

Scorching Yorks

by Reginald Brace

A week of scorching temperatures and sizzling tennis in Group One of the LTA Inter-County Cup at Eastbourne ended with newly-promoted Yorkshire winning the men's title for the first time since 1991-92 and Surrey women regaining a championship they last won in 1998.

Attendances mounted with the thermometer readings, and County Week buffs could not recall a bigger crowd than the 2,000 spectators who thronged Devonshire Park on the Wednesday. It all added up to a memorable chapter in an event whose doubles format might be something of an anachronism in the modern game but nevertheless continues to make a contribution to the sporting calendar which is endearing and inimitable.

Yorkshire captain Steve McLoughlin asked his team for drive, determination and desire on the county's return to the premier division after an absence of three years, and his call was answered in every respect as the side emerged unbeaten from a gruelling week, beating Hampshire and the Isle of Wight 6-3, Kent 6-3, Devon 6-3, Surrey 8-1 and Northamptonshire 7-2.

Yorkshire used their luck. They met a Hampshire team without Chris Wilkinson and Laurence Matthews on the opening day and Danny Sapsford had rejoined a family holiday by the time they faced Surrey. But this was a well

deserved victory by a talented and resilient squad.

McLoughlin singled out the clash between the Yorkshire leaders Gary Henderson and Jason Torpey and their Kent counterparts Colin Beecher and Oliver Freelove as the



Yorkshire men celebrated promotion from Group 2 last year by winning the title for the first time since 1991-1992.

crucial rubber of the week. Kent had beaten defending champions Surrey 7-2 on the first day and were in the mood to steamroller the representatives of the White Rose on the second.

Losing the first three rubbers dented Kent's hopes - Beecher and Freelove missed three

match points in losing to Steve Heron and David Sherwood - but they mounted a macho comeback in the second round which had Yorkshire tottering. Three-all at tea would have swung the contest Kent's way, and crucial importance rested on the rubber between the opposing first pairs.

Henderson and Torpey survived eight match points in the third set tiebreak before coming through to win it 14-12, the rubber 7-6, 4-6, 7-6 and give Yorkshire a 4-2 lead. Henderson saved one of the match points with a netcord and Torpey another with an ace which had Kent complaining he had used a new ball. Referee Bill Perkins ruled that the ball, which had rolled over from a match on the next court, was valid.

In the end Yorkshire came through a thunderous contest 6-3 and were on their way to the title, although there were still three days to go. "It was a theatre of emotions, and that tiebreak was the turning point of the week," said McLoughlin. "There is a big difference between 3-3 and 4-2 in a match of that intensity. Anything could have happened."

Henderson and newly-crowned Yorkshire

champion Sherwood both carried injuries which needed painkillers, and the rest of the team - Torpey (who won 13 of 14 rubbers), Jonathan Marray, Steve Heron, Richard Crabtree and Ben Riby showed the same level of commitment. "Flexibility has been a major asset," said McLoughlin. "I've been able to shuffle the cards and treat the week like a five day game of poker."

Much of the drama in the group was left to the closing stages on the Friday evening, when lengthening shadows symbolised the looming



Surrey ladies won the title for the first time since 1998, with Hannah Collin (not pictured) winning 12 out of 12.

threat of relegation for Surrey, who needed victory in the deciding set of the final rubber against Hampshire in order to stay up. This was duly achieved by the talismanic Nick Greenhouse and Jeff Hunter, who beat Julian Godfrey and Elliot Wood after saving three match points in a third set tiebreak which they won 8-6 after trailing 3-6.

A finale in the classic County week tradition kept Surrey in the premier division but spelled Group Two for the likeable, devil-may-care Devon team despite beating Kent 6-3 on the same day.

Northamptonshire, back in Group One for the first time since 1954, had a luckless week and the writing

was on the wall for them from the Tuesday after a 9-0 drubbing by Hampshire from which they prised only 25 games.

Surrey were decisive winners of the women's championship, beating Warwickshire 6-3, defending champions Essex 6-3, Oxfordshire 7-2, Leicestershire 6-3 and Lancashire 6-3 to keep a clean sheet. Their clash with hitherto unbeaten Leicestershire held the key to the title, and they emerged with flying colours. Hannah Collin delayed her departure for a tournament in Italy to partner Michelle Oldham in three wins which took their total for the week to 12 out of 12.

Julie Willson, the Surrey captain, said: "We have enjoyed a great week with a nice blend of youth and experience. Michelle Oldham, Chrissie Tee, Siobhan Nicholson and Sally Godman had 50 years of County Week experience between them. Hannah Collin, who was making her debut, Rebecca Rankin, Cristelle Grier and Leila Salek are all 19 or under.

"Hannah would be the first to admit that the youngsters have learned a huge amount. It was Hannah's decision to stay another day before flying to Italy, and it's fair to say that she has picked up some of the magic of County Week."

Oxfordshire did not have the best of fortune in the first appearance in Group One. They won only three out of 18 three-set rubbers during the week and were involved in two hair-raisingly close defeats, to Leicestershire on the first day and Warwickshire on the last, where they won more games than their opponents. Ultimately a sequence of missed opportunities caught up with them and they joined Lancashire, another side who failed to fulfil their potential, in the plunge to Group Two.

At least the two relegated counties

did not go unrewarded in the players' cabaret. The judges voted for Oxfordshire's original team song, performed with gusto by the team and officials, and there was a best newcomer award for James Safiruddin, nine-year-old son of Lorraine and grandson of LTA President Malcolm Gracie, who played a rollicking *Barrel House Blues* on the keyboard.

Steve McLoughlin, LTA Coach of the Year and now captain of the Group One champions, kept a promise to his team by putting on a dinner suit on the last night if they won the title. Resplendently attired, he was last seen leading his players along the Eastbourne sea front for a celebratory meal.

FINAL POSITIONS

MEN

Group 1 - Champions: Yorkshire. **Runners-up:** Hants & IoW. **Staying:** Kent, Surrey. **Relegated:** Northants, Devon. **Group 2 - P:** Lancs, South Wales. **S:** Middlesex, Essex, R. Berks, Dorset. **Group 3 - P:** Bucks, Cheshire. **S:** Leics, Warks. **R:** Lincs, Sussex. **Group 4 - P:** Derbyshire, North of Scotland. **S:** Avon, Herts. **R:** Cambridgeshire, Hereford & Worcester. **Group 5 - P:** Cornwall, East of Scotland. **S:** Staffordshire, Suffolk. **R:** Nottinghamshire, Wiltshire. **Group 6 - P:** Gloucestershire, Durham & Cleveland. **S:** Norfolk, West of Scotland. **R:** Oxfordshire, Bedfordshire. **Group 7 - P:** Northumberland, Somerset. **S:** Shropshire, North Wales, South of Scotland, Channel Islands, Cumbria, Isle of Man.

WOMEN

Group 1 - Champions: Surrey. **Runners-up:** Leicestershire. **Staying:** Essex, Warwickshire. **Relegated:** Lancashire, Oxfordshire. **Group 2 - P:** South Wales, Yorkshire, S: Cheshire, Middlesex. **R:** Hertfordshire, Norfolk. **Group 3 - P:** Berkshire, Buckinghamshire. **S:** Northumberland, Sussex. **R:** Kent, Hereford & Worcester. **Group 4 - P:** Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire. **S:** Dorset, Lurham & Cleveland. **R:** Cambridgeshire, Staffordshire. **Group 5 - P:** Derbyshire, Northamptonshire. **S:** Devon, Gloucestershire. **R:** Hampshire & IoW, Somerset. **Group 6 - P:** Shropshire, West of Scotland. **S:** East of Scotland, Wiltshire. **R:** Bedfordshire, Suffolk. **Group 7 - P:** Avon, North of Scotland. **S:** North Wales, Cumbria, Isle of Man, Channel Islands, Cornwall, South of Scotland.

