**Understrength Durham County find the going tough**

**Table tennis notes by Chris Blake**

**County Championships Focus**

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, represented by Dave Robson, Chris Blake and John Williamson fought valiantly with some very good individual performances, in particular Williamson, who played extremely well all weekend and can count himself unfortunate not to pick up more sets than he did.

After the 1st weekend matches held in Derbyshire, 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) – a great 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 – losing 7 – 3, 7 – 3 and 8 – 2 respectively. However, all of these matches were far closer than the scores suggest – with a large proportion of individual sets being decided in the 5th end. Had Durham being able to convert more of these key sets into wins the final outcome would have looked far different.

However, Durham will be back to full strength for the 2nd and final weekend in January with the expected return of Shirley Gelder and will also be in a position to call upon the services of Keith Weatherby. There is still everything to play for - with 3 matches left to play; leaders Nottinghamshire, Cheshire 2 (5th) and Bedfordshire (7th). In this respect Durham should have sufficient experience to achieve the results they require which will see them pull through to safety and start afresh for another title / promotion push next season.

**British League Focus**

A number of Sunderland league players regularly play for Hartlepool ‘1’ in the British National League – including Darren McVitie (see photo if you can use it), Dave Robson (see photo if you can use it), Barella brothers (Graeme and Anthony), Chris Blake, Andy Dryden (see photo if you can use it). This strong side has been further strengthened by the signing of Ahmed Heykal of Egypt – attends Sunderland University (see photo if you can use it) who has played at the highest level.

The British League is held over 4 weekends between November and February - after the first weekend Hartlepool ‘1’ were lying joint top with Wigan having won 3 and drawing 1 of their 4 opening matches.

The 2nd round of matches were held in Derbyshire last weekend and saw Hartlepool ‘1’ in impressive form. Despite the absence of the Barella brothers (playing matches in Belgium), excellent performances by Heykal, McVitie, Robson, Blake and Dryden saw them win all of their matches; Grimsby (8 – 0), Derwent (7 – 1), Isle of Man (8 – 0) and joint leaders Wigan (7 – 1). The wins mean that Hartlepool ‘1’ are now outright leaders of the Division and with only 2 weekends (and 6 matches to play) remain favourites for the title.

**Sunderland League Focus**

The Sunderland League has now completed over half of the of the fixture list.

In **Division 1** the title race is between 3 sides Thompson Insurance A, Silksworth IM A and St Chads – however, Silksworth IM A appear to be firm favourites following their recent impressive victory over reigning champions Thompson’s – who have been rocked by the news that their No. 1 player Andrew Wilkinson has a serious knee ligament injury which may see him miss the remainder of the season.

The race for the **Division 2** title is wide open with any one of four teams in with a shout – current leaders Sacriston St Bedes A, Mortimer (2nd), Silksworth IM B (3rd) and St. Gabriels B (4th). However, chances have been slightly dented following this week’s 2 – 8 defeat to Sacriston St Bedes B in a very entertaining match which saw saints Duncan Fraser and Ian McAllister undefeated before combining to win the doubles – the final set being won by Mark Walton. Dave Revell and Steve Young picked up the only sets for St. Gabriels.

In **Division 3** St Johns A remain firm favourites following this week’s excellent 7 – 3 victory over close rivals Sacriston St Bedes C. A defeat which sees St Bedes replaced in 2nd place by St Johns B.

Istvan Soos was once again ‘man of the match’ for St Johns A - winning his 3 sets and the doubles with team-mate Craig Burton (who also won 2 of his 3 sets – losing narrowly to Lee Maher 6 – 11 in the 5th). The remaining set was won by Craig Hilton to ensure a maximum 4 points for their victory. This was an extremely close match with 6 out of 10 sets being decided in the 4th and 5th ends – 4 of which were won by St Johns A which effectively helped to secure their win.

**Division 1 - Week 11 results:**

Redby CA A 3 vs. Durham CA 7

Thompson Ins. B 4 vs. West CA A 6

**Division 2 - Week 11 results:**

Mortimer CA 8 vs. Redby CA B 2

Redby CA 6 vs. Silksworth IM B 4

Sacriston St. Bedes B 8 vs. St. Gabriels B 2

West CA B 2 vs. Sacriston St. Bedes A 8

**Division 3 - Week 11 results**

Sacriston St. Bedes D 2 vs. St. Gabriel’s C 8

St. John’s A 7 vs. Sacriston St. Bedes C 3

St. John’s B 10 vs. St. John’s C 0