.

Liberal's wins in the run-in came against Rayne D (9-1), Notley C (7-3), Notley E (10-0) and they wrapped it up with a 7-3 win over Rayne C.

Rayne C threatened to upset the natural order by winning the first two sets in the final match, excellent wins for Cec Butcher over Barry Pritchard and Tony Hammond over Robin Armstrong.

But Liberal settled down thereafter and make a quick return to the top division they fell out of last year.

Pillar House were put down to division three after losing all but Duncan Elloy from their A team and it has been Elloy who has led them back up again.

He took his three sets for the 18th time out of 19 to lead his team to a 6-4 win over their only serious rivals Rayne E.

Adam Clift was called upon to play up from division four and played his part with a good win over Simon Fleming.

Earlier Pillar House had beaten Liberal B and Notley F both 9-1, and Nomads and Notley G 10-0.

In division two, Notley D's challenge faded when they fell 6-4 to their C team thanks largely to an outstanding performance from Stevie Pell.

Wins over both the Lawsons were out of the top drawer although she almost blotted her copybook against the lesser sung Gordon Fairchild, winning a marathon 16-14, 8-11, 10-12, 13-11, 14-12.

Notley D were also held to a draw by both the bottom two teams, Rayne C and Notley E.

Rayne C have had something of a resurgence. In addition to gaining an unlikely three points from Liberal and five from Notley D, they also scored successive 6-4 wins over Notley E and Rayne D to lift them off the bottom.

Hammond was particularly impressive against Rayne D where he won his three singles for the first time this season.

Rayne D, not entirely out of the relegation picture, picked up five points from Notley C thanks to three wins from Dave Punt and two from Keith Martin.

It was Notley G who produced the shock result in division three. After 14 successive defeats, they all clicked against Notley F and stormed to an 8-2 win.

Adam Purslow led the way with his three singles while Clare Johnson and Steve Willis notched up two each.

But they remain rooted to the bottom after defeats by 8-2 at Rayne E and 10-0 at home to Liberal B.

Rayne E had two wins and a draw in addition to their defeat by Pillar House. They beat Liberal B 7-3 and Notley F 9-1 but were held by Nomads where Kevin Saunders' three sets illustrated he is still a force to be reckoned with even though his bat comes out of its cover rarely these days.

- Eighteen-year-old Sarra Wang, the former Braintree League player who still lives in the town, put up the best performance of her career when she reached the semi final of the women's singles at the English National Championships on Sunday.

She scored an excellent win over the England No.5 Lindsay Reynolds 12-10, 6-11, 8-11, 13-11, 11-4, 11-3 before losing to the country's No.2 Joanna Parker.

Ron Fosker

6.4.08

table tennis

Black Notley H are the new champions of division four of the Braintree Table Tennis League.

Despite having two matches still to play they have secured enough points in a strong run-in to keep their challengers at bay.

Most vital was their victory over Panfield who had won their previous three encounters.

Panfield had two-thirds of their good team on view but for the first time Keith Flowers went through all of them.

Danny Canning, who beat him last time, went down 7-11, 11-7, 17-15, 11-6 while Nick Readhead also lost in four games, 11-8, 11-9, 10-12, 11-9.

Peter Foster and Bruce Wickham both got the better of Darrin Cann and Flowers and Wickham crucially overcame Readhead and Canning in another tight four-game set in the doubles.

But for Notley H it is a success tinged with sadness. One of the winners' medals belongs to Terry Davies who died in February. He played in five of the first six matches before becoming ill.

Rayne F, who play Notley H this week, and Panfield continue to fight out for the runners-up spot.

Rayne's 8-2 win over Panfield – a particularly good win here for Tim Gowers over Canning – appeared to put them in the driving seat, but they then had an unexpected stumble against Pillar House B.

It was a match that defied most predictions. A 3-0 defeat for Charles Wilkinson at the hands of Adam Clift in the first set of the evening was straight off the unscheduled pile, as was Gowers' defeat by Derek Agent in set 3.

Sandwiched in between was probably the greatest surprise of the night, a win for Geoff Long, who has enjoyed blank evenings against all but the bottom two teams, over Matt Shelley, normally Pillar House's banker.

It did not inspire Rayne to a recovery, however. Clift won all three and Agent and Shelley took two each to lead Pillar House to a 7-3 victory.

There were a few firsts at the other end of the table.

Evergreen Tony Murray registered his first win of the season in Notley I's draw with Panfield while the even more venerable Harold Jones took all three for the first time this season in the I team's 7-3 win over Rayne G.

It was that match that also marked the first win of his league career for Niall Campbell.

In Rayne G's 7-3 defeat by Panfield it was Ian Rubens' turn to make his mark, scoring two victories in an evening for the first time.

Ron Fosker

14.4.08

table tennis

Rayne B and Black Notley G have battled their way through to the final of the Braintree Table Tennis League handicap cup, one comfortably, the other less so.

Rayne B had little difficulty dismissing Notley D 5-0 in their semi final, but the competition kept up its reputation for tight matches when the other semi final went the distance.

Notley G and Rayne F reached 4-4 and Steve Willis and Charles Wilkinson then reached 2-2. It was Willis who held his nerve in the final game to put his side through to the final with an 11-8 win.

Geoff Long had done his bit for Rayne by winning his three singles but Notley's team effort – Willis and Adam Purslow won two and Clare Johnson one - saw them through to the final which was due to be played last night (Tuesday).

In their quarter final, Notley G had beaten their own H team 5-2 with Willis and Purslow unbeaten while Rayne B had beaten Notley F by the same score.

Cressing found their handicaps too much to overcome in their quarter final with Notley D. They led 3-2 but lost the next three before gaining the final dead set to produce a 5-4 scoreline. Trevor Carter won his three singles for Cressing.

Rayne F's win over Pillar House A was a genuine 5-4. They were 3-0 and 4-2 down before staging a comeback over the final three sets, Long's win at 11-6 in the fifth game against Adam Clift being the tightest of those.

In the league, the fight for the unrewarded honour of finishing third in division one has been all but resolved after Black Notley B's 8-2 win over a two-person Rayne A.

Bocking fell away after dropping three points in beating bottom team Rayne B and then six more in losing to Rayne A.

Kevin Gowlett's excellent run of 18 unbeaten sets, which included two matches each against Cressing and Black Notley A, came to an unexpected end when he could not find a way past Ian Whiteside's defence.

In division two, the top two again had a close contest, Liberal A's 7-3 victory including four sets that went the full five games.

But Notley D were without either Larte or Philip Lawson and it was 18-year-old Simon Churchman, called up from the E team, who was their star. He scored wins over Barry Pritchard and Frank Neill while Gordon Fairchild chipped in with a win over Robin Armstrong.

Notley D also beat Rayne D 8-2 but more important for Rayne D was their draw with Notley E which should just about preserve their second division status.

Churchman was to the fore here as well, with good wins over Dave Punt and Keith Martin, but unexpectedly failed to solve the riddle of Alastair Brown.

Also unexpected was Notley E's 6-4 win over their own C team. Three wins from Lyndon Griffiths this time led them to victory.

The end of the season has seen something of a spurt in the form of Notley F's Simon Pohl in division three.

With only one win in his previous 30 sets, he appeared to find whatever it was that was missing and won four of the next six. And they were not negligible opponents either: Paul Lombardi and Matthew Finch of Liberal B and Barrie Applegate and Arthur Wilson of Nomads.

His efforts were not quite enough to win the match in either case. Liberal B won 7-3 and Nomads 6-4.

Notley G, who can now claim they are concentrating on the cup, suffered 9-1 at the hands of Nomads and 10-0 against Pillar House A.

Ron Fosker

20.4.08

table tennis

Black Notley A have regained the Braintree Table Tennis League title they last won in 2006. And they did so after a cracker of a match against the team that took it off them last year.

The Notley v Cressing fixture fully lived up to its billing as a title decider. No fewer than seven of the ten sets went the full five games. Two more went to four and only one was decided in straight games.

But it was that one, the opener of the evening, that was in many ways the most important and certainly the most unexpected.

Rik James, a past winner of the Chelmsford individual title, and many times champion at Colchester, was drafted in for only his third appearance of the season in the absence of the injured Peter Hayden.

Three sets for Cressing looked assured.

But that reckoned without an inspired Gary Young. He cast reputations aside and tore through his opponent with a convincing scoreline of 11-4, 11-5, 11-8.

Suitably inspired, Ian Brown took the next set off Trevor Carter after being two games down.

Cressing, however, were not giving up their title without a fight. After Ian Hayden had beaten Ken Lewis in four games, Carter came back to the table to try to do what James had failed to. He stretched Young to five games but the former Clacton champion just held on to win the fifth at 11-7.

James then beat Lewis, but needed five games to do so, before Brown came back with a vital win over Hayden.

The doubles also went to the wire before Young and Lewis triumphed 11-9 in the fifth against James and Carter, then Carter stretched Lewis almost as far in the next singles, falling this time at 11-8 in the decider.

Cressing still refused to lie down and took the final two sets, Hayden against Young and James against Brown at 11-5 in the final game.

The result meant that Notley took a three-point lead at the top of the table and needed only a modest win over bottom team Rayne B to ensure the trophy ended up on their shelf.

They duly achieved that to make Cressing's subsequent 5-4 defeat by Rayne A (both teams had two players) irrelevant.

Elsewhere Black Notley B ensured they finished third with a draw against Bocking while Rayne B at last found the secret of success – use only two players.

Only Paul Mitchell and Brian Riedling were available for their match at Bocking but two wins each plus the doubles gave them a draw, only the second time they have avoided defeat this season.

Perhaps the most stunning result of the season's final weeks was Rayne C's demolition of Notley C in division two.

Rayne C were in serious danger of being relegated when they took on the third-placed side but crunched them 9-1, five of their wins coming in straight games and the others in four.

Paul Wellington and Tony Hammond were unbeaten to give Hammond ten wins out of 15 in his last five matches after winning only six of the previous 33.

Rob Stannard won the one singles for Notley and four days later proved he is no pushover by beating Philip Lawson and Gordon Fairchild in the C team's 8-2 defeat by their own D team.

Rayne C went on to defeat Notley E 6-4 to consign their opponents to relegation.

In division three Notley F ended a run of nine defeats by beating their own G team 9-1 – it is no coincidence that Tony Bamsey has missed the last five of those matches - while Nomads held Rayne E to a draw.

In division four Panfield sneaked back into second place after drawing for the third time with Notley I.

Rayne F, who had held second spot, tumbled 9-1 to divisional winners Notley H where the curio was that it was Keith Flowers who lost the only one, Charles Wilkinson getting the better of him.

Rayne B ended Black Notley's three-year run of success by winning the Braintree Table Tennis League handicap cup.

But it was a tight affair, in keeping with the rest of this year's competition, which could easily have tipped the other way.

Rayne's 5-2 victory over Black Notley G included three wins at deuce in the fifth game, in all of which Notley had a match point.

So just a net or edge at the vital time and the trophy would have stayed on the Notley shelf for another year.

But Rayne deserve the plaudits for their doggedness in overcoming long handicaps of either minus 5 or 6 against plus 3 or 4 which meant that they had to score roughly double their opponents' points.

It was tough going in parts – they lost two games 11-1 and one 11-0 – but their perseverance got them there in the end.

The first set illustrated how difficult it was going to be when Willis comfortably overcame Paul Mitchell 11-3 in the fourth game.

The match then entered its vital phase as first Brian Riedling just sneaked home against Adam Purslow then Peter Hance did the same against Clare Johnson who, like Willis, was in the winning team in 2006.

Riedling was stretched to 15-13 in the fifth before claiming victory. Hance had an easier time of it – only 13-11 in the fifth.

Mitchell's four-game defeat of Purslow was followed by a second win for Willis, this time over Hance, before Riedling put things back on track with a win over Johnson.

At 4-2 there was still all to play for as Hance took on Purslow and when he lost the fourth game 11-1, things could still have swung round. But in the fifth he slowly clawed his way back and ensured the trophy was Rayne's with a win at 13-11.

Braintree players have been making their mark on the table tennis world further afield.

For the first time, a Braintree-based team has won the Chelmsford League.

Bocking's Kevin Gowlett and Peter Hayden and Rik James of Cressing have just clinched the title.

Representing Bocking, they just held off Maldon B whose side ironically included Paul Davison who plays for Bocking in the Braintree League. Other members of the squad included Neil Charles, Chris Jacob and John Cleasby, all former Braintree League players.

Present and former Braintree players also made up the third-placed team, ECC A who were represented by Steve Kerns, Dave Cole, Lucy Wang and Sarra Wang.

And Gowlett has added a further trophy to his cabinet, the men's singles title in the Clacton League, his first men's crown.

He came back from two games down to beat Colin Stallwood in the final.

Black Notley's Andrew McEwan, 17, has been awarded this season's Martin Bawden award for service and achievement by the Braintree League.

The award marked not only his progress on the table – four appearances on finals night were an indication of his improvement this season – but his exemplary work off it.

He has taken charge of the league's website, which has had a complete revamp and been kept up to date weekly.

He has also arranged, organised and run weekly training sessions, which included persuading several of the town's leading players to give their time to help out at the sessions.

Ron Fosker

4.5.08

table tennis

The contest for this season's Braintree Table Tennis League title was one of the tightest for years and culminated in the do-or-die atmosphere of the penultimate match.

Champions Cressing and the previous year's winners Black Notley A were only three points apart when they met with one match to go and it was Notley's 6-4 win in that encounter that sealed the title.

But it was the first two matches of the season that made the difference.

Cressing were without Peter Hayden, the reigning men's singles champion, for those two matches and suffered a surprise 7-3 defeat in the first to Notley B, then could only beat bottom team Rayne B by the same score in the second.

In their three subsequent meetings with Notley B, they won 8-2, 7-3 and 8-2 while they beat Rayne B 9-1 on all three later occasions.

If they had matched those scores in the first two matches, they would have been virtually home and dry by the time it came to the final clash with Notley A.

But Notley also have a claim to the high ground as they won two and drew one of the meetings between the two teams. They only suffered when Cressing turned out a team of Peter and Ian Hayden and Rik James.

Notley were only able to turn out a recognised first team – three out of Steve Kerns, Gary Young, Ian Brown and Ken Lewis – on one of those occasions. And that was after Brown had had to make a late dash to the game when Kerns was held up in London.

It was a third title for Notley, following successes in 2000 and 2006 and second place last year.

There was an equally interesting though unrewarded fight for third place, eventually won by Notley B who used a total of 12 players to get there.

Andrew McEwan played in all their matches, Andy Doshier in more than half, Laurie Sapiano seven, Brad Hudgell five, Greg Green four and various other people one or two here and there.

Their matches with the other two contenders for third place indicate how close it was. They fought out three draws with Bocking and won the other match 6-4 while they had one draw with Rayne A and two 6-4 wins, only stretching to 8-2 in their final encounter when Rayne were a player short.

The Bocking v Rayne matches were also close: one draw, 7-3 and 6-4 to Rayne and 7-3 to Bocking.

Not so close were the matches featuring the bottom team Rayne B. They occupy yoyo land between the top two divisions, a distinction they share with Liberal A.

They won division two comfortably last year and were just as comfortably bottom of division one this year. Liberal A have done exactly the opposite, coming back up this year after failing to win any games in the top division last season.

But Rayne B did have the distinction of avoiding a 10-0 defeat, a scoreline that, apart from one concession, was completely absent in the top division this year, a rare statistic.

Somehow they managed always to sneak at least one win and lost an amazing 12 matches by 9-1.

Paul Mitchell, Brian Riedling, Peter Hance and Brian Cook all had the distinction of being the one to prevent the blank sheet and on three occasions they were saved by their doubles pairing.

They have the satisfaction or otherwise of knowing that if the league remains in its current format, they will almost certainly come back up again next year.

And go down again the year after.

Ron Fosker

11.5.08

table tennis

Only one team remained unbeaten during this season's Braintree Table Tennis League competition. And every team managed to put at least one win on the board.

Pillar House A in division three, the only unbeaten team, also scored the most points but Liberal A in division two matched their total of 18 wins.

Liberal, relegated last season, were the class act in division two and finished well clear at the top.

Their one defeat came at the hands of second-placed Black Notley D who in a season of few surprises were the one team who produced a little of the unexpected.

They were ranked below their C team on the basis partly that Larte Lawson would not play that often and partly that 13-year-old Philip Lawson would take a little while to find his feet in division two.

Both assumptions proved wide of the mark. Not only did Lawson senior play all but one of his team's matches, but his son stormed through the season losing only eight of his 42 sets – and crowned his season by winning the junior singles.

But the team could not match the all-round consistency of Mike Johnston, Barry Pritchard, Robin Armstrong and Frank Neill.

The other end of the table produced a three-way battle to avoid relegation featuring the veteran campaigners of Rayne's C and D teams plus promoted Notley E.

In the end it is Notley who return to division three partly as a result of a superb late run by Rayne C who won four and drew one of their final six matches.

In their final set of matches against the other five teams in the division, they garnered 29 points. Had they matched that in the other three segments, they would have ended with 116 points instead of 76.

Pillar House A found themselves in division three after losing all but one of last year's second division team. Duncan Elloy nobly carried on and with Bob Keefe's

dependability and Sean Clift's continued improvement, the team always looked a good bet for promotion.

They were strengthened even further when Chris Ciniglio joined halfway through and they received a serious challenge only from relegated Rayne E.

The two teams looked well matched at the start of the season, drew in their first encounter, and after seven matches, Rayne were two points ahead.

Then came what was probably the shock result of the season. In the second meeting between the two, Pillar House romped to a 10-0 win.

What made that even more bizarre was that within a couple of weeks, the two teams met again in the final of the restricted knock out cup with the same six players on view and played out a cracker, Pillar House creeping through 5-4 by winning the final doubles 11-9 in the fifth game.

Panfield were another team to drop a division despite not being officially relegated. They opted out of division three to allow their newer players to bed themselves in in the lowest division.

In the event, one of their planned signings was unable to play, but Roy Dickson, in his first season, and Darrin Cann, in his third, both picked up some useful wins.

By using their more experienced players they registered three wins out of four against divisional winners Notley H, but Notley's greater consistency gave them a comfortable lead at the top.

The sad death of Terry Davies during the season made Keith Flowers, Peter Foster and Bruce Wickham even more determined and they will be proud to be able to hand over a winner's medal to Terry's widow in memory of a very popular member of the league.

Ron Fosker

18.5.08

table tennis

Braintree's junior table tennis team have been crowned champions of Essex – and the men's team have finished runners-up.

Beaten by the narrowest of margins by Colchester last season, Braintree gained revenge on their rivals after a closely fought match in the all-day session at Harlow.

They then went on to register comfortable victories over the remaining teams to give them the title.

The juniors, all from the Black Notley club, got off to an excellent start by winning the first two sets against strong opponents.

Andrew McEwan, ranked 13 in Essex, put the first win on the board when he beat his Notley B teammate Greg Green, ranked six places above him. The first three games were tight, 14-12, 9-11, 13-11, but McEwan got off to a good start in the fourth to take the set.

Brad Hudgell, ranked sixth in Essex, then overcame the county No.8 Mike Shore in four games 11-13, 11-3, 12-10, 11-9 to make it 2-0.

County No.2 junior girl Holly Stubbings pulled one back with a five-game victory over Philip Lawson but Stevie Pell restored the two-set advantage with a win over Colchester No.4 Andrew Harvey.

Colchester had high hopes in the doubles where they were fielding the national college doubles champions Shore and Green and a win looked likely when they led by one game and 10-5.

But McEwan and Hudgell took the next seven points to get back in the match and eventually won another tight set that went the full distance.

Colchester pegged one back in the doubles but then came the closest one of all, a vital 18-16 win in the fifth end for Hudgell over Green.

McEwan and Shore also stretched their set to five games but again it was the Braintree player who came out on top.

With a defeat for Pell at the hands of Stubbings and a win for Lawson over Harvey, Braintree ended up with a 7-3 win.

They followed that with wins of 8-2 over Ilford, 9-1 over Clacton and 10-0 over Brentwood. McEwan and Hudgell stayed unbeaten all weekend.

McEwan found himself doubling up in the men's team at one point in the day when they found themselves a man short.

And he responded with possibly the win of the day, a victory over Colin Stallwood, who in the same match beat present and past Braintree men's champions Paul Davison and Steve Kerns.

That helped Braintree to an 8-2 win over the seashiders but it was the next match, against favourites Ilford, that proved the stumbling block.

Braintree moved into a 4-2 lead with two wins from Davison and one each from Kerns and Andy Doshier. But that was where it dried up and Ilford took the rest for a 6-4 win.

Victories over Southend and Harlow followed but the damage was done and Ilford took the title, just ahead of Braintree.

