

The last two years have produced tight contests for the Braintree Table Tennis League title. And there is every reason to anticipate another close run affair in the current season which starts this week.

Last year Notley won by eight points on the new point-per-set basis – and it would have been closer if Cressing had turned out a full team in their final match – while the previous year on the 4-3-2-1 system, Cressing won by a single point.

Cressing will have their usual line-up of Peter and Ian Hayden, sister Lisa Ashdown and Trevor Carter.

Notley at one time were uncertain of hanging on to their Suffolk-based players, but not only have Ian Brown, Ken Lewis and Gary Young signed on, they have added Ipswich premier division player Richard Goodhand. Steve Kerns and Graham Farmer complete the squad.

Last season Cressing took 21 of the 40 points available in the matches between the two teams but it was Notley's consistency in the other matches that won them the title.

The most important of those other matches this season will be against Bocking who have added former Clacton champion Nigel Hodder to their squad. Both he and men's singles champion Paul Davison are only expected to play occasionally so the title could depend on who turns out against the top two.

If Hodder, Davison and Kevin Gowlett turned out every week, they could win the league, but they have a squad of six to fit in and are likely to finish in mid table again.

Black Notley B, who finished third last season, have effectively dropped out. Brad Hudgell and Andy Doshier are not playing and Andrew McEwan will play occasionally for Rayne A when he is back from university.

Laurie Sapiano is the only survivor from last year and he will be joined by Rob Stannard and Mark Lewis, who step up from division two, Grant Sharpe, who returns after a brief absence, and new signing James Hicks.

In addition to McEwan, Rayne A have their usual selection of Dean Andrews, Steve Elmes, Jon Hill, Steve Pennell and Ian Whiteside with occasional appearances from John Andrews and are likely to challenge Bocking for third place.

The remaining four teams look likely to be involved in a relegation battle.

The change of format from four divisions of six to three divisions of eight has meant Rayne B retaining their place and both Liberal A and Rayne C being promoted.

Rayne C have leapfrogged the two Notley teams who finished above them as neither Larte nor Philip Lawson has signed this year and Stannard and Lewis have gone up a team.

Rayne B last year and Liberal A the year before both found the going tough in a six-team division and will welcome some easier games this time round.

It is some time since the Rayne C squad of Cec Butcher, Tony Hammond, Paul Wellington and Mo Hardy faced top-rank competition but they are said to be looking forward to the challenge. With an average age of 62, it is an attitude that does them credit.

- The Braintree League is holding its 60th anniversary dinner and dance at Earls Colne Golf Club on November 1. Guest speaker will be Richard Yule, the chief executive of the English Table Tennis Association. Tickets, price £29, are available from Dean Andrews on 01376 340994.

The reorganisation of the divisions in the Braintree Table Tennis League has given the second division a much more open look this season.

For the past two seasons, the top team has been well ahead of the rest.

This time both those teams, Rayne B, and Liberal A, are in the new eight-strong division one and new champions will have to emerge.

Three teams stand out as contenders: Cressing B, Rayne D and Black Notley C.

Cressing B will be looking for their second title in two years after winning division three as Pillar House A last year.

The reason they will be in the frame again is largely down to the presence of Duncan Elloy who lost only once last year and is likely to be pretty much as impregnable this time.

The continually improving Sean Clift will give him solid backing as will Bob Keefe and last year's mid-season signing Chris Ciniglio.

They also hope to have Dave Ciniglio, Chris's uncle, back in action after a number of years' absence and if he can reach anything like his previous standard, he too will not let many pass.

Dave Punt is of a similar standing, eighth in the division two individual averages last season and the only one of the top ten still in the division. He may have the occasional lapse but he can be expected to lead Rayne D's challenge.

Teammate Keith Martin rediscovered some old form after a lengthy lay-off and will not lose many.

If the returning Malcolm Mosedale can do likewise after a shorter absence – just one year in his case – and Alastair Brown can find the form that deserted him last season, they will anticipate a tilt at the title.

Notley's C team is a mixture of last year's C team (Stevie Pell), D team (Gordon Fairchild and Tim Huxtable) and E team (Lyndon Griffiths). They have no stars but greater strength in depth which may be telling.

Division three consists of only one team from last year's division three, the relegated Notley G, plus four of last year's division four, a reshuffled Notley collection, a Notley team of newcomers and a new club, Sible Hedingham.

Notley's F team of Adam Purslow, Clare Johnson and Steve Willis were relegated last year after winning division four in 2007 and are likely to challenge again.

Their G team will also be up there but Rayne F look the strongest combination, especially now that both Tim Gowers and Peter Taylor are getting used to playing again. If Brian Hill joins them after missing a year it can only make them stronger.

Heddingham's entry means a return to the league for Graham Cannon and Roy Hooper after many years plus a debut for Mark Brown and Adam Redgewell.

Notley's new combination arises from the Sunday morning sessions that the club ran last year and is a mix of the young and not so young.

New club Sible Hedingham stamped their mark immediately on the Braintree Table Tennis League when they stormed to a 9-1 win in their opening match against one of the stronger teams in the third division.

Black Notley's G team are expected to be in the top half of the division this season but they had little answer to the debutants.

Former league players Graham Cannon and Roy Hooper showed they have lost little of their old skill and won their three singles plus the doubles while newcomer Mark Brown settled immediately and took the other two.

Brown's wins came against players of the standing of Alan Cook and Mike Smith, which suggests he will win a lot more during the season.

Steve Ascott's win over Brown was the only consolation for Notley G.

On this evidence a title challenge is clearly not beyond Hedingham.

For that to happen they are likely to have to get past Rayne F and Notley F, who both started with healthy wins.

Notley F took all ten points against their own I team, themselves all newcomers to the league, while Rayne F picked up nine against Notley H.

Charles Wilkinson and Peter Taylor were unbeaten for Rayne while Harold Jones, now 82, picked up Notley's one win.

Three of the likely challengers for honours in division two, Cressing B, Notley C and Rayne D, all started positively.

Cressing began with an 8-2 win over Rayne E, Notley C won by the same score against Nomads while Rayne D were stretched to 6-4 before overcoming Liberal B.

Duncan Elloy and Chris Ciniglio were both unbeaten for Cressing while it was Tim Huxtable whose evening was unblemished for Notley C. Kevin Saunders picked up the two for Nomads but lost out to Huxtable in five games.

Keith Martin won his three singles for Rayne D but Liberal's new signing Trevor Laird suggested he will strengthen their side this season. He won twice, including a victory over the formidable Dave Punt.

Two teams more concerned with avoiding relegation featured in the other match in the division where Notley E upset the alphabet by beating their D team 6-4.

The first week's fixtures in division one pitted the four teams expected to finish in the top half against the four likely to be in the other half. Unsurprisingly a series of big scores resulted.

Champions Black Notley A led the way with a 10-0 win over Rayne B. Graham Farmer's 12-10-in-the-fifth win over Paul Mitchell – after being two games down - was the tightest of the evening although Ken Lewis also had to battle back from 2-1 down to overcome Dave Moles.

The most interesting feature of Cressing A's match against Rayne C was a name on the scorecard.

Terry Dowsett, men's singles winner a record six times, has rejoined Peter and Ian Hayden, whom he helped to three league titles with Bocking in the mid 1990s.

And he has brought his son Scott, a leading county cadet, with him. Ranked at 100 on the England cadet list, Dowsett junior showed he will not be out of place in division one with wins over Cec Butcher and Tony Hammond and a narrow defeat at 13-11 in the fifth against Mo Hardy.

Trevor Carter and Dowsett senior were unbeaten.

Bocking introduced their new signing Nigel Hodder to the fray in the first match of the season and he helped his side to a 9-1 win over Notley B. Notley's recent acquisition James Hicks pinched the one, with a win over Garry Fryatt.

Andrew McEwan made an unbeaten debut for his new team Rayne A who beat Liberal A 8-2.

But Liberal started the season more successfully. In a match brought forward before the official start of the season, they despatched Rayne C 9-1. Robin Armstrong and Mike Johnston were unbeaten while Paul Wellington took Rayne's one with a good win over Barry Pritchard at 11-9 in the fifth.

Bocking showed their various faces in their opening matches in the Braintree Table Tennis League.

Their championship-challenging side was on view against Rayne A, their mid-table side against Black Notley B and their relegation-tinged side against Rayne's B team.

In the event, Bocking will neither win the championship nor be relegated as the team of Richard Jennings, Kevin Gowlett and Nigel Hodder that appeared against Rayne A are not going to go down nor are a team of Jennings, David Edwards and a blank space (on the scorecard at Rayne B) going to finish top.

Jennings came close to avoiding defeat on his own against Rayne B. He won his three singles and took the doubles with Edwards.

He also won one against the A team but Steve Pennell and Jon Hill got the better of him and joined up to beat Hodder and Gowlett in the doubles to bring their team three points.

Jennings and Hodder were unbeaten against Notley B where Notley's new signing James Hicks picked up his side's only point with a win over Garry Fryatt.

The top two teams both collected eight points.

Champions Black Notley A beat Rayne A with the help of the almost inevitable unbeaten evening from Steve Kerns. Rayne's two came from good wins by former Notley player Andrew McEwan over Gary Young and Jon Hill over Ian Brown.

Cressing were a player short and called up Duncan Elloy from their new B team for his first crack at division one for some time. And he came desperately close to chalking up a win, losing to both Laurie Sapiano and Rob Stannard (Notley B only had two players) at deuce in the fifth game.

Ian and Peter Hayden took the rest.

Notley B fared better against Rayne C. Hicks took his three singles, Sapiano two and Stannard one in their 7-3 victory. Paul Wellington won twice for Rayne.

Rayne C also lost 9-1 to Liberal A. Robin Armstrong and Mike Johnston were unbeaten while Wellington took Rayne's one with a good win over Barry Pritchard at 11-9 in the fifth.

Liberal earlier lost 8-2 to Rayne A.

The likely title challengers in division two all had comfortable victories.

Rayne D's was the most comfortable, 10-0 against Notley D, while Cressing B won 8-2 at Liberal B and Notley C 7-3 at Rayne E.

The doubles eluded the victors in both cases. Richard Whiteside's two wins made up the three for Rayne E (Tim Huxtable's scalp was the one he could not take) while Derek Finch's win over Bob Keefe was the other blemish on Cressing's record.

Notley E notched up their second win in two outings when they brought back eight points from Nomads.

Sible Hedingham went a step further after their encouraging start to life in division three by beating one of the two teams tipped for promotion. Both Roy Hooper and Graham Cannon were unbeaten as they beat Notley F 7-3.

There was a familiar name in unfamiliar circumstances in division three. After being out of the game for a number of years following a heart attack, former first division player Tom Elder (top of the individual averages in 1978) is aiding his recuperation with a few outings in division four.

Even a half-speed Elder is not going to lose any at that level and his efforts limited Notley G to a 6-4 win over Rayne G.

After a win of unexpectedly crushing proportions, Cressing B's potential as Braintree Table Tennis League division two champions grows stronger every week.

They will face their major test next Tuesday (Oct 21) when they tackle Rayne D, the only other unbeaten side in the division.

Rayne D and Black Notley C were expected to be Cressing's main rivals for the title, but that view was blown away last week when Notley C were dismissed without a single point.

Notley were without both Gordon Fairchild and Stevie Pell so had to call in a reserve. But it was still a major surprise that Lyndon Griffiths and Tim Huxtable returned home empty handed.

Duncan Elloy, Chris Ciniglio and Sean Clift found top form and surged through them all.

The closest Notley came to a point was Ciniglio's win over Griffiths at 13-11 in the fifth game in the first set of the evening.

The tightness of that set suggested a series of close encounters to come. It was not to be.

Rayne D meanwhile notched up their third win of the season, 8-2 over Nomads.

Phil Wade was called up from the E team. He and Dave Punt took their three singles while Arthur Wilson and Lorraine Burgess both beat Alastair Brown for Nomads' two.

Wade did his bit for his own team too when he and Richard Whiteside remained unbeaten in the E team's 7-3 win over Notley E. It was Rayne's first win of the season and Notley's first defeat.

Liberal B also recorded their first win, 6-4 against Notley D. All three Liberal players foundered against the steady Bill Facey.

Black Notley A and Cressing A, the top two teams in division one, are locked together on 26 points as they head towards the first of their encounters on October 26.

Cressing made up the one-point deficit from the previous week by beating Rayne B 9-1 while Notley dropped two points in beating Liberal A.

Ian and Peter Hayden were unbeaten for Cressing although the former was stretched to 11-9 in the fifth by Brian Cook.

Gary Young and Ken Lewis had clean records for Notley.

Second division Rayne E produced the surprise of the first round of the Braintree Table Tennis League knock out cup when they put out first division opposition.

What is more, they had to come from 3-1 down to do so.

Black Notley B were the victims. They had to bring in a reserve, but Lyndon Griffiths did not let them down, winning one of his singles and taking a doubles with Laurie Sapiano.

Sapiano also beat Simon Fleming to give Notley a 3-1 lead, but that was as far as it went.

Richard Whiteside had excellent wins over both Sapiano and Rob Stannard while Phil Wade beat Stannard and Fleming secured the passage into the next round with a win over Griffiths with the score at 4-3.

The last doubles no longer mattered, but Wade and Whiteside won it nonetheless to give them a 6-3 win.

League champions Black Notley A received a jolt in their match against second division Cressing B.

Duncan Elloy and Ryan Pitt opened the evening with a doubles victory over Ian Brown and Graham Farmer then Chris Ciniglio scored an outstanding win against Ken Lewis.

They settled down after that to take the remaining five sets, but the fifth could hardly have been closer, Brown beating Elloy 14-12 in the fifth game.

Liberal A had to borrow Diane Garner from the B team but she played a full part in their 8-1 victory over Notley C, with a good win over Tim Huxtable and two doubles successes. Gordon Fairchild's win over Garner was Notley's only success.

In the restricted cup, third division leaders Sible Hedingham took all nine sets against Notley G while Nomads dropped two in coming past Rayne F.

Barrie Applegate and Lorraine Burgess were unbeaten for Nomads while Charles Wilkinson and Geoff Long picked up one each for Rayne.

In the league, there were comfortable victories for the top two in division three.

Hedingham beat Notley H 9-1 – Mike Pitt's win over Mark Brown the one to get away – while Rayne F won every set against Notley I.

Matt Millbank, son of former Liberal A stalwart John, made his league debut for Rayne G in their 6-4 defeat by Notley F and he came close to registering his first win. But Mike Smith just edged him out at 12-10 in the fifth.

Another newcomer, Barry Clark, was more successful. He opened his league account with all three singles for Notley I against Notley H. The H team, however, won all the rest.

Cressing C began their season with an 8-2 win over Notley G. Matt Shelley was unbeaten for Cressing while Steve Ascott took Notley's two.

New club Sible Hedingham's already impressive start to their Braintree Table Tennis League career is even more striking after their most recent match.

They took on their main rivals for the division three title – and thumped them 8-2.

It means they have now played all the teams thought likely to be at the top end of the table and dealt summarily with all of them.

Their latest victory was against Rayne F whose combination of Charles Wilkinson, Peter Taylor and Tim Gowers does not surrender easily.

But Graham Cannon and Roy Hooper kept up the unbeaten records they have had since the start of the season and Mark Brown added the scalp of Gowers to leave Rayne with only two points.

And it was desperately close to being only one point. Wilkinson's victory over Brown was a nail biting 6-11, 6-11, 11-5, 14-12, 14-12.

Rayne F may now have to set their sights on second place, no longer an automatic promotion spot but a possible springboard to higher things if there is a reorganisation above.

Their main rivals for that slot are Black Notley F who improved their own chances with an 8-2 win over their own G team.

Arthur Clark remained unbeaten for the F team while Liz Heath marked her return to competitive table tennis with her first win of the season, a creditable one over Adam Purslow.

Cressing C are also determined to impose themselves on the division. They have won three out of three after wins over both Rayne G (6-4) and Notley I (10-0).

They came closer than anyone has managed so far in depriving Rayne G's Tom Elder of his unbeaten record – not in the singles which remains virtually unthinkable, but in the doubles where Elder and Ian Rubens just scraped home at 15-13 in the fifth game against Mark Shelley and Adam Clift.

Elder's presence has meant a string of 6-4 defeats for his team. But in their last match they managed to reach that score without him.

Two wins for Barry Mouser, a first league win for Matt Millbank and the doubles gave them four sets against Notley H. But Mike Pitt's three singles ensured that the majority of the points went Notley's way.

Black Notley C's challenge for a leading spot in division two faltered when they were beaten 6-4 by Liberal A. And it could have been worse.

They found themselves a player short and so called up Keith Flowers from the E team and it was Flowers who won two while his teammates won one each.

Paul Lombardi foiled all of them.

The two teams occupying the basement slots came up against each other and it was Nomads who triumphed over Notley D 7-3. Barrie Applegate and Kevin Saunders were unbeaten.

In division one, Rayne B registered their second win of the season which, like the first, was by 6-4. Notley B were on the receiving end. They could only raise one of their regular team so Gordon Fairchild stepped up from division two and scored a notable victory over Brian Riedling.

In the top v bottom clash, Notley A predictably took all ten points against Rayne C.

League champions Black Notley A suffered their first defeat of the season in the Braintree Table Tennis League when they came up against a strong Bocking side.

But their pain was eased when their main rivals Cressing A dropped points to both Rayne A and Liberal A.

Bocking included men's singles champion Paul Davison for the first time this season and it was he and Kevin Gowlett who earned the win.

Davison won his three sets, dropping only one game in the process, while Gowlett beat both Ken Lewis and Graham Farmer and the two of them combined to take the doubles.

Gowlett foundered against Ian Brown, his first defeat of the season, and all three Notley players beat Richard Jennings to produce a 6-4 scoreline in Bocking's favour.

But Notley maintain a one-point lead at the top over Cressing after the 2007 champions dropped three points to Rayne A and four to Liberal A.

Ian Hayden hung on to his unbeaten record with a maximum performance in both matches but his brother Peter lost to Rayne's Steve Pennell, not for the first time. Pennell and Jon Hill also got the better of Trevor Carter.

Thirteen-year-old Scott Dowsett found it tough going in his second league outing for Cressing against Liberal. Carter and Ian Hayden remained unbeaten in the singles but failed to work out a doubles formula against Robin Armstrong and Barry Pritchard.

Bocking remained in touch with the top two after a 7-3 win over Liberal A in which Gowlett and Nigel Hodder were undefeated.

The match between Rayne's B and C teams was one for the record books as the players took out their calculators and worked out that the combined age of the six players in action was 382, surely unmatched in a Braintree first division match.

The B team came out on top by 6-4 thanks to a hat-trick from Brian Riedling.

Black Notley F inflicted the first defeat of the season on Cressing C in division three but they had to come from 4-2 down to do so. Steve Willis and Adam Purslow won two each for Notley. Adam Clift and Matt Shelley did likewise for Cressing.

Rayne had wins of 10-0 over Notley I and 6-4 over Rayne G while Sible Hedingham remain ten points clear at the top after their 10-0 win over Notley I.

The Braintree League celebrated its 60th anniversary with a dinner held at the Colne Valley Golf Club on Saturday.

More than 100 guests attended to hear guest speaker Richard Yule, chief executive of the English Table Tennis Association, and to mix with current and many past league players.

The league had the rare distinction of being able to invite its founder to its 60th anniversary. It was Harry Warde who called the meeting to bring the league into existence in 1948. He became its first general secretary and went on to spend 16 years as chairman.

Other former league players present included men's singles champions Maurice Overall (1952), John Leith (1987), and Andrew Wadling (1989-91) and ladies' singles winners Kate Wadling (1989-91), Sarah Davison (1995), Helen Barnett (2003) and Kelly Skeggs (2004-05).

Peter Beatham and Harold Bickmore travelled from North Wales and North Yorkshire respectively and other former players included league president Len Woolmer, vice-presidents Dave Atterbury, Fred Button, John Millbank, Peter Morgan and Ced Vigar plus John Cleasby, Brian How, John Mills, Terry Pleasance, Mike Shorten, Phil Sinclair, Ashley Skeggs, Vicky Stredder, Malcolm Wehmeyer and Sally Wellington.

Some of the lesser known names in the Braintree Table Tennis League made their mark on this week's set of scorecards.

Names like Adam Pitt, Lorraine Burgess, Bruce Wickham, Peter Foster and Ted Sims.

Sixteen-year-old Adam Pitt must take pride of place for an uncommonly good win over the previously unbeaten Chris Ciniglio.

It was the opening set in Black Notley D's match at division two leaders Cressing B. Pitt won the second game 18-16, almost lost in four games, but after surviving the fourth at 11-9, surged through the decider to win at 11-5.

He also beat Bob Keefe to make the final scoreline 8-2 to Cressing.

He had been in solid form the previous week too when he got the better of the steady Phil Wade, never an easy task, as Notley D and Rayne E shared the points.

It has not been a good season so far for Lorraine Burgess who has struggled to find form.

But she did so for Nomads against Liberal B where she chalked up wins over Diane Garner and Derek Finch and came within an ace (11-8 in the fifth) of beating Trevor Laird.

Her teammates could add only two more so Liberal emerged 6-4 winners.

Bruce Wickham will have encountered few opponents of the calibre of Stevie Pell and Gordon Fairchild in division four last year. But he was not overawed and put both of them to the sword in Notley E's 7-3 defeat by their own C team.

His teammate Peter Foster found a cutting edge of his own in Notley E's match against Liberal B. With only one win in 12 so far, he took all three to help his team to a 7-3 win.

Ted Sims is making a comeback to the game after putting his bat away for nine years. A former Harlow League player, he has signed for Rayne D and is still adjusting to the pace of the game.

It came good for him against Notley C where he recorded an excellent win over Lyndon Griffiths, a player who wins more than he loses. Notley, though, took the match 7-3.

Elsewhere in division two, leaders Cressing B notched up two more wins, 8-2 over Notley E and 7-3 against Rayne D, but gave away three points by sending in one of the scorecards after the deadline.

Ryan Pitt made his Braintree League comeback against Rayne D and won his three singles.

Chris Ciniglio won his three against Notley E where Keith Flowers picked up the two for the losers.

Rayne E are likely to have to see out the season without the hospitalised Simon Fleming, to whom the league sends its best wishes.

They have promoted Peter Taylor for the last two matches and he has responded with a singles win in each, most recently in the 8-2 defeat of Nomads.

Back in his normal habitat, Taylor won his three singles for Rayne F in their 6-4 win over Notley G in division three.

Rayne G have recorded their first win. Two wins for both Matt Millbank and Ian Rubens went with the inevitable three from Tom Elder to give them an 8-2 victory at Notley I.

Barry Clark recorded Notley's two wins.

Leaders Sible Hedingham added another ten points, this time against Cressing C, while Notley G gave away only the doubles against their own H team.

The top of division one of the Braintree Table Tennis League has become something of a maelstrom as teams bob up and down with increasing inconsistency.

Cressing A, champions in 2007, appeared to have stolen a march on their main rivals, current champions Black Notley A, when they beat them 6-4.

But in their next match they crumpled horribly to their first defeat of the season, a startling 8-2 against Bocking.

On the same day, Notley turned out what is probably their best team to crush their own B team and go into the second phase of the season on top of the table.

Against Notley, Cressing brought together the old BUSC team that won the title in 1994, 1995 and 1996. Terry Dowsett, encouraged back into the fold this season, joined the Hayden brothers Peter and Ian.

But Notley's Gary Young turned in a dazzling display to bring his side a vital four points.

He dominated against Dowsett (11-6, 11-3, 11-9) and Ian Hayden (11-2, 11-8, 11-5) and although he was pushed by Peter Hayden he got home in four games after a close 17-15 win in the third after sharing the first two.

He then joined Graham Farmer to win the doubles, again in three straight games.

With only one change – Trevor Carter in for Dowsett – Cressing then faced Bocking and found Kevin Gowlett and Nigel Hodder in irresistible form.

They both won their three singles and combined to win the doubles, but the talking point of the match was the defeat of Peter Hayden, the 2007 men's singles champion, by David Edwards, a player without a single win in his 33 sets last season.

The tendonitis that has troubled Hayden for some time is clearly getting the better of him.

For Bocking, though, life keeps getting better. With the help of an 8-2 over Rayne C – three wins this time for Paul Davison and Richard Jennings – they have moved into second place and need only a judicious shuffling of their resources in the remaining two-thirds of the season to mount a realistic title challenge.

The table at the end of the first third of the season is:

	P	W	D	L	A	P
B Notley A	7	5	0	2	16	54
Bocking	7	6	0	1	21	49

Cressing A	7	6	0	1	23	47
Rayne A	7	4	0	3	31	39
Liberal A	6	2	0	4	32	28
Rayne B	7	3	0	4	46	24
B Notley B	6	1	0	5	43	17
Rayne C	7	0	0	7	58	12

In division two, Phil Wade was at his most dogged to enable Rayne E to share the points with Liberal B. He won his three singles while Trevor Laird and Paul Lombardi won two each for Liberal.

Cressing C won their fourth match out of six in division three when they overcame Black Notley H 7-3. Notley's three points all came from the bat of Mike Pitt.

Notley's I team continue to learn about league life the hard way but Barry Clark recorded two wins in their 8-2 defeat by their own G team. Steve Ascott was the one to deny him a hat-trick.

While the first division develops into a three-way contest, the destination of the title in the other two divisions of the Braintree Table Tennis League already appears decided now that the teams have all played each other once.

Cressing B in division two and Sible Hedingham in division three have won all their matches so far, and mostly in some comfort. In seven matches Cressing have dropped only 12 sets and Hedingham ten.

Cressing arrived at the one-third stage of the season with a straightforward 9-1 win over Nomads. Straightforward that is apart from an outstanding win by Lorraine Burgess over Chris Ciniglio, only his second reverse of the season.

The more intriguing battle is for the runners-up spot where Black Notley C have 42 points from seven matches and Rayne D 37 from six.

Rayne have to rearrange their match against their own E team and may regret not playing it on the original date as the E team have just signed former first division player Paul Whybrow to replace Simon Fleming, expected to be out for the rest of the season.

Whybrow's presence could liven things up in the remaining two-thirds of the season. He is unlikely to lose many, and with Richard Whiteside and Phil Wade on 72 and 67 per cent respectively, Rayne E will become a tough nut to crack.

In their last matches of the first third of the season, Rayne D beat Notley E 8-2 and Notley C had a 9-1 win over their own D team.

Hedingham's Graham Cannon and Roy Hooper entered their final match of the first phase unbeaten but there they encountered Tom Elder who, but for health problems, probably belongs in the top half of division one.

He took his singles for Rayne G comfortably as usual, but Cannon and Hooper became the first pairing to prevent him adding the doubles with Ian Rubens.

As in division two, the battle for second place is the interesting one and looked to be a close fight between Notley F and Rayne F – until the two met each other, and Notley came away with an 8-2 win.

Peter Taylor picked up two sets for the losers, but Steve Willis took all three for Notley.

Willis's wins were not without a struggle, 7-11, 12-10, 12-10, 9-11, 11-9 against Geoff Long, 15-13, 7-11, 2-11, 11-9, 11-7 against Tim Gowers and 11-9, 11-13, 11-8, 18-16 against Taylor.

Rayne A have established themselves comfortably in fourth place in division one. They had wins of 7-3 over both Notley B and Rayne C and 9-1 over Rayne B, the only time they had three players.

Liberal B beat Rayne B 8-2 with unbeaten hands from Mike Johnston and Barry Pritchard.

The past two champions of the Braintree Table Tennis League are on course for a head-to-head battle in the final of the team knock out cup. But Bocking may have other ideas.

Current champions Black Notley A had a comfortable 7-0 win in their quarter final against second division Rayne D.

Cressing A, the 2007 winners, have yet to play their quarter final but in the second round came past Rayne's B team 8-1, Brian Riedling's win over Trevor Carter the one that eluded them.

Assuming Cressing have no problems with Rayne C, whom they have just beaten 10-0 in the league, they and Notley A are in opposite halves of the semi final draw.

But at that stage Cressing will face Bocking, 6-3 winners over Liberal A and a team with the capability of putting out a potential cup-winning trio of Kevin Gowlett, Paul Davison and Nigel Hodder.

Notley will play Rayne A who secured an 8-1 win over their own E team. The one defeat came from the newly unretired Paul Whybrow whose win over Steve Elmes showed he has lost little in his two-year absence from the game.

Two teams from the second division and two from the third are through to the semi finals of the restricted cup.

In a match far closer than the score suggests, Notley E put out Nomads 7-2 while Notley D had an easier passage, 5-0 against Cressing C.

Division three leaders Sible Hedingham were also untroubled in a 9-0 win over Notley H while Rayne G beat Notley's I team 8-1, a match featuring a first competitive win for Josh Rhodes.

The two Notley teams face each other in next week's semi final while Hedingham and Rayne G meet to decide which third division team will be represented in the final.

In the league, the four teams in the top half of division one played the four teams in the bottom half with predictable results.

Black Notley A beat Rayne B 9-1, Cressing A took all ten against Rayne C, while Bocking and Rayne A dropped one set against Notley B and Liberal A respectively.

The most notable performance was that of Bocking's David Edwards. Inspired by his unexpected win over Peter Hayden a couple of weeks ago, he won all three sets against Notley B. James Hicks beat Richard Jennings for Notley's sole point.

Rayne E's match with Cressing B in division two marked Paul Whybrow's comeback and he had the misfortune to come up against Duncan Elloy, the division's leading player, in his first match.

But he stretched Elloy, unbeaten so far this season, to five games and added wins over Ryan Pitt and Sean Clift.

Cressing took the match 6-4, their tightest result so far.

Notley C pulled away from Rayne D in the race for second place after their 9-1 win over Nomads where Barrie Applegate's win over Tim Huxtable was their one blemish.

Only Dave Punt was firing on any cylinders for Rayne D in their match at Liberal B. He won his three singles but Trevor Laird, Paul Lombardi and Derek Finch took the rest for Liberal.

Punt took his three again in Rayne D's draw with Notley D while Notley E repeated their first half win of 6-4 over the D team.

Division three leaders Sible Hedingham were untroubled in their match at Notley G where they took all ten sets in straight games.

Notley F recorded the same score against their own I team, but it was a curious evening for Steve Willis. Whereas his teammates won all their singles in straight games, he insisted on getting in a full evening's table tennis.

He was 2-1 down in all three sets. Josh Rhodes and Steve Baines both stretched him to 11-9 in the fifth while Leon Hewitt lost 11-6 in the decider.

Cressing C and Rayne F, currently third and fourth, played each other twice inside a week.

The matches finished 5-5 and 6-4 to Cressing. Adam Clift was unbeaten for Cressing in the drawn match while, in Clift's absence, Rayne's Peter Taylor won his three singles in the second.

Cressing earlier won their rearranged match with Rayne G 10-0.

The capacity of Rayne E to change the face of division two of the Braintree Table Tennis League was starkly illustrated when they crushed the team in second place 8-2.

But there was a twist to the tale.

It was not ex-first division player Paul Whybrow who won his three singles against Black Notley C.

That honour fell to Rayne E regular Richard Whiteside. Whybrow was on the wrong end of a superb display by 16-year-old Stevie Pell who beat him in four games.

Both Whiteside (11-9 in the fifth game) and Phil Wade managed to get the better of Pell although Wade was found wanting by Gordon Fairchild.

Rayne followed this up with a 9-1 win over Notley E – Whybrow and Wade this time unbeaten – and are now only two points behind Notley C with a match in hand.

Leaders Cressing B remained above it all and added seven more points from their match with Liberal B.

But it was not all straightforward. Duncan Elloy, defeated only once since the beginning of last season, was given a fright by Diane Garner, the one player to beat him in that time. He eventually got home 11-6, 12-10, 6-11, 9-11, 11-9.

Ryan Pitt, who beat Garner in three straight games, joined Elloy in the unbeaten enclosure.

In division one new signing Richard Goodhand made his debut for Black Notley A and remained unbeaten in the 7-3 win over Rayne A.

Steve Elmes and Jon Hill both beat Ken Lewis and combined to take the doubles against Lewis and Gary Young.

Bocking closed the gap on Notley by one point in beating Rayne B 8-2 and Cressing did so by two points after winning 9-1 against Notley B. Notley B's James Hicks added the scalp of Trevor Carter to his growing collection.

Rayne C battled hard against Liberal A but had little to show for it. Four sets went the full distance but only Cec Butcher's win over Robin Armstrong went their way.

Rayne F moved six points closer to Notley F at the top end of division three, but only because it was Notley's turn to face the Hedingham steamroller.

The closest Notley came to a point was Steve Willis's 9-11, 12-14, 11-3, 11-9, 11-5 defeat by Mark Brown.

Charles Wilkinson was unbeaten in Rayne F's 6-4 win over Notley H.

There were three firsts in the Notley I-Notley H match. The I team's Jane Young and Steve Baines recorded their first wins of the season, as did Tony Murray of the H team.

Nguyen Tran and Mike Pitt were unbeaten as the H team took the match 8-2.

Braintree's inter league teams have got off to a good start in the Essex League.

The veterans' B team won their first two matches 7-2 against Brentwood B and 8-1 against West Essex B. Duncan Elloy and Graham Farmer were unbeaten in both matches.

The veterans' C team began with an 8-1 win over Ilford B. Cec Butcher and Mike Johnston were undefeated.

Graham Farmer's forte has always been to persuade big name players to turn out for his team. But in his latest match it was his bat that did the talking.

Braintree Table Tennis League leaders Black Notley A needed a special performance from their captain to retain their advantage at the top when they took on Liberal A.

Short of players, they had to call up Gordon Fairchild from the second division. And the normally reliable Ian Brown – 13 wins out of 15 up to this point – was out of sorts and won only one set, both Barry Pritchard and Mike Johnston getting the better of him.

But Farmer rose to the occasion to win his three singles – two in straight games and one in four - and join with Brown to win the doubles.

Fairchild also did his bit with a win over Robin Armstrong and the reigning champions emerged with a 6-4 victory.

It was enough to keep them ahead of Cressing A, but only just. Cressing turned out the strong combination of Ian Hayden, Terry Dowsett and Trevor Carter for the third successive match and took nine points off Rayne B to nestle in one point behind the leaders.

It was not completely straightforward. Peter Hance pinched the one set in a nailbiting win at 16-14 in the final game against Carter. He almost repeated it against Hayden but was just edged out at 11-9 in the fifth, the same score by which Carter denied Brian Cook.

Bocking dropped back after a 6-4 defeat to Rayne A. Neither Nigel Hodder nor Paul Davison was in their line-up and they soon learned that Rayne are not a team to take liberties with.

Kevin Gowlett won his three singles and took the doubles with Richard Jennings, but Ian Whiteside, Jon Hill and John Andrews took the rest.

It was quite a week for Gordon Fairchild. Not only did he contribute to Notley A's win, he also played up for the B team and registered twice to help them to an 8-2 victory over Rayne C.

In between those two matches, he also turned out for his own team, Notley C in division two, making it three appearances for different teams on three successive days.

But he was powerless to prevent a crushing defeat by the division's top team Cressing B.

Curiously, Cressing have registered only two 10-0 wins this season, both against the team in second place. Duncan Elloy, Ryan Pitt and Sean Clift did the damage.

Notley now share second place with Rayne D who beat Nomads 8-2 with three wins each from Dave Punt and Keith Martin.

The match was notable for a return to the table of former league secretary Rupesh Harding although he clearly needs a few more games before his touch returns.

Liberal B had only two players against Notley D but that was enough for a 6-4 win. Paul Lombardi was undefeated but Notley's Keith Perrins racked up a good win over Trevor Laird.

Two wins over their D team have pushed Rayne E up to second place in division two of the Braintree Table Tennis League.

They were both tight encounters, as befitting two evenly matched sides, and the variety of the results illustrated the beguiling unpredictability of the game.

In the first match, postponed from earlier in the season, all six players won at least once and lost at least once and the D team pulled back to 6-4 after being 6-1 down.

The E team went one better the following week by winning 7-3.

Paul Whybrow's presence has turned the E team into a potent force but he has not been as all-conquering as expected. He lost one set in each of the matches, in the first to Dave Punt, Punt's only victory of the night, and in the second to Roger Warren.

Punt came close to repeating the dose second time round but was denied at 13-11 in the fifth game.

Whybrow is known to favour the old 21-up system of scoring and did his best to recreate it in a remarkable set against Keith Martin whom he beat 11-8, 20-22, 11-5, 19-17. It was Martin's first defeat of the season.

In what is becoming an E team tradition, different players starred on different evenings. Whybrow and Phil Wade won two sets each on the first occasion but it was Richard Whiteside, with one win first time round, who was the only one to remain unbeaten in the second match.

Also in division two, sixth-placed Black Notley E maintained a comfortable cushion between themselves and Nomads, the team one place below them, when they shared the points in a rearranged fixture. Keith Flowers was unbeaten for Notley E.

Cressing C, a mid-table team at best for the past few years in division three, have shown greater consistency this season and two good wins in their last two matches have pushed them up to equal second place.

They beat Black Notley G 8-2 then went on to take all ten sets from Notley I. Derek Agent won six out of six.

Cressing share second place with Notley F who had wins of 7-3 over Rayne G and 8-2 over Notley G. Clare Johnson and Adam Purslow were unbeaten against Notley G.

Notley's H and I teams got little change out of Sible Hedingham and Rayne F respectively. With one exception, their opponents won all the sets in straight games. So step forward Josh Rhodes, the only one to spoil the symmetry by taking a game off Peter Taylor.

It was much closer between Rayne and Notley's G teams.

Tom Elder took his three singles for Rayne, of course, but it was Barry Mouser's win over Steve Ascott plus an Elder/Mouser win in the doubles that enabled the teams to share the points.

Mike Smith and Alan Cook won two each for Notley G.

In the Essex League, Braintree veterans' C team had a comfortable win over Southend D. Robin Armstrong, Mike Johnston and Cec Butcher won all their sets, seven of them in straight games and the other two 3-1.

Black Notley A and Sible Hedingham have both made their way through to this year's Braintree Table Tennis League cup finals, Notley in the knock out cup and Hedingham in the restricted.

Neither passage was strewn with too many obstacles. Notley beat Rayne A 5-1 in their semi final while Hedingham were 9-0 winners against Rayne G.

For Notley, Ian Brown beat both Jon Hill and Ian Whiteside in straight games. Steve Kerns beat Whiteside and Notley won two doubles to reach the required five sets.

Rayne's sole victory came from Steve Pennell who beat Ken Lewis 12-10, 11-5, 11-3.

The other semi final, yet to be played, will be between Bocking and Cressing A. Bocking had won through to that stage earlier but Cressing had a delayed quarter final against Rayne C to deal with, something they achieved by 9-0.

Hedingham also do not know who their final opponents will be as the semi final between Notley's D and E teams was postponed.

Hedingham's task against Rayne G was rendered considerably easier by the absence of Tom Elder in the visitors' side. Barry Mouser gave Mark Brown something to think about - Brown won 11-6, 10-12, 7-11, 11-7, 11-6 – but Roy Hooper and Graham Cannon were untroubled.

In the league division one, Black Notley B were involved in two tight matches. They shared the points with Rayne B and just missed out at 6-4 against Liberal A.

Rayne B had only two players but Peter Hance won his three singles and the doubles with Paul Mitchell to help them get up to five sets.

James Hicks was in form for Notley against Liberal. He won all three singles but it was a narrow defeat for him and Rob Stannard at the hands of Mike Johnston and Barry Pritchard that denied them a draw. The Liberal pair won 11-9 in the fifth.