

The limited number of younger players taking up table tennis in recent years has long been a concern of the Braintree League, but if this year's individual championships are anything to go by, the situation could be about to improve.

No fewer than 18 junior players (under 18) entered the tournament, 12 of them under 15.

Most are the product of the coaching scheme the league runs in conjunction with the Black Notley club. There are currently 19 juniors among the 24 people attending the Sunday afternoon sessions.

While Zach Harrington and Patrick Gilbert demonstrated the top end of the range in the junior boys' singles on finals night, others showed their prowess in the events played earlier in the weekend, most notably in the handicap singles.

This year's handicap event final featured 16-year-olds Oliver Gregory and Matt Wallace, while 14-year-old George Wallace reached the semi final.

The odd one out was Chris Parr, whose junior days are some 30 years behind him, and a player with the kind of defensive game inexperienced players often find difficult to cope with.

He faced two of the league's younger players, was made to sweat in the first and found the second too much for him.

Keith Martin, a leading coach at the Sunday coaching sessions, takes up the story: 'I was really impressed with the way the juniors performed throughout the weekend,' he said. 'There were some excellent performances, none more so than the way that first Sam Johnson and then Oliver Gregory played against Chris Parr.

'Sam really held it together and was unlucky not to go through. He took one game and pushed him all the way in the others, which he lost 11-8, 11-9 and 12-10.

'He played intelligently and produced some mature and powerful strokes.

'I noticed Oliver had been watching that game and when he came up against Chris he had worked out a way to beat him and put that into action brilliantly.

'He had gone through two attacking players, Rob Stannard and Duncan Elloy, in the previous rounds but had to change his game against Chris.

'He is quite an experienced player for his age and I was impressed by his mature approach and the positive way he went about tackling Chris's defensive style.'

Gregory (off +2) went on to win the final against Matt Wallace (- 4) 4-11, 11-6, 11-8, 11-6. Wallace had earlier knocked out men's seed John Cleasby and then removed his own brother George in the semi final.

George Wallace came to the fore in the cadets' singles where he had an excellent win in the final over the more experienced Tom Brown 8-11, 11-6, 14-12, 12-10.

Keith Martin was encouraged by the performances of the younger players in the cadets' event.

'It was an excellent win by George, who lost to Tom in the division three event. But Jack Banks deserves considerable credit for the strong performance he put up against George. He lost narrowly 13-15, 11-5, 11-9, 11-7, a superb effort for a player who only took up the game three months ago.

'Olly Ledwith also played well in his group and it was particularly encouraging to see two eight-year-olds, Mia Charles and William Bettley, willing to have a go.'

The league's top two juniors Patrick Gilbert and Zach Harrington faced each other in the final of the junior doubles as well as the boys' singles.

While Harrington upset the seedings to defeat Gilbert in the singles final, the Netts player had the upper hand in the doubles – but only just.

Harrington and Matt Wallace had their chances in all three games against Gilbert and Warren Baines, but fell down each time at the final hurdle to lose 12-10, 12-10, 12-10.

Junior players were less in evidence in the handicap doubles, where pairings are drawn on a random basis. Steve Baines and Simon Webber emerged with the title after an 11-5, 11-6, 11-6 win over Roy Hooper and Ian Whiteside.

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In league matches, Netts Phoenix made up some ground on division one leaders Rayne A by taking all ten sets off Rayne's C team.

But they were held to a draw by Netts A where Kevin Gowlett proved a step too far for any of them.

Also in the first division, Liberal B beat Sible Heddingham 8-2 while Rayne B got the better of Black Notley's B team 6-4 and Rayne C got home by the same score against Notley A.

Brian Riedling was unbeaten for Rayne B and Richard Whiteside for Rayne C.

Division two leaders Rayne D ended a run of ten successive wins when they ran into Liberal C.

Liberal included former Witham FC player Neil Freeman and he made the difference between the two teams. He won his three singles in Liberal's 6-4 victory.

Notley D beat their own E team 6-4, despite three wins from the E team's Warren Baines, while Felsted RBL A had a victory by the same score over Nomads.

Three wins from Andrew Huckson led Notley C to a 7-3 win over White Lions.

Rayne F increased their lead at the top of division three with an 8-2 win over Notley G.

Mike Smith scored an excellent win over Nick Readhead to carry Notley H to an 8-2 win over their own I team while Keir Hughes was unbeaten in the F team's 7-3 win over Rayne G.

Joe Nourse won three for Netts B but that did not stop Felsted B from taking a 6-4 victory.