

## **BEST PERFORMANCE TO DATE BY LEWIS GRAY**

Benenden's Lewis Gray, the 15 year old Angley School, Cranbrook pupil and member of the Weald TT Club based at the school, produced his best performance to date last weekend by winning the gruelling English National Cadet (under 15) Boys' Masters competition at the Cippenham Table Tennis Centre, Slough.

The format is a round robin competition whereby all play all in a group of the top 14 players in the age group in the country. It is very difficult for even the best player to go through it unbeaten. Gray, who has just dropped from England no.2 to England no.3, but will surely now go up again, finished the weekend with 12 out of 13 wins. However, untroubled up to then he suffered his only loss in his last match on Saturday, going down 11-5, 5-11, 10-12, 8-11 to the speedy England no.2 under 13, Igor Morais (Middlesex) to the end the day with 6 wins out of 7.

Gray then showed his metal on the Sunday, putting the unexpected defeat behind him to raise his performance against the top players. His most significant result was against the England no.1 and champion, Zak Zilesnick (Middlesex). Gray stormed through the first two games with a barrage of relentless power attack, and led 6-2 in the third. At the end of a brilliant rally in which Gray had driven Zilesnick back from the table, Gray played a drop-shot, which the creative Zilesnick was just able to throw up with a 'wiggly' (disguised sidespin return played from below the table, which can kick both ways). Unfortunately Gray misread the kick, and Zilesnick proceeded to take the game 11-6 with a run of 9 consecutive points.

With renewed confidence Zilesnick comfortably won the 4<sup>th</sup> game, but Gray came back strongly in the 5<sup>th</sup> and then had 4 match points at 10-6. The ever dangerous exploited a slight caution from Gray by saving 3 match points with aggressive play and there then followed another brilliant aggressive topspin rally which the Benenden boy was fortunate to win with a ball which clipped the top of the net, for a 11-5, 11-3, 6-11, 6-11, 11-9 victory. Gray was devastating in beating his other nearest rivals, Sam Walker (Nottinghamshire), the new England no.2, and Reece Tan (Essex) in straight games. Although he finished the group with the same games average of 12 out of 13 as Zilesnick, he won the Masters by dint of having beaten the Middlesex boy.

Peter Charters, ETTA Vice Chairman for Selection, and a former talent scout for Reading Football Club, commented: "I regard the Masters as the most important national competition for cadets. They have to show real character to maintain a competitive standard against the best in the country over a long weekend, and keep going even when they have suffered some disappointing losses. A real test of character. Well done Lewis!"

Gray's Weald Club team mate, 14 year old Yolanda King from Hastings, was not so successful. Recently elevated to England no.2 cadet girl and no.6 junior (under 18), she won 10 out of 13 singles to finish 4<sup>th</sup> in the girls' event. Although she never gave up and was never seriously threatened by anyone else, she did not play with her normal fluency and was comfortably beaten in straight games by Emily Bates

(Lincolnshire), the England no.1 and event winner, Lucy Davidson (Derbyshire), England no.3, and Chloe Whyte (Cleveland), the England no.5 and event runner-up.

Two other Kent players also competed in the Masters. Jasmin Ould of the Byng Hall Club, Tunbridge Wells, came 10<sup>th</sup> in the girls with 5 wins, including beating the England no.7 Abbie Milwain (Derbyshire) 11-9, 11-4, 4-11, 5-11, 11-5. And Ross Wilson of the Howard Club, Gillingham, came 7<sup>th</sup> in the boys with 6 wins, which included a 12-10, 11-9, 11-8 triumph over the England no.5, Ping Ho (Middlesex).

Lewis Gray now plays in the English National Junior Masters at Grantham next weekend, while Yolanda King goes to Bratislava, Slovakia, to train and compete with the England squad.