**Understrength Durham Vetts find the going tough**

**County notes by Chris Blake**

**Division 2a**

Last year’s ‘runners up’ Durham were hoping to go one step further this season and gain promotion to Division One of the County Championships. Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond their control Durham were unable to field a lady player. In this respect they were forced to concede 3 out of the 10 sets up for grabs in each of their 4 matches - immediately placing them on the back foot.

Despite this early set back Durham fought valiantly with some very good individual performances, in particular John Williamson, who played extremely well all weekend and was unlucky not to pick up more sets than he did.

After the 1st weekend matches Durham are currently lying at the foot of the table having understandably managing to pick up only 1 point for their efforts (a draw against close neighbours Northumberland) – an outstanding effort considering they were 3 nil down going into the match. The remaining matches against; Cambridgeshire 1 (lying 2nd), Essex 2 (3rd) and South Yorkshire (4th) were just a bridge too far for Durham. Despite giving a good account of themselves there was little reward (in terms of points) for their effort and commitment to the cause.

**League table after the 1st Weekend**



**1st Round: Northumberland (5 – 5)**

(Robson**\*** 1, Blake**\*** 1, Williamson 2, **\***Doubles 1)

Having travelled to Draycott & Longeaton (Derbyshire) Durham’s first opponents were close neighbours Northumberland! With both sets of players playing in the Sunderland & District and Northumberland leagues this was always going to be a close affair.

First blood went to Durham who were by far the best turned out!



Sporting their new kit Durham set about their business focused on the task in hand.

The first set saw Durham’s Chris Blake play Northumberland’s Jim Stamas. This was a tense affair with both players looking to dominate the rallies wherever possible and bring in their attacking flair. Stamas just edged the 5th (11 – 9) to win the set and put Northumberland into what was effectively a 4 – 0 lead (taking into account the 3 sets Durham had to concede at the beginning of the match).

John Williamson clawed a set back with an excellent 3 – 2 win over Northumberland’s Marc Cotton. John played outstanding table tennis, looking to bring in his forehand attack to stem the flow of Marc’s spinny and controlled loop – eventually winning 11 – 2 in the 5th to make the match score 4 – 1. Jimmy Scope then piled on the pressure with an excellent 3 – 2 win over Durham’s Dave Robson to give Northumberland a 5 – 1 lead.

However, Durham dug in deep and gradually clawed back the sets one by one. Blake had a straight sets win over Marc Cotton, Robson & Blake edged a tight doubles game over Stamas and Cotton (winning 11 – 6 in the 5th) – to make the match score 5 – 3 with 2 sets to play. With no margin of error Williamson again played excellent attacking table tennis to dominate his match against Scope winning 3 games to nil to make the match score 5 – 4 with only one set to play.

In the final set of the match Robson lost the opening game to Stamas (11 – 7) but stormed back to take the next 3 games (7, 9 & 8) playing some excellent backhand smashes and open / attacking play along the way in what was a very entertaining game. Robson’s win ensured Durham gained a share of the points which was richly deserved following an excellent team effort from everyone concerned.

**2nd Round: Cambridgeshire 1 (3 – 7)**

(Robson**\*** 2, Blake**\*** 0, Williamson 0, **\***Doubles 1)

Round 2 saw Durham play Cambridgeshire 1 a side containing the experienced Mick Harper, Simon Pryke and Alex Facoy. Fresh from their narrow defeat against Essex 2’s they were looking to get some points on the Board.

The match result was closer than the score suggests and with a bit of luck Durham may have scrapped a draw had 2 narrow defeats been converted into wins; John Williamson lost to Simon Pryke (8 – 11 in the 5th) and Chris Blake losing to Alex Facoy (9 – 11 in the 4th).

Dave Robson gave Durham a 1 – 0 in a very tight match against (-10, 7, 5, -10 and 9 in the 5th) – this was an excellent game with both players playing great table tennis throughout. In his other set Robson again just managed to edge the game against Mick Harper - 9, 10, -9, -4 and 6 in the 5th).

Chris Blake had lost to Harper earlier in the match in straight sets although he played very well against the awkward rubbers used by his opponent – losing -9, -6 and -9. In his other set Blake narrowly lost out to Alex Facoy (-9 in the 4th) in an entertaining game which could have gone either way.

Following his 2 wins against Northumberland in the opening match, John Williamson was full of confidence. He played well throughout the match against Cambridgeshire 1 with powerful attacking play from both flanks but particularly his forehand side. He was narrowly defeated by Alex Facoy (-10, -4, 7 and -4 in the 4th) and against Simon Pryke (15, -6, -8, 4 and -8 in the 5th). This was a great effort by Williamson a theme which was to continue throughout the weekend.

Durham’s 3rd set win came from Robson’s / Blake’s doubles win over Pryke / Facoy (8, 8, -8 and 7 in the 4th).

Durham had played some excellent table tennis throughout this match - however, having to concede 3 sets and just losing out in 2 sets they were just edged in a very tight game against a very experienced side.

**3rd Round: South Yorkshire (2 – 8)**

(Robson**\*** 1, Blake 1, Williamson**\*** 0, **\***Doubles 0)

Next up was the match against South Yorkshire who had previously lost their first 2 games; convincingly against eventual leaders Nottinghamshire (10 – 0) and narrowly against Essex 2 (4 – 6) who went on to finish 3rd after the 1st weekend’s fixtures.

In this respect, Durham went into the 2nd day full of hope but they were immediately cursing their bad luck after hearing the news that their opponents had strengthened their team bringing in experienced British League player Andrew Horsefield to face them.

Chris Blake was the first to face Horsefield losing the 1st two ends quite easily (-6 and -6) but he was starting to grow in confidence bringing in his own attack and backhand block to put his opponent under constant pressure. Unfortunately he just lost out in the 3rd (-12). Had Blake managed to win this end he would have taken confidence from this and had a real go in the 4th & 5th ends. In Horsefield’s other single’s game he played Dave Robson in an excellent match – Robson just edged the game (8, 7, -7, -7 and 7 in the 5th) to register one of only two sets won by Durham.

Chris Blake won the only other set registered by Durham with a fine win over Shaun Bibby. The game was closely fought and was played in good spirit with both players having opportunities to win the game. Blake eventually emerged as the winner in a very tight game (7, -9, -2, 8 and 7 in the 5th). Bibby’s other single’s game saw him beat Williamson (10, 3, and 7) – the game was a lot closer than the score suggests with the Durham player counting himself unlucky not to take the set into a 4th end at the very least.

In Williamson’s other set he narrowly lost out to the experienced Bill Grant (10, -7, -10 and -8) in an excellent game which Williamson could have easily won had he capitalised on the opportunities he had constructed. Grant had earlier had an excellent win over Durham’s Dave Robson by the narrowest of margins – winning deuce in the 5th (12 – 10).

The doubles set was another tense affair with South Yorkshire winning in 3 straight (8, 8 and 9).

Once again this was another great effort by Durham, particularly due to the fact they had commenced the game 3 sets down. Had some of the sets went the other way Durham may have just managed to scrape a draw or a closer 6 – 4 defeat.

**4th Round: Essex 2 (3 – 7)**

(Robson**\*** 1, Blake**\*** 1, Williamson 0, **\***Doubles 0)

So…onto the final match of the weekend against Essex 2 team consisting of; Alex Abbott, the experienced John Monk and Paul Cumming. Essex 2 just edged a very tight game 7 – 3 – again, this could have easily been 6 – 4 or maybe even a draw.

Dave Robson got Durham off to an excellent with a 3 – 2 win over John Monk (-7, 8, -9, 5 and 9th in the 5th). However, Robson lost out to Alex Abbot in his other set losing in 5 ends (-9, -5, 7, 2 and 4 in the 5th). Abbot went on to win his remaining singles set beating Blake in a very entertaining game – emerging victorious 11 – 7 in the 4th).

Blake did however to recover and win his other singles game with an excellent win over Cuming (-7, 11, 6 and 5 in the 4th).

Cuming had earlier inflicted defeat on Williamson in 3 straight (6, 7, and 8). Williamson did not let this affect him and played some outstanding table tennis against John Monk but was narrowly defeated 11 – 5 in the 5th and deciding end.

Robson / Blake lost the only doubles set of the match losing to Monk / Abbot – 10, -5, 9, -7 and -9 in the 5th.

Once again Durham were desperately unlucky not to get anything out of the game. The players had given their all and worked extremely hard throughout the weekend – it’s just real shame that their efforts were not rewarded with a few additional points on the board!

**All still to play for…**

Durham will be back to full strength for the 2nd weekend in January 2012 with the expected return of Shirley Gelder and will also be able to call upon the services of Keith Weatherby. In this respect there is still everything to play for - with 3 matches left to play; leaders Nottinghamshire, Cheshire 2 (5th) and Bedfordshire (7th). Durham still have a fighting chance to avoid relegation and will be doing everything in their power to achieve this.

**Chris Blake (Captain)**