



Divisions 1 and 2, Weekend 4 *by Rhys Cumming*

Division 1

Pool A

The key match in the final round of Pool A was between Grantham Sharks 1 and Barbican 2. A win for Grantham would guarantee them a place in the Championship Pool ahead of 3Cs 1. Despite Barbican 2 being in a relegation fight this season, the two teams were relatively evenly matched with Grantham out-rating Barbican by fewer than 50 points per board. Grantham snuck through 4½-3½ however, in a match where a draw would have seen Grantham slip into the Demotion Pool. 3C's, who were hoping to take advantage of a slip up from Grantham fulfilled their end of the bargain by beating bottom of the table The ADs. That win, although not enough to earn them a place in the Championship Pool, saw them take 6 points through to the Demotion Pool and all but secure their safety. At the top of the table there were no shocks as Guildford won on all 8 boards against Spirit of Atticus, while in the match between 2nd placed White Rose 1 and 3rd placed Oxford 1 it was White Rose who came out on top 5-3.

Pool B

Going into round 7 Cheddleton, Guildford 2 and Wood Green HK had all secured their place in the Championship Pool and with just one more place remaining it was Barbican's to lose. Although they were pushed close by West is Best 1, Barbican won 4½-3½. That result would have meant Blackthorne Russia would have had to win 6-2 against Wood Green HK, but against a side stronger than themselves, that was always unlikely to occur and indeed they ended up losing 5-3. Although the teams were evenly matched on the higher boards, Wood Green boasted much greater strength in depth and took advantage of their rating advantages on the lower boards with wins for Neil McDonald and Alvaro Valdes Escobar proving to be the difference between the two teams. Both teams at the top, Cheddleton and Guildford 2, were comfortable winners against bottom half teams. Cheddleton beat Cambridge University 1 6½-1½, while Guildford 2 beat Alba 6-2 with neither Cheddleton nor Guildford 2 losing a game.

Championship Pool

Round 8 saw Guildford 1 face Guildford 2 and unsurprisingly Guildford 1 won 5½-2½. While there can be no complaints from Guildford 1 about the result, it was in fact the first time they had lost a game this season, with James Golding managing to beat Sophie Milliet on bottom board. It was also the first time that Guildford 1 had scored fewer than 7 points in a match, but it was inevitable that this streak would end at some point once Guildford started to face tougher opposition (such as their 2nd team!). The title is still not wrapped up for Guildford 1 though, with Cheddleton hot on their tail thanks to a comprehensive 7-1 win over Grantham Sharks. Cheddleton sit just a point behind Guildford and seem likely to take the title to a final day decider in May.

Barbican 1 and White Rose 1 have been, barring the odd exception, Championship Pool fixtures for years now. While Barbican 1 may have had the upper hand in the past, White Rose have clearly overtaken them as the greater force in the division, although on this occasion were actually out-rated by a strengthened Barbican side. White Rose however carried out the classic team performance by drawing with black and winning with white (which they did on boards 3, 5 and 7) to win the match 5½-2½. The other game in the Championship Pool featured Wood Green HK and Oxford 1. Although there was not that much difference between the teams on ratings, Wood Green won 6½-1½ to leave themselves well in the running for a top 3 finish. Going into the final weekend, there is still a lot to play for. It seems likely that Guildford 1 and



Cheddleton will occupy the top 2 spots come the end of the season, but even that is not guaranteed with the likes of White Rose and Wood Green breathing down Cheddleton's neck.

Demotion Pool

For the teams at the bottom end of the table, the first 7 rounds can take their toll. The difference between the teams at the top of the table and the bottom are significant and for many of the teams at the bottom, the final 4 rounds are what make or break their season. 3C's 1 and Blackthorne Russia both went into the Demotion Pool with 6 points and were the only two teams that looked to be safe of the relegation battle, barring an almighty collapse. 3C's won their round 8 match against Cambridge University 1 5-3, although that did feature a win for young Irish FM Conor Murphy against GM Fabien Libiszewski. Cambridge remain on 0 points and even if they win all their remaining matches, seem set for a return to Division 2 next year.

Blackthorne Russia were dealt a mild shock as they could only manage a 4-4 draw with the ADs. That result will likely not make too much of a difference to Blackthorne Russia, but it might make all the difference to the ADs who only had 1 point going into round 8. Their survival is still unlikely, but with their hardest fixture out of the way, they still have a chance at the last weekend. Barbican were in a precarious position going into the weekend with both their 2nd team and Youth team in relegation fights, but their 2nd team eased some of the pressure with an important win over West is Best 1. West is Best 1, previously South Wales Dragons, have been just about keeping themselves a float year in year out and although the loss to Barbican 2 has not helped matters, they are still in a good position with 4 points and have two winnable matches remaining.

One team that has struggled so far this year has been Alba, the side who won every match in Division 2 last year. Having entered the Demotion Pool on only 2 points, their round 8 win over Spirit of Atticus was crucial and still gives them clear survival chances. With Blackthorne Russia and 3Cs safe, and Cambridge almost certainly down, just 2 points separate 3rd from 7th so the last weekend looks set to be very tight at the bottom end of the table.

Division 2

Pool A

Heading into the last round, there were 3 teams fighting for the 1 remaining spot in the Promotion Pool. After fielding a weakened team last time out, King's Head had to the difficult task of overcoming a strong Wood Green Monarchs team who out-rated them by over 100 points a board. King's Head ran Wood Green very close but were narrowly ran out 4 ½-3½ thanks to wins for Andrew Gilfillan overturning a 150-point rating gap and Adam C Taylor who won a tactical endgame to bring the match home.

This left Sussex Martlets 1 and Grantham Sharks 2 as the two teams that could go through and conveniently enough they faced each other in round 7 in what ended up being a straight shootout for 4th spot. The match was close throughout with several draws, but the match turned on it's head when Carlo Russian managed to conjure up counter-play out of a clearly lost position to give Grantham Sharks a win on board 8. From there on out there only looked to be one winner as Shawn

Tavares and Sam Milson also ground out wins with black on boards 4 and 6 to give Grantham a comfortable 5-3 victory and see them through to the Promotion Pool. Neither of the other matches in Pool A would carry through to the next stage, however that didn't stop White Rose 2 pulling off an upset by taking down Celtic Tigers 5½-2½. Manx Liberty meanwhile beat Barbican Youth 7-1, which wasn't particularly surprising given that the match saw the 1st placed team face the 8th placed team.



Pool B

Only two teams going into the weekend had completely guaranteed their place in the Promotion Pool: North East England and Anglian Avengers. Due to their good tiebreaker however, Manchester Manticores would have to be thrashed in order to fail making it through and it became clear before the round even started that this would not be the case, with Anglian Avengers having to default their bottom board. The Manticores came out winners in the end, winning 4-3 on the remaining boards, in a match in which every game was a decisive result.

This left the remaining match between Guildford 3 and Warwickshire Select 1 as a play-off for the final promotion spot. In fact, just a year ago these two sides were also battling it out for 4th spot in Pool B with Warwickshire Select 1 making it through. This time however Guildford 3 came out on top which was not hugely surprising given that Guildford 3 had a strong team out. The match was significantly tighter than one might have thought due to both Andrew Martin and Nigel Povah going down against lower rated opposition, but Guildford 3 came out on top thanks to wins on the bottom 3 boards. In the other two matches, North East England continued their unbeaten season by beating Poisoned Pawns 1 while KJCA Kings won what could be an important relegation decider against West is Best 2.

Promotion Pool

Going into the Promotion Pool stage, there looked to be 4 clear front runners in the promotion race and round 8 backed up that theory with all 4 of those teams winning. It should be a surprise to no-one that Manx Liberty have won all their games so far and they made sure of their promotion Spot by hitting the magic 8 point-mark. They got to that point by beating Anglian Avengers 5-3, but this was the closest they had come all season to dropping match points as Manx's faith in their juniors paid off with Robert Akeya-Price's win on board 7 proving crucial. Manx Liberty are not the only side however that have secured their place in Division 1 next season as North East England have also won every match so far this season. They sealed their spot with a comfortable 5½-2½ win over Grantham Sharks 2 in round 8.

The other two sides to win were Celtic Tigers, who recovered from their surprising Saturday loss to beat Manchester Manticores and Wood Green Monarchs who beat Guildford 3. With Anglian Avengers and Grantham Sharks, still lurking on 0 points and Manchester Manticores on only 2, both Celtic Tigers and Wood Green seem set for promotion. This is aided by the fact that their closest challengers, Guildford 3, are ineligible for promotion due to the limit of 2 teams per division.

Demotion Pool

At the other end of the table, things are a lot tighter with no sides destined for relegation and no sides safe yet. Barbican Youth have struggled this season in a strong Pool A and when they only were able to take 1 point through to the Demotion Pool their chances of survival looked thin. Their chances were lifted however by a potentially season-saving round 8 win over KJCA Kings. There was also hope for the side that finished bottom in pool B, as Poisoned Pawns 1, who had amassed 4 points in Pool B but were only able to take 1 of those through to the Demotion Pool, kept their survival chances alive with a win over White Rose 2. That victory however throws White Rose 2 into a tough position. White Rose 2 actually finished 5th in Pool A but after their round 8 loss, they have just 2 points due to their results against Promotion Pool teams not being carried through.

Sussex and Warwickshire had both narrowly missed out on a place in the Promotion Pool and got to battle it out for best 4NCL county side (not an official title) with the southerners coming out on top 5-3 with the only 2 wins in the match coming from Sussex's 2 juniors: Dom Miller and Matt Forster. King's



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Head's results meanwhile have fallen off a cliff as they lost their 4th match in a row to go from possible promotion contenders to possible relegation candidates. After their loss to West is Best 2 they do still have 5 points and so are still likely to stay up, but they will need to turn their form around if they are to do so.