

Return of the WHITE ROSE

Yorkshire men won for the seventh time and Surrey women for the 46th as Group One of the County Cup needed an extra day at Eastbourne. **Reginald Brace** reports.



Devonshire Park, Eastbourne is a sea of courts as the top six men's and women's teams do battle in Group One of the Inter-County Championships.

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All in all, it was an eventful LTA County Cup Group One at Eastbourne. Play spilled over to an extra day on the Saturday after rain made Friday a total wash-out; Yorkshire regained the men's championship by a solitary rubber, despite losing to Kent on the final day; Surrey won the women's title for a third consecutive year in fraught circumstances. And the indomitable Jane FitzGibbon retired after 16 years as tournament director.

That was County Week in the proverbial nutshell. The big story of course was how Yorkshire were almost pipped at the post by Kent, the defending champions who dethroned them in 2002. Kent had been defeated 6-3 by Surrey on the second day but Yorkshire were unbowed, having beaten Cheshire 7-2, Buckinghamshire 7-2, Hants and Isle of Wight 6-3 and Surrey 6-3.

Kent went into the final day minus Colin Beecher, who was a wedding guest in Ireland, but after trailing 2-1 after the first round Richard Whicello's battling side came back to lead 5-3. That was where the admirable David Sherwood and Jason Torpey came to Yorkshire's rescue with a

evangelist, pastor Doug Keen, 34, who has been preaching the gospel in the Harrogate area for three years but dipped into his past as a coach and tournament player to produce some astute tennis in the four days he was available, including three wins with Ben Riby. And though Jason Torpey was a day late arriving at Eastbourne because of his commitments as a body double for the film *Wimbledon* he soon showed he was ready for the real thing at Devonshire Park.

Putting him with David Sherwood for the Surrey and Kent matches proved to be a master stroke by McLoughlin, who was rewarded by six rubbers. Sherwood has never played better for Yorkshire, and Torpey was an admirable partner.

Kent did not relinquish the title without a fight in a red-blooded match where tempers sometimes erupted (Billy McManus was warned for an audible obscenity by referee Denise Parnell) but nobody could be accused of lacking effort or spirit. Because of the need to finish on Saturday, all third sets were replaced by a first-to-10 points tie-break and this in itself

Biddle and Lucy Wood having crucially squandered four match points against Julia Smith and Chrissie Tee in losing the match tie-break 11-9. A heavily strapped Godman decided to risk playing her third rubber with Lorna Woodroffe, but victories by Smith and Tee and, decisively, Hannah Collin and Oldham nudged Surrey into an unassailable 5-3 lead.

Team captain Julie Willson praised a "fantastic" effort by her side, who became champions for the third year in a row by beating South Wales 9-0, Essex 5-4, Lancashire 8-1, Oxfordshire 9-0 and finally Warwickshire.

Sadly, the four promoted teams - Cheshire and Buckinghamshire in the top men's group, Lancashire and Oxfordshire in the women's - were all relegated. Lancashire's fate - they won two matches but finished with one less rubber than South Wales - was particularly disappointing for Lorraine Safiruddin, who made her County Week debut 25 years ago at the age of 14 and has missed only three years since then, twice to have children and once because of injury.



Gavin Masterson (LTA) with Surrey ladies: Sally Godman, Michelle Oldham, Julia Smith, Chrissie Tee, Julie Willson, Lorna Woodroffe, Hannah Collin.



Yorkshire men: David Sherwood, Jonathan Marray, Ben Gudzelak, Richard Crabtree, Jason Torpey, Ben Riby, Steve McLoughlin, Ben Atkinson.

7-6-3 victory over Jim May and Nick Cavaday which clinched the title. Yorkshire were beaten 5-4 but over the week had collected 30 rubbers to Kent's 29.

This narrowest of margins was enough for the representatives of the White Rose to recapture the championship - and put a broad smile on the face of Steve McLoughlin, who is relinquishing the captaincy of the team to take a year's sabbatical with his family in South Africa.

"It's the best leaving present I could have had," said McLoughlin, 43, who has been an inspirational leader for four years during which the side has lost only two matches in County Week - both, ironically, to Kent. "I couldn't think of a nicer note on which to say cheerio to a great bunch of players."

Yorkshire were full of surprises during the week. Their team included an American

produced moments of high drama - Ben Atkinson and Jonathan Marray saving nine successive match points against Andy Burgoyne and McManus before losing the breaker 11-9.

The women's event was also decided on a last day showdown, with unbeaten Surrey and Warwickshire both going into their match knowing that the titled hinged on the outcome. Surrey had problems before the start with Cristelle Grier (unbeaten in 12 rubbers with Michelle Oldham) and Alex Napier both absent at weddings. But the situation deteriorated even further with a freak injury to Sally Godman, who pulled out of the first two rubbers after developing a groin strain in the second game of the day.

This meant that Warwickshire were gifted two rubbers, but Surrey were still level at 3-3 after two rounds, with Hayley

Jane FitzGibbon's retirement was marked by several presentations including one from the Mayor of Eastbourne, Councillor Olive Woodall, an ice-cream maker from the counties presented by Julie Willson, and a bouquet from the Lawn Tennis Writers' Association. The tributes were warm and sincere.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed organising all the county events, especially County Week here at Eastbourne," said Jane at the players' party at the Grand Hotel. "I do hope you will continue to support it. You can see better tennis at Eastbourne than you can see at Wimbledon. Everyone here is enjoying their tennis - and that's what it is all about."

Elsewhere in the Championships, Cornwall's men were promoted for the third year running and will be playing in Group Two next year.