Men’s Singles 2017

This year’s men’s singles clearly was of interest with Richard Whiteley striving for that so far elusive 25th title - last year saw him fall at the semi final stage to Bryan Birkbeck. The draw after the preliminary matches resulted in 32 players coming to the competition proper. At first glance the seedings and draw favoured Richard, although a potential semi final with Bryan was on the cards. The lower half of the draw included some very good players and more of that to come.

Round of 32 – highlights

This round saw the 16 Division1 players drawn against lower league opposition – on paper a clean sweep for the Division 1 players? Well as it turned out, Andy Challenger from Division 2 had other ideas, he took on the ever youthful Ricky Slack, finalist in the over 60’s, and with a combination of good defensive play and attacking forehands took the match 3-1 even allowing Ricky the luxury of the first set. A great win for Andy, 7-11, 11-6, 11-8, 11-7. Other notable performances came from Jim Shannon, he did Division 3 proud, taking a set off Ripley’s Nathan Taylor and the same can be said for rising star, Lewis Bush who took a set of last year’s losing finalist Bryan Birkbeck. Finally a word on Richard Blunden who played Andy Whiteley, losing in 3 straight sets but at 11-8, 12-10, 11-9 a fine performance against one of the league’s better players.

Round of 16 – highlights

So, with the exception of Andy Challenger against Bryan Birkbeck, we had seven all Division 1 ties. Andy’s run came to a gallant end; Bryan was just too strong and came through 3-0. Other matches in the top half saw Number 1 seed, Richard Whiteley overcome Graham Bowland 3-1 without any real concern. Nathan Taylor with his aggressive all round game proved too strong, 3 sets to 1, for, Ian Wright, who with his own particular style of play can be extremely difficult to beat. Another match ending 3-1 was that between Filip Wojtkowiak and Paul Walker, it was Filip who ran out the winner, again a battle of styles, Filip with his rock solid defence overcoming the spin and loop attack of Paul.

So to the lower section of the draw and what a set of matches! First off Sean O’Connor, rapidly improving after his years away from the sport, took on and beat Andy Whiteley, 15-13, 11-8, 10-12, 11-8. A great game and Andy had his chances to make more of an impression in the match. Tim Simpson another player back playing after time away from the game, played long time HTTA stalwart Ian Hilton, Tim with his power and aggressive play just too much for Ian’s game, running out the winner 3-0. The third game pitched Joe Wright against David Jackson; both players have developed their games over recent years with Joe, currently the holder of HTTA’s most improved player award. In a real tussle of a game, Joe ran away with the first two sets 11-7, 11-6 but Dave hit back taking the third 11-5. The fourth proved to be a very close game and for Dave the agony of losing the set by the narrowest of margins, 14-12 and with it the match 3-1. In the final round match, number 2 seed, Deo Jones ran out a 3-0 winner against Mike Pickering, who was destined for other victories in the over 60’s event. Mike’s strong forehand and pimpled defence backhand just weren’t able to stop Deo on this occasion.

 Quarter Finals – highlights

Top seed Richard Whiteley playing with that style that we’ve seen for many years now showed no signs of slowing down against Nathan Taylor, who before the game looked ready for the battle ahead, was beaten comfortably in 3 sets, 11-9, 11-6, 11-3. So who would Richard meet in the semi? It was the match between Bryan and Filip that would provide Richard’s opponent. Bryan with his aggressive attacking play on both wings had the temperament and game plan to overcome Filip’s remarkable defensive blocking tactics. Filip is a difficult opponent and without patience and knowing which ball to hit nearly always comes out on top. So Bryan through in 4 sets, 11-9, 10-12, 11-7, 11-9.

The match of the round saw an old rivalry come to light again, Sean against Tim. What a game they produced – you could feel the tension and with Sean’s coach cheering on from the side, we were set for an epic encounter. Sean started well and took the first set 11-8, what could Tim do? With a review of tactics and driving Sean back from the table, Tim turned the tide and took the second set 11-7. So all square, the third set went all the way and both players had chances but it went to Tim 14-12. The rallies were superb and with many people straining to see the game Tim kept his composure and took the fourth and decisive set 11-9. It was all over and those who saw the match showed their appreciation at the end to two players who gave it their all. Tim then in the second semi final and he would play either Deo or Joe. Sadly for Joe he came up Deo playing at his near best and with that easy style that seems to always get the ball back in play, Deo ran out a comfortable winner, 11-8, 11-6, 11-2.

Semi Final – highlights

Richard against Bryan, a repeat of last year’s semi final, but would Bryan prevail again? Richard, having only dropped one set so far, started the quicker and soon opened up a two set lead, 11-4, 11-7. Bryan fought back well in the third with his aggressive hitting driving Richard away from the table and this enabled him to take the set 12-10. So 2-1 now to Richard and was Bryan about to make it all square? Richard had all the answers in the fourth and Bryan couldn’t get a foothold in the set, Richard ran out a comfortable winner 11-5 and so took the semi final 3-1.

In the second semi, Deo took on Tim. Deo was yet to drop a set and Tim himself had only dropped one. It was a great match to watch and Tim really through everything he had at Deo, fast loops, aggressive backhands, the full repertoire of his shot making. At the other side of the net there was Deo, so calm and relaxed, seeming to have so much time to play his shots. The rallies were superb but time and time again it was Deo with his fluid style and fast hands manipulating the angles who came out on top. A close first set was edged by Deo 12-10 and this seemed to deflate Tim a little and Deo took the next two sets 11-8, 11-7 to win the match 3-0. A great performance by both players but Deo with that something extra special to win through.

The Final – highlights

So the final that was expected, the top two seeds: Richard and Deo. Richard’s route to the final had been a little easier than Deo’s and yet Richard had dropped 2 sets along the way with Deo winning all of his previous 4 matches 3-0.

The pressure was really on Richard, he wanted that 25th title and had been stuck on 24 for a few years now. Deo was a worthy opponent and easily capable of winning the match. The first set was over in a flash, 11-4 to Richard who played a canny game – stepping back from the table and not allowing Deo to come forward and dominate with his clever angled play. The second set, with some superb rallies, Richards controlled loops met with Deo’s blocks and the backhand rallies drawing much applause from the watching players. Deo just wouldn’t give an inch and came through 11-9, so 1-1 in sets. To the third, the pace unrelenting and following similar tactics to the previous game, Richard trying to drive Deo away from the table and stop the controlled play of Deo. It worked, Richard coming through the winner 11-9, so 2-1 and only 1 set away from the title. To the fourth set, Deo began to gain the upper hand, the consistency of shot making remarkable – he just didn’t miss! The set was won 11-8 and the match tied at 2-2. The final was going all the way to the fifth and deciding set. A deep intake of breath by Richard and the set was underway. With a controlled start sprinkled with some aggressive top spin forehands Richard opened up an early lead, he seemed to be in control and at the change of ends for the final set had a decent, but not quite decisive lead. The rallies continued to astonish the watching crowd and slowly but surely Richard extended his lead and was within touching distance at 9-7. Deo had other ideas and clawed his way back to 9-9. Richard was worried, was the title going to slip away again, somehow he refocused and serving he dominated the next two points and willed himself over the line taking the final set 11-9 and the match 3-2.

It was a great final and the culmination of a very good men’s singles tournament.

Congratulations to Richard on winning his 25th title and to Deo for making it a great final and providing all those watching with some sublime table tennis.