**Table tennis by Chris Blake - www.tabletennis365.com/Sunderland**

The Sunderland & District league this week turned its attention to Team Handicap Cup with two of the four quarter-final matches being played.

In the 1st tie saw Division 1 side St Chads (currently lying in 3rd place) play Sacriston St Bedes currently lying in 2nd place in Division 2 and odds to gain promotion to the top flight with only 5 games remaining.

Sacriston represented by Chris Grant, Nigel Coe and Dan Nicholson were awarded between 4 and 10 points as a handicap to their opponents in an attempt to cancel any advantage the 1st Division side would have over their challengers.

Despite this handicap St Chads ran out comfortable 9 – 0 winners with excellent performances from Jimmy Scope, Dave Bissett and Barry Cuthbertson.

The Saints will now go on to play 1st Division leaders Thompson Insurance A who had a 5 – 2 win over rivals Durham CA A currently lying in 2nd place in the same division.

Player / Manager Allan Thompson gave Thompsons a perfect start when he beat Gavin Bestford (+6) 21 – 19 and 21 – 16. Andrew Wilkinson double their lead despite awarding his opponent Stuart Anderson 12 points – in a really powerful attacking play Wilkinson ran out winner 21 – 15 and 21 – 18.

Colin Hunt gave Durham some hope when he defeated Diane Cartmell after overcoming a handicap of 12 points, eventually winning 21 – 17 and 21 – 19.

Wilkinson increased the lead with a narrow 2 – 0 victory over Bestford before Hunt pulled one back to make the match score 3 – 2 in Thompsons favour.

With the winners being the 1st team to 5 sets Durham still had everything to play for but their hope was short-lived when Cartmell disposed of Anderson and Wilkinson finished the night undefeated when he beat Colin Hunt (+7) 21 – 13 and 21 – 18 to set up another all 1st division mouth-watering against St Chads.

With teams from Divisions 2 and 3 yet to play against each other in the other 2 quarter-final legs, and the winners of these matches drawn to play each other in the other semi-final, the final of the Team Handicap Cup is now guaranteed to have representation from Division 1 and either the 2nd or 3rd Division.

\*In the league, 2nd Division North East Bed Centre are all but guaranteed promotion despite being out of action this week. Rivals West CA A beat St Gabriels B 7 – 3 but dropped 2 valuable points against lowly Durham CA B in a very close and entertaining game. This means that NEBC’s current points total of 58 points can only now be bettered by Sacriston St Bedes B. With 2 teams being promoted to Division 1 NEBC can now start planning for life in the top flight.

In the only other match to be played in Division 2 Redby CA A were 8 – 2 winners against St Johns A. The score suggests this was a comfortable match but this was far from the truth with only one of the 10 sets being decided in 3 games and 33 of the 42 games played being decided 11 – 7 or more.

Frank Booth (3), Malcolm Deneven (2) and Ken Tweedy (2) did the damage for Redby with the former combining to take the only doubles set 11 – 3 in the 5th and deciding end. Craig Hilton recorded the 2 sets for the Saints with Istvan Soos and Craig Burton extremely unlucky not to pick up a set on the night despite playing well throughout.

Redby now move up to 5th place and more importantly have opened up a 4 point gap on the relegation spot.

There was only 1 game played in Division 3 and what a close affair it turned out to be when leaders St Gabriels C took on 2nd placed Redby CA B.

The match finished all square with a 5 – 5 draw resulting in the points being shared.

Despite the importance of the game, there was some excellent table tennis played – Joe Muldowney was man-of-the match after winning all of 3 singles sets and combining with Howard Forster to win the only doubles set. With Alan Girdwood edging an epic game 11 – 9 in the 5th against Alan Ray Redby earned a well-earned draw.

Sid Gooding was pick of the bunch for the Saints winning 2 of his 3 singles, narrowly losing out to Muldowney 3 – 1 in the final set of the night despite taking the first end. With Murden picking up 2 sets and Alan Ray 1 kept up their promotion hopes alive with a very valuable and hard earned draw.

\*The Sunderland & District Closed TT Tournament took place at the weekend with some excellent and very entertaining table tennis played throughout. Watch out next week for a full report on the tournament\*

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