

HARD BAT COMPETITION

As in last year's event, the final sixteen players gathered at the Almonds Table Tennis club on Saturday 17 January 2009 to test their skills with the identical bats that were once again being used in the annual Hard Bat competition. With the absence of last year's winner, **Milan Dragojlovic**, a new champion would most certainly be crowned by the end of the day, and with a gleaming new perpetual trophy being graciously donated for this competition by our Association, it was evident that there was a keen and competitive edge from the very outset.



With players being placed in groups of four based on their current league averages, as well as trying to ensure that no two players were in the same initial group as a club colleague, play commenced in earnest at 9am. However, in the very first match in Group C, with **Shaun Fitzpatrick** (Nailsea) of division one succumbing in two straight games to **Phil Turner** (Page) who plays in division eight, and also not winning any other game either in that group, it was apparent that the so-called "top seeds" would not be having it all their own way. After over-coming **Ken Simmons** (Civil Service) in his first match in Group A, **Bill Bruton** (Cleeve) also fell away and had to be content in making his mark in the Plate competition, as too did **Martin Cope** (Cleeve) in Group B. Of those four "top seeds", only **Andrew Smith** (Almonds) from Group D was to make it through to the Main event, which meant that there would also be some fresh faces in the top half vying for the coveted new trophy.

Plate Competition

As the morning wore on, most of the players seemed to be getting to grips with the alien bats, and it was almost as if some had been using them for years, especially with so many of the rallies being of an exceptional quality. **Bill Bruton** (Cleeve) on table three ensured that he made it to the knock-out stage by overcoming **Phil Turner** (Page) and **Duncan Jones** (Page), where he was joined by **Rick Hutchinson** (Cleeve), but only after a three-way tie, and on the games count-back rule. On the

adjoining table, however, **Ken Simmons** (Civil Service) and **Bernard Nash** (Knowle & Brislington) were finding the going as hard as the bats, whereas **Shaun Fitzpatrick** (Nailsea) was finally getting to grips with his one, and was joined in the next phase by **Martin Cope** (Cleeve).

By late afternoon, **Bill Bruton** found himself facing **Shaun Fitzpatrick** in the first semi-final, and seemingly had no real problems cruising into the Plate final, and therefore, whilst taking a well-earned rest, he was able to size up his potential opponent in the other semi-final. Little did he know, however, that he would have to wait for some considerable time! The match between **Martin Cope** and **Rick Hutchinson**, unlike almost every match to that point on the day which had comprised in the main of fast and attacking shots, was a grim and dour affair, with neither player being prepared to force the play. However, and after what seemed an eternity, Martin eventually took the match 23-21, 21-18, which thankfully did not have to be decided by a third set!



As the final got underway in a very cagey and cautious manner, and especially after recalling the previous match, **Brian Pearson** was beginning to wish he hadn't volunteered to umpire! Anyway, both players were soon locked together at 5-5, but then Martin began to serve everything at least a foot above the net, in an effort to tempt Bill into a mistake. With some stunning returns in some of the rallies as well, Martin appeared to pull away

with consummate ease, and wrapped up the first set at 21-9. In the second, he just breezed into a 9-0 lead, only for Bill to pull back to 5-10, and then to 7-15, but then Bill was coaxed into attacking mode once more in order to redeem his precarious situation, which would have probably worked with his own unique and familiar rubbers in any other event, but this time it was to no avail, and Martin ground out the second game to a finish at 21-11, thereby claiming the trophy as the 2009 Plate competition winner. Congratulations, Martin.



Main Competition

After the earlier initial group stages during the morning, both groups in this half of the Hard Bat competition contained some really strong candidates for the vacant title.

Steve Doidge (Portishead) had blasted through to this stage without dropping a single game, as too had **Werner Behrschmidt** (Almonds), with the other two places being filled by **Brian Pearson** (Portishead) and **Andrew Smith** (Almonds). This group was such a close call, however, that four of the six round-robin matches went to a deciding third set. The very first match on table one saw **Steve Doidge** and **Andrew Smith** locked at 20-20 in the third set, before Andrew took the spoils in this heated affair at 23-21. However, Andrew failed to win either of his subsequent two matches, whereas his clubmate, **Werner Behrschmidt** managed to win all of his three, albeit every one of them in the third! The final match saw **Steve Doidge** doing battle with his clubmate, **Brian Pearson**, but surprisingly Brian won 22-20, 21-17, and so staked his own place in the semi-final.

The other group also saw some terrific matches too, and some of the points played in the match between **Mark Kerlake** (Page) and **Terry Toghill** (Civil Service) were simply outstanding. Meanwhile, last year's runner-up **Eric Dews** (Bristol Club) and **Andy Boucher** (Civil Service) were quietly easing their way through to the semi-final stage, even though they each were to lose one match - Andy to Eric, and Eric to Terry, who was overheard to say that the B&DTTA Hard Bat competition was "*the highlight of his table tennis season*". Thank you, Terry. However, Andy left it late to claim the remaining place, having to see off a spirited display from **Mark Kerlake** in the very last match of the group in the deciding third set.

The first semi-final between **Werner Behrschmidt** (Almonds) and **Andy Boucher** (Civil Service) was a joy to watch. The first set went to Werner (21-17), but back came Andy to claim the second at 23-21 after staring at least three match points against him, and it looked as if Werner had been broken at the start of the third, as Andy edged well ahead. However, Werner's resolve was inspiring, and as he wiped the perspiration from his brow on several occasions, he seemed to be the more determined of the two as the game wore on, and eventually ran out the winner at 21-16 to put himself, and his towel, into the final. The same table then entertained **Eric Dews** (Bristol Club) and **Brian Pearson** (Portishead) – both intent on putting on a similar display and range of shots as their counterparts – but it was Eric who was able to put his experience from last year into good effect, and secured his second successive place in the final with a 21-13, 21-14 win.



Whether it was psychological tactics or not, but Eric, who had reached this final stage last year, commenced the first game still with his jumper on. However, it was Werner who was playing the match on "home" territory, and probably though he had an advantage too. Anyway, after sharing the first eight points, it was the left-handed Eric, and intriguingly the only pen-holder in the competition as well, who crept in front at 9-6, only to be pegged back at 9-9, before extending

his lead once more to lead 12-9 with some bold, well-placed attacking shots which brought the deserved and well-earned applause from the onlookers. As the rallies became longer and more exhausting from Eric's point of view, he nevertheless found himself leading 16-12 and then 19-16, and it was Werner who was beginning to show signs of struggling, and he finally relented at 17-21. The second game started with the removal of Eric's jumper, and he seemed intent on wrapping the game up with some incredibly fast attacking and extremely well-placed shots down Werner's backhand, to pull away at 6-3. However, Werner dug deep, and pulled level at 11-11, and was soon 14-13 ahead, which was the first time in the whole match. With more than his fair share of net cords and a succession of edges, he stole the set at 21-17, to level the match. Knowing that it would have taken just five or six shots to not have to play another set, Eric lost the first five points of the decider in a row, and was soon changing ends at 4-10 down, albeit very slowly as he did so. It was now Werner's turn to show his own speed of shot down Eric's back-hand, and he only allowed six more points to be scored against him, and so ran out the winner at 21-10. Congratulations, Werner.



Unlike any other competition being played anywhere at all in this country, and with only the identical hard bats being provided on the day being allowed for use, this has to be the most unique and fair competition that there can possibly be, and many would argue that this is how table tennis should be played.

As you will see in the photographs above, the trophies were very kindly handed out by our Chairman, **Duncan Jones**, who was also competing in this event for the first time this year. Thanks must also go to **Aylwyn Powell** (Almonds), who very generously provided for free all of the refreshments throughout the day, and even did a sandwich run at lunchtime for some of the players. So with everyone thoroughly enjoying the day, it is virtually guaranteed that next year's Hard Bat tournament will be another success, and some of this year's players were already reserving their place for next year's competition!

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