

LEWIS GRAY BEST EVER WIN AT SENIOR NATIONALS, THEN DISQUALIFIED

Benenden's Lewis Gray, 16, a member of the Angley School, Cranbrook based Weald TT Club, looked all set to have a fantastic tournament at the English National Championships held at Ponds Forge International Sports Centre, Sheffield last weekend. After winning his men's under 21 singles group, including a good 11-6, 11-9, 9-11, 11-7 result over the England senior no.44, Ashley Willetts (Hampshire), the Angley School pupil had a bye in the first round of the knockout. He then produced his best performance to date, overpowering the England no.11 senior Damien Nicholls 11-4, 11-9, 11-9 to reach what should have been the quarter finals.

But then disaster struck! Although the umpire had allowed Gray to play with his bat, the bat was then checked and declared illegal, the rubbers (composed of a 'sandwich' of inverted pimples on sponge) being assessed as slightly too thick, and a distraught Gray was disqualified from the event. What really rubbed the salt in the wound was that Nicholls, restored to the draw, then knocked out the England no.2 Darius Knight (Middlesex), 3-1.

Ken Muhr, Weald coach, commented: "I feel very sorry for Lewis. It was not his fault that he was disqualified on a technicality. He was using rubbers from an equipment sponsor, and was entitled to expect them to be legal. However, the England selectors saw how well he played and several commented on it."

Playing with rubbers from a different manufacturer in his senior men's singles group the next day, Gray beat Anthony Farrel (Yorkshire) in straight games, but then after a tremendous fight back to take the 4th game from 4-9 down, he lost narrowly, 11-13, 11-6, 11-7, 13-11, 7-11, to the higher ranked Jonathan Crawford (Cumbria), the England no.60 senior. Gray actually led 5-4 in the deciding game, but never quite felt fully confident with his 'touch' with the new rubbers.

Gray's Weald Club colleague, Yolanda King, 15, had a successful competition. After winning her under 21 women's singles group, including overcoming for the first time the England no.23 senior, Caroline Hallows (Cheshire), she had another first ever win, 11-4, 4-11, 11-8, 9-11, 11-9 over the defensive Melissa Wright (Yorkshire), the England no.35. However, in the quarter-finals she faced the England no.4 senior and no.1 junior Karina Le Fevre (Cleveland), seeded no.2. Although Yolanda has frequently beaten her in the past, on this occasion Le Fevre had the ascendancy, beating King 11-7, 11-4, 9-11, 11-8.

Yolanda, a pupil of St Bede's, Hailsham, comfortably won her senior women's singles group, including outplaying the England no.41 senior, Rachel Baker (Lancashire) in straight games. However, against another opponent she has often beaten in the past, Mary Fuller (Yorkshire), the England no.16 senior, Yolanda fell 2-11, 8-11, 11-7, 8-11, Fuller proving too sharp on this occasion. Had King won, she would have had a crack at the defending champion and no.1 seed, Joanne Parker (Surrey).

13 year old Judd School, Tonbridge pupil Helshan Weerasinghe had the toughest of opponents in his under 21 singles group, being beaten in straight games by England's top man, Paul Drunkhall (Cleveland). And his senior men's singles group was not much easier: he beat Reece Placid (Surrey) in 5 games, but lost in 3 close games to the England no.4 junior boy, Zak Zilesnick (Middlesex).