

BENENDEN BOY LEWIS GRAY ENGLISH SCHOOLS UNDER 16 CHAMP

As compensation and revenge for narrowly losing to Zak Zilesnick (Middlesex) in the recent National Cadet (under 15) Championships final, Benenden's Lewis Gray, 15, beat the same opponent at the Butterfly Schools National Individual Championships at The Dome, Doncaster on Saturday to be crowned English Schoolboy Under 16 Champion.

Gray, a pupil at Angey School, Cranbrook, and a member of the Weald TT Club based at the school, came back 2 games to one down to defeat the left-handed Londoner 10-12, 11-3, 5-11, 11-6, 11-6. Although he is currently England ranked cadet boy no.2 to Zilesnick's no.1, Gray always had his adversary in his sights. His father, Diccon, explained:

"Despite 3 recent very close losses to Zak, Lewis has always maintained a strong belief that he could and would beat him. He was as usual very determined, focused and played very positively, taking the game to Zak and playing more to the middle of the table and then punching or looping wide to Zak's forehand."

On Sunday, Gray and Weald Club colleague Yolanda King, 14, led the South East side which trains at Angley School, to come third in the National Regional Squad Championships at the Grantham Meres Leisure Centre, Grantham. They beat Yorkshire 9-3, West Midlands 10-2, and North West 7-5 before going down 8-4 to the London region. They then overcame the Eastern region 7-5 in the playoffs for places 3 and 4.

The South East lost two decisive sets in the London match, with the powerful Reece Tan, the England no.4 cadet, playing a 'blinder' to beat Lewis Gray 12-10, 11-5, 11-5 in the clash of the top cadet boys, and Igor Morais, the England no.3 under 13 boy overcoming the England no.1 Helshan Weerasinghe, a pupil of the Judd School, Tonbridge, 16-14, 6-11, 11-9, 11-5. These were the only losses sustained by Gray and Weerasinghe in the competition, who both won 4 out of 5 singles played.

St Bede's School, Hailsham pupil Yolanda King was unbeaten in her 5 cadet girl singles appearances, as was Jack Bennett, from Polegate, East Sussex in the under 13 boys'. His brother Josh lost only 1 (out of 5) under 11 boys' singles (against London). Katie Wilson from the Howard Club, Gillingham, won 3 out of her 4 under 13 girls' singles, (and her West Midlands opponent also conceded to her), and her Howard Club colleague Luke Savill also did very well to take 3 out of 5 of his under 11 boys' singles. Likewise Holly Holder from Horsham, Sussex, who won 3 out of 5 of her under 11 girls' singles.

Although Daniella Gray, sister of Lewis and also a pupil of Angley School, won 2 out of her 5 cadet girls' singles only, one of these was a 11-9, 11-6, 11-7 success over Natasha Walsh, who at England no.22 is ranked 22 places above her, and was crucial for the South East to beat the Eastern region 7-5 to come third overall in the competition. The other players to represent the South East were Tejas Padalkar (Sussex), Lauren Beamont (Kent) and Lauren Pound (Sussex).

South East regional coach Ken Muhr commented: “Although we could have put out an even stronger team to win, we wanted to field only players who were committed to squad training. There was again excellent team spirit and overall they performed very well.”

Meanwhile also at Grantham, in the 1 Star Junior Open tournament on the Saturday, Weald Club member Dan Lawrence from Tonbridge had demonstrated great maturity and determination in reaching both the semi-finals of the under 13 boys’ singles and the quarter-finals of the cadet boys’ singles, being beaten only narrowly in both.