

So, after 13 years, the Watford and District Ray Cup has returned to Berkhamsted BC for the first time since 2011. The feel good factor has certainly returned to our Club and in particular, the Men's section.

In advance of the semi final your Mens Captain had decided on the makeup of the 3 Rinks IE: To utilise a squad system, whereby, if successful, not all the players who represented the Club in morning Semi-Final, would play in the afternoon Final.

The Berko men came out of the traps with all guns blazing against Hemel Hempstead in the morning Semi-Final and quickly established a commanding lead across all 3 Rinks. Unfortunately, I do not have the scorecards anymore, but by the half way point (9 Ends) I believe we were well in excess of 25 - 30 shots in front.

With peoples' minds already dreaming about the afternoon Final, I think a number of our players let their standards drop and allowed Hemel Hempstead to make inroads into cutting down the overall score. But after indicated that Clubs could not concede and relishing the prospect of unnecessarily making Berkhamsted play the full 18 Ends, knowing that they would then have to play another full match in the afternoon ; their Captain had no choice other than to follow the example of the other losing Semi-Finalists, Tring, and concede the match with a couple of Ends still to be played.

Our hosts, Croxley Guild, provided an excellent lunch, including a pudding ! Fortunately, our men refreshed themselves, without over indulging, knowing that the day's work was only half done and with the prospect of facing much stiffer opposition, in the shape of the 'mighty' Garston BC in the afternoon's Final.

The weather had been dry in the morning, warm, with plenty of grey cloud cover. However, as the afternoon's session was about to start, the sun starting to shine more brightly through the clouds and the temperature definitely rose by more than a few degrees. With little wind, it was near perfect bowling weather.

The Berkhamsted BC support in the morning had been good to hear ; definitely the loudest of the 4 Clubs represented. But, I do not know if word had spread of our Semi-Final victory in the morning, but our supporter numbers swelled considerably during the afternoon, primarily made up from our Ladies section. It must have been so gratifying, especially for our younger players, to hear each of their incredible bowls being cheered on by so many supporters. I would personally like to thank each and ever one of you who came to support us. You were most definitely our 13th 'man' !

Moving on to the Final itself. Again, your Men's Captain had difficult decisions to make. But freshening up the squad in my eyes, was essential. I strongly believe that some of our players cannot play 2 highly competitive matches in 1 day or at least not maintain their own high standards playing 40 Ends in 1 day. Consequently, 1 player was replaced from each Rink. But let me assure you, that those 3 players from the morning, Gary Fisher, Paul 'Mac' Mackness and Bill Howells all played their part in helping Berkhamsted BC be winners in the afternoon, and deserve the utmost praise and thank you from the rest of the Team.

Unfortunately, not all the players in our squad agreed with my tactics and it took more than a little persuasion (nee begging) before Brian Livesey stepped in as my No.2, Dave Sear as Lead for David Brown and Tony Smart as Kevin Clarke's No.2.

Predictably, Garston players were loud, in our faces and playing their usual confident aggressive bowls. For some of our players, this was a new experience and it took them slightly by surprise, with a few slightly dejected heads in the opening Ends. Across all 3 Rinks, after 5 Ends we were losing 9-1, 6-2 and my own Rink 8-1.

Would Berkhamsted BC be conceding even earlier than Tring BC had done in the morning ? The answer was an emphatic "No" ! David Brown's Rink stuck to their task well. Even though they eventually lost 17-13, they picked up a great '5' on End 7 and a truly, most important 1 on End 18.

I am sure David will say he meant it, but I and many others watched his bowl and even he will have to admit, it was a fortuitous 'wick' !

Kevin Clarke's Rink went on to win their next 8 out of 13 Ends, picking up a '5' along the way and winning 21-19. However, I am sure he/they would agree, dropping a '5' on the their last End made it a more nervy intense finale than his Captain was hoping or expecting.

This left my Rink who had done tremendously well to win 10 out of their last 13 Ends. The Garston BC Skip, the notorious MR Glen Williams, had deliberately played slower (what is known in Herts Middleton Cup matches as the 'snail' Rink), to try and determine what he and his players needed to achieve in their last few Ends. Consequently, it all came down to the very last End, with Berkhamsted BC leading by 2 shots IE: A second wood would suffice. Keiran Davis played perhaps, if not his best 2 woods of the match, definitely his 2 most important. 1 toucher and the other extremely close to the jack. From that moment onwards, my job as skip was to try and ensure the rest of my players played good positional woods ; which Brian Livesey and Louis Sear did to perfection. Glen tried his best, which meant 'firing', obviously, and even though the jack did move, Berkhamsted BC held firm and won their last End by 1 shot and overall won the Ray Cup by 3 shots.

The relief (primarily by me) and joy (celebrations) by the Berkhamsted BC players and mass of supporters was and is a memory I will treasure for the rest of my life. Thank you to ALL my players, the squad, including Paul Sims, who travelled but was not required ; and not forgetting Tony Howard who was abroad celebrating his famous WWII hero Uncle, but helped our Team in previous Rounds.

Chris Gray - Club Captain