

LEWIS GRAY NATIONAL UNDER 15s DOUBLES CHAMPION AND SINGLES RUNNER UP

Playing with penholder Ping Ho (Middlesex), 15 year old Lewis Gray from Benenden became National Cadet Boys' Doubles champion at the English Junior (under 18) and Cadet (under 15) National Championships held at Loughborough University over the weekend.

Seeded second, Gray and Ho beat Sam Walker (Nottinghamshire) and William Morais (Middlesex) 11-1, 4-11, 15-13, 11-9 in a semi-final of fluctuating fortunes, and then the top seeds. Zak Zilesnick (Middlesex) and Reece Tan (Essex), 9-11, 11-6, 11-5, 11-9, to lift the title. Their 'edge' was their greater consistency and work-rate.

Winning the boys' doubles was some compensation and revenge for Angley School, Cranbrook pupil and Weald Club member Gray, for losing to Zilesnick in the cadet boys' singles final. Gray, the second seed, had got through some tough, on-form opponents, putting out Ross Wilson, of the Howard Club, Gillingham, 11-6, 11-7, 11-8 in the quarter-finals and Ping Ho 11-4, 9-11, 11-7, 11-6 in the semis, and his encounter with the gifted lefthander Zilesnick, the top seed, was a crowd pleasing, nail-biting, epic.

Despite flashes of brilliance from Zilesnick, Gray relentlessly attacked and came back from 2 games down to level 2 all and lead 4-1 in the fifth game. Zilesnick's corner then called 'Time Out' and there followed a crucial rally, with first of all Gray driving Zilesnick away from the table, and then, assisted by a net ball, Zilesnick then driving Gray away for the table and finishing with a winner wide to Gray's forehand. This point gave Zilesnick increased confidence and he leapt to a 10-7 lead. With typical courage and tenacity Gray saved two match points before finally succumbing 8-11, 9-11, 11-9, 11-8. 9-11.

Having won his group and first round match, Gray went down 3-11, 7-11, 11-7, 7-11 to England no.13 under 18, Richard Andrews (Berkshire) in the second round of the junior boys' singles.

Another Kent player to reach a final was Jasmin Ould of the Byng Hall Club, Tunbridge Wells. Playing with Chloe Whyte (Cleveland), she knocked out cadet girls' doubles second seeds Yolanda King (Sussex) and Tin Tin Ho (Middlesex) 11-6, 15-13, 2-11, 12-10 in the semi-finals, before falling at the ultimate stage, 7-11, 7-11, 4-11, to the top seeds Emily Bates (Lincolnshire) and Lucy Davidson (Derbyshire).

Despite reaching two national championships cadet semi-finals, as well as the quarter-finals of the junior girl's doubles playing with Tin Tin Ho, Yolanda King from Hastings, who like Lewis Gray is a member of the Weald TT Club based at Angley School Cranbrook, had only a moderately successful weekend by her standards, but it could have been very different.

In the second round of the junior girls' singles on the Saturday, King faced her old rival, Lucy Davidson, who as England no.7 junior is ranked one place above her. However, King looked like she was going to demolish Davidson when she totally out-played her with big two wing topspins in the first two games. Unfortunately Yolanda then lost her focus, and although Davidson played slightly more positively she must have been surprised to take the 3rd game so easily. In the 4th game King played a little better, but missed a relatively easy forehand topspin at 9-10 down to let Davidson go level in games. King was erratic in the final game as Davidson continued to improve, losing 11-5, 11-4, 4-11, 9-11, 5-11.

The two girls met again on the Sunday, in the semi-finals of the cadet girls' singles. Whilst King could not find the brilliance of the earlier part of her previous encounter, she was a little more consistent than in the latter part of the previous clash. Unfortunately for King, Davidson had now found top gear, and deserved her 10-12, 11-6, 11-7, 11-7 victory. Davidson went to take the national title.

Weald Club coach Ken Muhr commented: "Lewis Gray did everything that was asked of him, fought for every point, and was close to taking two national titles. I have great respect for him. He still has some technical weaknesses but he is working on them. However, although Yolanda King performed according to her England ranking, she has previously beaten almost all of the top girls in England, and had the opportunity to do better at the nationals. If she had maintained the form of her first two games of the junior singles match against Lucy Davidson, who knows what she might have achieved?!"