

PATIENCE HAS ITS REWARD by Reginald Brace

(Tennis Correspondent of the Yorkshire Post)

I WAITED a long time to write about a Yorkshire double in Group One of County Week — not, despite scurrilous rumour, since 1901 when Yorkshire women first won the title.

Nor even 1907 when the county's men opened their account. But certainly 1962 when I began to report Yorkshire's fortunes in the week when the game of doubles rules British tennis.

I was there in 1963 to see the late Freda Hann's side win a second accolade for Yorkshire women, and in 1967 and 1988 to record a second and third triumph for Yorkshire men.

Two titles in the same year, however, remained a tantalising mirage: something to fantasise about over one of those wallet-draining drinks in the bar at the Grand Hotel.

The week that changed all that started with a couple of setbacks for the representatives of the White Rose. Jason Goodall withdrew from the men's team with an injured shoulder and Nina Topper from the women's line-up because of an ankle operation.

It was not the happiest of auguries for the respective captains Bob Armytage — county president in his 25th year on County Week — and Charlotte Lindsay (county president in 1991-2) as they attempted to select pairs which would make the dream double reality.

But ranks were closed, and at the end of a remarkable championship neither team had been beaten.

Yorkshire men defeated Essex 6-3, Hants and IoW 7-2, Kent 8-1, Surrey 5-4 and Lancashire 6-3 as they reached a final tally of five wins, 32 rubbers and 69 sets.

The women also, of course, won five matches, but took 29 rubbers and 60 sets, defeating Leicestershire 5-4, Middlesex 8-1, Lancashire 5-4, Surrey 5-4 and Essex 6-3.

Note the two results against Surrey, the defending champions. These were the most satisfying of the competition for Yorkshire, achieved on the same day.

They also contained a shot and a set which were crucial to the hopes of both the men and the women.

It is not often you can bring a County Week challenge into such sharp focus, but this was an outstanding exception.

First, the shot. It was in the second round of the women's match when Yorkshire's leaders Catherine Berry and Jacqui Holden were 3-5 and match point down in the final set against the Surrey thirds Chrissie Tee and Julie Willson.

Defeat here would have put Surrey 4-2 ahead at tea. Who would have backed Yorkshire to capture the three final rubbers? Nobody, I suspect, although the question became academic when Holden solved the crisis by climbing to hit a smash of splendid power, angle and penetration.

She also struck another fine overhead to clinch victory by 6-1, 6-7, 7-5, but it was the smash on Surrey's match ball which saved the rubber, and arguably the week, for Yorkshire women.

The set which was equally priceless to Yorkshire men was in the last round.

They had led 4-2 at tea, but lost their momentum dramatically as Surrey counter-attacked to take the first set in each of the last three rubbers. Yorkshire were tottering, no doubt about that.

Steve Heron and Gary Henderson were the players who rose to an increasingly desperate situation. They had been performing fitfully, but found the passion to force a deciding set against Neale Pashley and Richard Stoakes in which they produced their most inventive and exciting tennis to come through 2-6, 6-4, 6-1.

Surrey won the other two rubbers, but it was too late: they had been beaten for the first time in three years and Yorkshire were within reach of becoming Britain's top county.

All this was on Friday, normally the last of the championships but this year the penultimate day after a total washout on Tuesday.

Diminishing the mathematical permutations which always accompany the closing stages of the event, Yorkshire had to beat Lancashire and the women defeat Essex to become the dual champions.

Joyce and Roger Howden drove through the night from Leeds to see their daughter Kate play for Yorkshire. Joyce — a member of the last Yorkshire women's team to win the title — was greeted by Valerie Clark, her partner 28 years ago and another stalwart drawn to Devonshire Park for an occasion to savour.

Denis Heron, father of Steve, made a dawn dash from York because "I just wanted to witness a bit of tennis history."

There was also a Yorkshire supporter who seemed to have strayed from a TV beer commercial. Red faced, dark blue T-shirt, jeans, trainers — and loud.

"Come on Yorkshire, give it to 'em — the old one-two," he bellowed. It brought a touch of the Kop to the Centre Court, but nobody minded too much as Yorkshire headed for an achievement without precedent in the county.

The men had the hardest task. No Roses clash is easy, and Lancashire were eager to succeed not only for the pleasure of beating traditional rivals, but to retain their status in Group One.

Ian Blakeman and Paul Ranson played a vital role for Yorkshire in the first two rounds. First they overwhelmed Chris Peet and Andrew Livermore 6-0, 6-2, then they downed the Lancashire firsts Eric Knowles and Brendan McGuire 6-4, 6-4 in a fiery clash, which put Yorkshire 4-2 up at tea, with one victory needed for an impregnable lead.

This arrived when Danny Bishop and Simon Ickringill beat Knowles and McGuire 6-1, 6-4. Bishop hit the winning volley and Ickringill brandished a triumphant racket to let his team-mates know that Yorkshire were home and dry.

Bishop and Ickringill were Yorkshire's most successful pair with 14 rubbers out of 15 — and, at the venerable age of 34, Simon enjoyed his best County Week since his debut at Ilkley in 1978.

Yorkshire women's conquest of Essex was almost placid by comparison. Berry and Holden dropped only nine games as they, too, brought their total of winning rubbers for the week to 14.

Two victories from the admirably consistent second pair of Howden and Karen McLoughlin and one from a resolute third couple of Louise Johnson and Sarah Longbottom completed the second unbeaten run in a memorable week.

Both teams had desperately close matches, but most people at Eastbourne agreed that they were the best sides in this enduring event which, under its new title of the LTA County Cup, continues to be the pinnacle of county tennis, with an endearing emphasis on pride, loyalty and team spirit.

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