



Norfolk Bowls Association

Eastern Counties League – a way forward into 2023 & beyond

The cancellation of the Eastern Counties League in 2020 & 2021 has presented the opportunity to consider the future of the League for future seasons.

The League in its current format has each County playing each of the other counties meaning a total of 6 matches per season.

The Middleton Cup will revert to a Group format in 2023 which will mean that each County will play either 3 or 4 matches depending on which Group they are in followed by a quarter final for the Group winners.

If the ECL continues in its current format and with the Middleton Cup reverting back to a group format this will result in a commitment to players and officials of a minimum of 9 or 10 Saturday fixtures over what is already a crowded season. Added to this there are National Inter-County and Inter-Club National competitions which are generally played at weekends which adds further to the commitments and player availability.

In previous seasons, there have been problems firstly in finding suitable match dates and then problems with some Counties fielding teams, particularly with matches later in the season. This has resulted in some matches being conceded and 'weakened' teams being fielded though it is hoped that this will not arise going forward but if they do then this will put the overall viability of the League into question.

Competitive ECL matches, particularly early in the season provide the opportunity for Counties to use the matches as trials for the Middleton Cup. In addition, the League provides a pathway for players into the Middleton Cup. Both of these are positives for the League.

However, the question is, do the positives outweigh the negatives?

Various alternatives and options for the League should be considered

- A revised structure that reduces the negatives but retain the positives. To this end, a suggestion is to restructure the League by splitting the League into 2 sections, one of 4 Counties and the other of 3 with each County playing the other once (either at home or away)
- The winners of the 2 sections to then play-off for the League title (at a neutral venue or possibly in the President's County) on a date determined by the ECBA Council.
- The Counties in the 2 sections and will apply for a 2 year period with fixtures reversed in the second year. As with the Middleton Cup, the 2 sections will be re-drawn every 2 years and a way found that Counties in a 3 county group play in a 4 county group in the re-drawn structure.

This structure will allow for matches to be suitably arranged as Middleton Cup trials if so required but will also give Counties more scope and date availability to arrange their own separate trials & squad get-togethers ahead of the start of the Middleton Cup. In addition, though with less matches there is still a player pathway in to the Middleton Cup.

Another matter needs to be considered and that is of the Officers rink.

- If the revised format is adopted should the Officers rink be scrapped allowing each match consist of a full 'competitive' 6 rink match?
- If the Officers rink is to continue, should it be included in the overall team result?
- If the Officers rink is to continue, should it be an entirely separate league but continue to be played at the same time as the 'main' league and with a separate Group winners play off?

Summary

This matter should be considered by all Counties ahead of any motion that might be put to the AGM in November.

Whilst considering this matter it is important that all key stakeholders are consulted including Team Managers and players as it is critical that all buy-in to any changes thereby avoiding the situation whereby changes are made without due consultation as has been the case with changes introduced by Bowls England over the last couple of years. A critical point that must be considered is that players feel there is a viable pathway, including for younger players, to progress to Middleton Cup selection be it through the Eastern Counties League or other events, which is the dream of every competitive County player.

So far as junior players are concerned, in the past, there was an Under 30 Eastern Counties League but this was ended due to lack of players. Two rinks comprising 'Under-30' players within the main Eastern Counties League was then tried but this too was ended with younger players being integrated into the 'senior' team. The question is, is there a need for an Eastern Counties Junior event to be introduced maybe a knock out event on similar lines to the White Rose Trophy (i.e. 2 rinks of 8 players) to provide an additional development pathway for younger players? If so, is it viable for this to be played and completed on a single day & should such an event, be open to both male & female players? This is also a matter that needs to be considered.

There is much to consider!

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