

REPORT ON ESSEX JUNIOR 4 STAR OPEN 19 APRIL 2008 FROM KEN MUHR

Yolanda King, 13, and Lewis Gray, 14, of the Weald Table Tennis Club based at Angley School, Cranbrook, put in great performances at the Essex 4* Junior Open Championships, Harlow, winning the respective girls' and boys' under 15s singles in the same competition where last season they won the under 13 singles. Both had been training at the English Institute of Sport, Sheffield last week.

For Yolanda from Hastings, who also trains regularly at the South East Region High Performance Centre, Angley School, it was also a case of retaining the under 15s girls singles title she won last year, as well as following on from taking the Cotswold's title two weeks ago. She faced her toughest challenge in the quarter-finals while overcoming Evangeline Collier (Essex), 12-10, 5-11, 11-9, 8-11, 11-4. She then had straight games wins, 11-7, 11-5, 11-9 over Rebekah (Essex), and 11-5, 11-6, 11-3 over her South East Region Squad training colleague, Kirsty Wilson (Kent).

However, Yolanda put in even better performances in the under 18 events, reaching both the final of the junior girls' singles via second seed Haylee Potts (Hertfordshire) 11-8, 11-3, 11-13, 10-12, 11-4 after missing several match points in the quarter-finals, and 4th seed Joy Whitehorn (Devon) 11-8, 13-11, 11-6 in the semi-finals, and the final of the elite (high England ranked only) girls' singles, again beating Potts, 11-1, 11-6, 8-11, 11-6 in the semi-finals. Unfortunately in both finals she met the England no.3 Rachel Jamieson (Essex) who plays the same two-wing topspin attacking style as Yolanda but who proved stronger in every department, Yolanda losing 5-11, 6-11, 7-11 in the open singles and 3-11, 2-11, 6-11 in the elite singles. Never the less, she did fantastically well in getting that far.

Lewis Gray, from Benenden and a pupil at Angley School, who topped the national trials the previous weekend, dropped only one game in winning the under 15 boys' singles, being taken to 4 games, 11-3, 7-11, 11-6, 11-5 by the 'long pimples' combination bat player Joe Thursby (Nottinghamshire) in the semi-finals, before defeating Luca Mariano (Essex), 11-9, 11-4, 15-13 in the final. He also recorded wins over higher England ranked players before bowing out 8-11, 4-11, 15-13, 8-11 to Ryan Collier (Suffolk) in the 3rd round of the under 18 boys' singles.

Weald Club and South East Regional Coach Ken Muhr commented, "I think Yolanda and Lewis have made a recent leap in their understanding of the game, realising that winning is not just about playing big shots but that technique is the tool for delivering tactics. With this understanding of the nuances, they are going to be very difficult to beat in the future, even when they are not playing well."

Kirsty Wilson, a member of the South East Region squad and the Howard Club, Gillingham, not only reached the girls' under 15 singles final, Sushmita Limbu (Middlesex) 11-8, 7-11, 11-3, 11-6 in the semi-finals before being overcome by Yolanda King in the final, but she also fought through to the under 18s' singles semi-final with a tight 8-11, 9-11, 11-6, 11-5, 11-9 victory over Charlotte Calcutt (Essex). Although she then lost 14-12, 3-11, 7-11, 8-11 to the eventual title winner, Rachel Jamieson (Essex), she did take the first game off the England no.3.

Kirsty's brother Ross Wilson, who was the losing finalist of the under 13 boys' national trials at Derby the previous weekend, was again on fire in reaching the under 13 boys' singles final at Harlow with epic five games wins over Connor Neenan (Middlesex), 11-6, 12-14, 7-11, 11-4, 11-5 in the quarter-finals, and over top seed Helshan Weerasinghe, Dartford and a member of the Weald Club, Cranbrook, 10-12, 11-6, 2-11, 11-8, 11-7 in the semis. However, his nemesis was again Jared Patel (Essex), who he had lost to in the national trials. This time the final, possibly the best of the day, was much closer, Patel just edging home 19-17, 10-12, 11-9, 11-8.

Harry Lumb, also from the Howard Club and a member of the SE Performance Centre at Cranbrook, competed in about the longest, most nerve-wracking encounter of the tournament while going down 11-9, 11-9, 7-11, 6-1, 14-16 to the talented Damilola Thomas (Middlesex) in the under 15 boys' singles third round. In the deciding game Harry had two match points, and saved countless others, before the spin serve advantage of Thomas eventually proved decisive. Thomas was then dispatched by Lewis Gray in the next round.