

Junior Camrose 2009 – Captain's Report

This year's Junior Camrose, the under-25 teams-of-four competition contested by the home nations, was hosted by Northern Ireland in Belfast.

Despite only taking two pairs, Wales looked to have a much stronger team than for several years. Eve Hatfield and Cat Evans were playing in their third Junior Camrose together, and on the back of a successful performance in Beijing, are becoming a real force to be reckoned with on the junior scene. Chris Owen, who also played in Beijing, resumed his partnership with veteran Jonny Sharp, playing in his 479th and last ever Junior Camrose.

The first day of the Junior Camrose is always a long haul, with five twelve board matches, and our draw this year meant we would face England and Scotland in the tough evening slots. With this in mind, it would clearly be important to hit the ground running.

In the first match against Scotland, most of the action was the boys' table, with a game swing in for reaching a good 4H, and a game swing out after their opponents were the only pair in the room to find a club game. Apart from these, solid cards at both tables led to a narrow defeat, 16-14. For the next match, against Northern Ireland, we were up on the Vugraph, and perhaps suffered slightly from nerves. The Irish made mistakes as well, but we couldn't capitalise and ended up losing 20-10.

The team did well to bounce back against Ireland; both pairs had a very good card, with Eve and Cat frequently making contracts that Jonny and Chris took off in the other room. No real mistakes from our team was good enough to pick up an 18-12 victory and put us only a couple of VPs off par. With dinner providing a bit of a break before the evening, we were focussed on holding our nerve in what would undoubtedly be a crucial evening session.

For the match against England, Eve and Cat sat East-West against Mike Bell and Ed Jones, while Jonny and Chris faced Tom Dessain and Dom Maloney. This early board augured well for our chances in the match, as both our pairs showed good aggression and judgement on a potentially explosive deal:

| | | |
|---------|---------|----------|
| | A | |
| | 7 | Love all |
| | QJ7532 | dealer W |
| | AQ984 | |
| KJ532 | | Q10984 |
| KJ10964 | | AQ82 |
| 8 | | AK6 |
| 7 | | 6 |
| | 76 | |
| | 53 | |
| | 1094 | |
| | KJ10532 | |

In the closed room, Eve found an aggressive 1H opening first in, and was perhaps surprised when her next decision came at the five level:

| | | | | |
|----|------|-----|----|-----------|
| 1H | 2NT* | 4C^ | 5C | *minors |
| P | P | X | P | ^splinter |
| 5H | AP | | | |

2NT showed the minors, and after Cat's excellent choice of a splinter, South's 5C looks almost conservative. Although some might not choose a forcing pass with Eve's cards, the girls did well to stop in 5H. The defence failed to find the double dummy line to take this off (SA, C to A, S ruff) and Eve quickly wrapped up eleven tricks.

In the open room, the auction was very different, Dom choosing to pass first in hand:

| | | | | |
|-----|----|----|----|---------|
| P | 1D | P | P | *majors |
| 4D* | 5C | 6S | AP | |

Tom's initial pass over 1D is perhaps not automatic, but on an auction marking him with values, Dom certainly made up for lost time. Chris' aggressive re-entry into the auction gives East a tough decision, and, perhaps counting on a diamond lead, Tom tried 6S.

The spotlight was now firmly on Jonny. Many might think 7C an automatic sacrifice here, but Jonny judged well on the layout to pass out 6S, and, vitally, led a club, ensuring the contract could be cashed one off, for a useful ten IMPs against the closed room result.

Both pairs held their own against the English for the rest of the set, avoiding disaster, and we emerged with a 16-14 victory which demonstrated just how competitive a team we have when everyone is playing well.

The exertions of that match and some tiredness from the long day may have hung over into the final encounter, our second tussle with Scotland, where a few individual errors crept back in. But both pairs also produced their share of good scores, so while we couldn't quite emulate the victory over Scotland in Beijing, a second narrow defeat 16-14 was the sort of solid score we needed to keep taking to stay in contention.

Well, what a day! The team was lying third, and still close behind a Northern Ireland team we knew we could beat with a little more discipline and a following wind. After a couple of drinks, maybe allowing ourselves to dream of an historic second place finish, we got an early night to be ready for the second day.

Sunday dawned, then, bright with promise, and it was a real blow to lose heavily in the first match, picking up just 3 VPs from Northern Ireland. A combination of some slightly disappointing individual mistakes, some good judgement from the Irish, and the inevitable bad luck was not the start we needed, but the helpful draw meant that we had lunch then a sitout to get over it, and I was keen to emphasise that posting a good score against Ireland would still leave us in a strong position going into the final match.

It's always difficult to put previous results behind you, but this team has enormous character and that elusive ability to sit straight back down and be at the very top of their game. A 22-8 victory over the Irish, under the additional pressure of being on Vugraph, was a fantastic way to get back on track, with both pairs managing to reprise their roles from the previous match. Eve and Cat, once again, were finding and making the right contracts, while Jonny and Chris were taking off the often inferior contracts in the other room. It's tough to sit and defend throughout a set, and particularly at this level we see a lot of players wandering into auctions simply because they're a bit bored, so it was reassuring to see Jonny and Chris keep up their concentration and trust Cat and Eve to be doing the right things in the other room.

With just the rematch against England to come, then, we were sitting fourth. Twelve VPs from the match would see us go past Scotland and claim third, providing that the Irish didn't completely whitewash Northern Ireland. Both pairs duly produced solid cards, and were perhaps slightly unlucky to lose as heavily as 18-12 - no more than 7 IMPs changed hands in this set, with overtricks and undertricks really counting. So we'd done our bit - but Ireland had produced a storming performance in their final match and just snatched third from us.

To be disappointed at just missing out on third place goes to show how far this team has come in the past year. The first day's VP tally was roughly the same as the total scores posted in 2007 and 2008, a remarkable achievement, and the dramatic improvement is a testament to the hard work put in by both partnerships. Eve and Cat have refused to let a mere 400 mile separation get in the way of playing together, and as their strong performance in Porthcawl in December demonstrated, their partnership has a bright future. Jonny and Chris have taken full advantage of Bridge Base Online to hone their understanding, and despite Jonny no longer being eligible for the Junior Camrose, it is to be hoped they will continue to play together at congresses. All four of them were a credit to their country throughout the weekend, and as you can see from the team photo they were also clearly the best dressed side!

Our thanks as a team must go to all the organisers, who as ever did a tremendous job of running the event and making sure we were all in the right place at the right time. Closer to home, we're very grateful for the support of our top players - taking the time to come down to a coaching session and give advice or tips is a small effort that can really bring huge rewards. Speaking to the team, it's also very clear that the experience of Beijing has really contributed to their desire to improve; we've already seen signs of their potential, and given further opportunities to compete internationally, these four players could form the backbone of a very strong Welsh U28 team in 2012 in London.

James Ewington (NPC)