

KENT VETERAN 1ST TEAM NATIONAL CHAMPIONS

REPORT FROM

CHRIS BARTRAM

Well after both Kent and Surrey were unbeaten on the first weekend and Surrey looking to bring in ex-England internationals and a Korean it was always going to be tough. But the Kent team had a strong all-round team with Chris 'manic' Bartram, Joey 'Surbeck' Kennedy, Mark 'who needs pimples' Brown, Mark 'captain fantastic' Romano, and Jackie 'twinkle toes' Williams and felt they could do it.

The first test came Saturday morning against Sussex, led by England number 5 and 6 Vets in Richie 'who needs to move when you have a backhand like me' Venner and Nigel 'I do need pimples' Eckersley. Kent started well with Chris beating Nigel and Mark (probably the best number 3 in the competition) beating Dave Butler comfortably but Sussex fired back with Reliable Richie pulling one back for Sussex against Joey which meant it was to be nip and tuck all the way. Sussex left Richie out of the mixed doubles which proved to be a tactical error as Joey and Jackie beat Sheila King / Dave Butler comfortably, and with Jackie beating Sheila, Kent had the upper hand. Leading 5-4 it all came down to the last mixed doubles with Bartram and Williams beating the mixed doubles specialists of Eckersley/Eckersley to secure a hard fought victory.

After lunch it was the 2 unbeaten teams of Kent and Surrey led by ex Chinese International and formerly World ranked penholder and unbeaten Marcia Ma. The verbal sparring and mind games had started the night before in the hotel (good banter) but now it was 'Put Up or Shut Up' - pressure on! Kent started well with Kent going into a 3-0 lead winning the first 3 men's singles but Marcia had yet to pick up her bat in anger. Now to the Mixed where Chris and Jackie took on the best mixed pairing of Marcia and Surrey number one Ian Girdler. I don't know if Ian has ever told you but they are (were!) unbeaten in 4 years 😊! Well in a hard long fought 5 setter Bartram and Williams did the unthinkable and brought that to an end and were jumping with joy, Surrey were not 🙄. Now at 4-0 to Kent that was the 'psychological straw that broke the camel's back' as Surrey looked shell shocked as one of their 'bankers' had gone. Even with Marcia winning her singles and mixed against Kennedy / Williams and some close matches including Brown beating Jonah in 5 long drawn out games (expedite almost called - does any one know the timing for Expedite these days?) the fight seemed to have lost Surrey as they put up little resistance in the men's doubles where Super Captain and doubles specialist Mark Romano teamed up with Chris to win easily. Ian Girdler led Chris 10:7 in the 5th but couldn't get that all important last point, which will leave him with nightmares considering at the same venue last year he led 10:8 and had 4 match points in the 5th - ouch! So Kent cruised to a 8:2 victory but with the title in sight a nervous and may be sleepless night was ahead.

With a sudden and unexpected influx of snow overnight many people struggled to get to the venue on time and having to abandon Romano's car in the snow nobody was complaining now about Chris '4x4 Chelsea tractor' as we arrived to prepare for battle with Lancashire led by England VETT number 7 and Mr. Consistent Keith Williams. The position Sunday morning was that, as Yorkshire dropped points on the first weekend, if Kent could beat Lancashire they would be champions again after a gap of almost 10 years! A great position to be in but a pressured one also.

Lancashire and Williams got off to a flying start against Joey but Chris and Mark fought back to make it 2:1 to Kent. That coupled with Chris and Jackie's easy mixed win against Williams/Brenda Buoy and Jackie beating Brenda again in the Women's singles meant that it was down to Mark Romano and Chris to take the men's doubles, win the match and bring the Title back to the 'Garden of England'. This they did as Lancashire were outclassed and the goal had been achieved and a happier team you have never seen with Chris and Jackie like 2 kids in Willy Wonkas chocolate factory! With the weather bad and all positions decided apart from a technicality it was decided by all teams that with the long journeys faced by many combined with the snow the final round if matches were scrapped and the trophies were presented - where is the cup Yorkshire?!

Looking back Kent, despite, not having a superstar had a strong all-round team, good doubles and won the title as they didn't play a bad a match despite some very closely fought 6:4 wins where it came down to a few points here or there. With a great team spirit and humour throughout, the mixed and men's doubles proved very important to Kent's success as well as an excellent captain and organiser in Mark Romano, who would have made a good number 3 in any team. But he always put the team first making some big decisions at the right time and that contributed significantly to the team's success.

Chris Bartram

PS - as a footnote it was a shame that the ETTA were unable to supply umpires or even just one official to officiate for such a national competition and even though one has to be realistic and understand that priorities have to be set and VETTS is not high up on that list, the ETTA has to look at itself and be somewhat embarrassed that it could not find just one official for the deciding weekend of a national title!