

WEALD STARS' DISAPPOINTMENT AT NATIONAL MASTERS

There was bitter disappointment for Weald Club, Angley School, Cranbrook stars at the English National Junior Masters competition at Grantham Meres Leisure Centre over the weekend, with Lewis Gray, 16 from Benenden not performing as well as expected, and Yolanda King, 15, having to drop out through injury.

Hoping to finish in the first 6 of the round robin of the country's top 14 junior boys, Gray ended up 9th. He started well enough, defeating Igor Morais (Middlesex), a player he has often found difficult, 11-8, 11-2, 10-12, 11-9, and then going on to beat English junior champion Daniel Basterfield (Middlesex), who finished 5th, 11-4, 7-11, 11-7, 11-8. Although not playing his best, Lewis also comfortably overcame in straight games another Middlesex player, Ping Ho.

Gray had two other 3-1 wins in athletic, heavy topspin clashes with Guy Ben-Aroya (Hertfordshire) and Scott Crawford (Cumbria). However, although he played well and often got close against the highest ranked players, he could not beat them, and dropped most of the tightest games. He got closest to the England no.4 Richard Andrews (Berkshire), attacking aggressively to take a two game lead before going down by the narrowest of margins, 15-13, 11-8, 9-11, 4-11, 10-12. In possibly the best match of the competition, Gray actually led 9-7 in the decider, but Andrews was brave and absolutely relentless in stealing the result.

Gray's downfall was his 6-11, 11-7, 10-12, 8-11 loss to Judd School, Tonbridge pupil Helshan Weerasinghe, the England no.1 under 13, who as a practice partner at the SE Performance Centre, Cranbrook, knows his game very well. The main difference was that Weerasinghe played with confidence, whilst Gray was a little edgy. However, having fought hard throughout the competition, Gray's worst result was at the end, when with his spirit seemingly broken he fell 8-11, 8-11, 9-11, to James Ward (Staffordshire), to whom he has never lost before. If he had beaten both Weerasinghe and Ward, Gray would have finished a creditable 5th, but it is the nature of round robins to suffer some unexpected losses.

Helshan Weerasinghe had 4 wins to 9 losses, to finish 10th, which is quite good for one so young. He biggest disappointment was in losing narrowly 11-5, 11-13, 14-12, 6-11, 8-11 to his long standing rival, Igor Morais.

Overcoming the worry of a painful left thigh, for which she had received physiotherapy leading up to the competition, St Bede's, Hailsham pupil Yolanda King also started quite well. She narrowly defeated the up and coming Tressa Armitage (Hampshire) in 5 games, Armitage going on to 'giant kill' some of the top players to finish 5th in the junior girls. Yolanda then had another narrow win over the dangerous lefthander Jessica Dawson (Cleveland), although sharp pains in her left thigh and hip were causing her increasing problems, particularly when playing shots wide to her forehand.

Things got suddenly worse during a long counter-hitting rally of the final game against the powerful Abbie Milwain (Derby), King ultimately losing that match. She probably should have withdrawn at that stage, but elected to carry on. Unfortunately she was in no state of body or mind to compete with Tin Tin Ho (Middlesex), crumpling to a 3-0 defeat and then withdrawing through injury from the competition.

Weald coach Ken Muhr said, "What happened at the weekend is crushing for both Lewis and Yolanda, because it now means that both are highly unlikely to be selected for the European Youth Championships in the summer, though Lewis still has an outside chance if he does well at the Spanish Youth Open. Yolanda should have pulled out earlier, but she was worried that other girls might have thought she was chickening out."