

HARD BAT COMPETITION

The final sixteen players gathered at the Civil Service table tennis club on Saturday 13 January 2024 to do battle, and to meet old friends of course, in the annual Hard Bat tournament which had not taken place since 2020 due to the COVID pandemic. Once again only the identical bats provided on the day were allowed to be used, which continues to make sure this competition is one that is fair and equal for all of the entrants.



The main prize was once again the **John Mycroft Boucher** Hard Bat trophy in honour of the very first winner of the Championships of Gloucestershire in 1902 at the Victoria Rooms in Clifton and one of the founder members of our league that same year. He was also an inaugural committee member of the Ping Pong Association when that was formed in London in December 1901 to which the Bristol league was affiliated (*pictured right in 1899*). There was also the perpetual silver salver for the Plate competition winner, called the **James Hamilton** Hard Bat trophy, in memory of **Dr James Edwin Sherrard Hamilton** who was instrumental in re-forming our league after WW1 in 1919 when he was elected as our first Chairman and also became the very first winner of the Men's Singles event at our Bristol Closed Individual Championships in the 1919/1920 season in which there were 72 entrants. His Bristol University team also captured the Division 1 title too.



For the competition itself this year then, players representing divisions from the Premiership down to the fifth were placed in four groups of four based on their current league averages, as well as ensuring that no players started off in the same group as either a club colleague or a previous opponent in previous years as best as possible. An early upset to the seeding came in Group A, where the number one seed, and former 2016 champion and Premier Division player, **Gary Baldwin** (Failand), lost the very last match in the group to the hard bat newcomer and 15-year-old Division 1 player, **Josh Branch** (K&B) 21-7, 21-11, which meant Gary would finish as runner-up. **Charlotte Taylor** (Civil Service) also did outstandingly well to beat the current Plate trophy holder, **Simon Monks** (HCC) in two-straight games 21-15, 21-14 to finish third. The same scenario was repeated in Group B, when top seed, **Nick Branch** (Failand) also lost the very last match in his group to another newbie, **Jack Vaughan** (St George) 22-20, 21-12. Meanwhile, yet another new player, **Roger Pritchard** (Portishead) was playing exceptionally well, and defeated the 2011 Plate champion, **Terry Toghill** (Civil Service) 21-15, 21-6, but prior to that, when Roger was drawn against **Nick Branch** in the very first group match, he found himself 20-15 up in the first game, only to eventually lose 24-22. He lost the second game 10-21. In Group C, however, the seeding did go as expected, with **Rob Chandler** (Failand) and another newbie, **Charlie Callus** (K&B), topping the group, with **Tony Cooper** (Civil Service) and **Matthew Brealey** occupying the third and fourth spot. This was also the only initial group where two matches of the six played went to three games; the other three groups' games were all decided in two straight. **Rob Akery** (Portishead) was also playing in his first Bristol Hard Bat competition, and immediately won his first match in a very tight encounter 22-20, 21-19 against **Mark Kerslake** (HCC) who was making his seventh appearance. **Jon Thorn** (HCC), the 2020 runner-up in the Main event, eased through the group to take top spot, and **Vasily Pribylov** (Civil Service) finished fourth, but not after giving Mark a scare by just losing 24-22 in one tight see-saw game.

Plate Competition

By the time there was a short break for the customary hot bacon rolls, most of the players seemed to be getting to grips with the alien bats, and it was almost as if some had been using them for years, especially with so many of the rallies being of an exceptional quality. This half of the competition kicked off with all of the players from the first round who had finished third and fourth in their groups, but surprisingly all of the players on Table 3 that lined up were from the same club – Civil Service. **Vasily Pribylov** began by just edging out **Charlotte Taylor** in three close games, and then **Tony Cooper** beat **Terry Toghill** in two straight. However, when those two early winners met in the penultimate group match, it was Vasily who would beat Tony 21-17, 18-21, 21-19. Although Terry narrowly won against Charlotte in the last dead-rubber match (*no pun intended!*), he could not stop Vasily and Tony making it through to the semi-finals. On the next table, **Roger Pritchard** seemed to be easing through with three two-straight wins against **Matthew Brealey**, **Mark Kerslake** and **Simon Monks**, although a 26-24 win in the second game against Mark was nervy. The runner-up position was filled by Simon who managed to at last surprisingly find his form and win the last two matches!

The semi-finals soon followed, with **Simon Monks** continuing his remarkable resurgence and just beating **Vasily Pribylov** 21-14, 21-17 to reach his third Plate final and hoping to defend his title. In the other semi-final, the energetic **Tony Cooper**, eventually met his match with **Roger Pritchard** who dominated proceedings and ran out the winner, 21-13, 21-14 to reach his maiden Plate final in this competition.



Roger then continued his hot vein of form and breezed into a 4-1 lead in the first set of the Plate final, but the rallies and choice of shots with Simon did appear cautious by both finalists, and despite Simon missing a few backhands and Roger missing a number of forehands, the scores were level at 10-all. After that, Roger seemed to have more control with his backhand, with intermittent, and successful forehand winners and he wrapped the first game up at 21-13. Continuing that momentum at the start of the second, he raced into a 4-0 lead, but Simon (*see left*) was

holding on and reached 4-7, before unleashing a great backhand flick to reduce the gap to two points. However, a number of net returns by Simon saw Roger pull away to gain a 15-9 lead and it appeared that Simon's seventh bacon roll before the final was taking effect (*only kidding, Simon!*). Simon's returns were now either net-bound or long off the end line of the table, but then from 11-16 down he remarkably managed to pull back to 17-18 before finding the net once more. A backhand miss by Simon at 18-20, and he had relinquished his title to a new and well-deserving champion. Congratulations, Richard (*see right being presented his trophies by Dave Reeves*).



Main Competition

All four groups in this half of the Hard Bat competition contained some really strong candidates for the title that the current holder and five-times winner, **Dave Reeves**, was unable to defend due to an injury. There were no upsets on table one, with the number two seed, **Nick Branch** and the high-flying **Josh Branch** seeing off the resolute **Rob Chandler** and **Rob Akery**. The latter's two players' match was the only one that went to three, with **Rob Akery** playing superbly to defeat the more experienced **Rob Chandler** 21-7, 7-21, 21-15. In the end, and meeting each other for the first time in the last match in this group, **Josh Branch**, and looking to be the favourite to be the new champion based on his performances so far having breezed through undefeated until this point, was startled to find himself losing 21-17, 23-21 to **Nick Branch**. On Table 2, three of the six matches went to three games, but remarkably **Jon Thorn** was involved in all three – losing to **Gary Baldwin** and **Jack Vaughan**, and only beating **Charlie Callus** in a tight encounter 21-14, 21-23, 21-17. Jack then beat Gary 21-16, 21-17 in the last match to seal top spot, with Gary as runner-up.

The semi-finals pitched the two youngsters together (**Josh Branch** and **Jack Vaughan**), who many watching throughout the day's proceedings expected would have met in the final, and the more experienced veterans, **Nick Branch** and **Gary Baldwin** faced each other on the adjoining table. The Josh v Jack match was brutal, with neither player holding back, but it was Josh who eventually reigned supreme 21-18, 22-20 in an epic battle. The number one and two seeds, Gary and Nick respectively, finally confronted each other for the first time today, (and the first in this competition since the epic three-way semi-final "group of death" in 2020 with Nick and Dave Reeves), but in a very cagey, but nevertheless exciting two games of table tennis, it was Gary who would succumb to Nick 10-21, 17-21.

The final was therefore a repeat of the earlier meeting in the day in round two, when Nick beat left-handed Josh in two highly competitive straight games. Josh was therefore seeking retribution as the first game unfolded claiming the first two points with ease. An impressive forehand then saw him race into a 4-1 lead. Some great blocked returns by Nick, however, and a loose forehand smash into the net by Josh, and it was level at 4-4. Nick then won three points in a row by concentrating his play down Josh's right side of the table and a terrific drop shot by him put him into a 9-7 lead. 12-9 then became 13-13 though. They were level again at 15-15. At 17-18 down though, Nick found the net and it was now 17-19. At 18-20, a repeat



net hit again by Nick and the first set to Josh. The second game was just as exciting, but this time Josh raced into an 11-7 lead. However, some wild forehand hitting by him ensued, and with much more control by Nick, the scores were level again at 14-all, which soon become 14-18 in favour of Josh, who was now imagining his hands around the trophy. Josh then attempted a forehand loop and suddenly 16-19 became 17-19 and the game suddenly became exceedingly tight. A simple failed return ended in the net and amazingly Nick was leading 20-19, but then a long shot off the table by Nick at match point brought the game level at deuce. A combination of fortune and great play then saw Nick grab the next two points, and the final was going into a third set.

Nick began the third and final game by serving, and did so.....straight into the net! It was then nip and tuck, but with some bold and extreme shot attempts by both players, culminating in a great forehand winner by Nick to lead 6-4, a fantastic rally at 9-8 was lost by Josh to make it 10-8 in favour of Nick. Some great covering on the backhand by Nick stretched his lead to 14-10, but a forehand miss and an early rally net, saw Josh (*see above left*) creep back to 15-13. A fantastic forehand smash by Nick increased it to 17-13, but regular and miraculously-fast counter forehand hits emanating from Josh's bat and he found himself just 19-20 down with a net cord. The match ended on the next point, when Nick found the far edge of the table and Nick had finally won his first title in this competition at long last and the crowd had just witnessed one of the tightest finals in years (18-21, 22-20, 21-19). Congratulations, Nick (*see right being presented with the John Mycroft Boucher trophy by the current holder*).



Our thanks also go to the Civil Service club for allowing us to stage this event at their venue once again and it is hoped that an even larger entry may be able to be accommodated next year, so we look forward to seeing you again then. Both finals, kindly umpired by **Jon Thorn**, were also videoed on the day, as well as the **Josh Branch/Jack Vaughan** classic semi-final, and hopefully they will all soon be available to view either on this website or on YouTube within the next week or so. Thank you.

John Ruderham

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