

The past decade was not a particularly healthy one for table tennis and table tennis in Braintree was no exception.

When this column reviewed the 1990s, the Braintree League had 36 teams. Last season it was down to 24.

All rather different from the late 70s when the league boasted 60 teams.

But there have been signs of a recovery this season when the numbers have risen to 27.

The central concern is how sustainable that rise will turn out to be.

The worrying trend, outlined here ten years ago, of the ever growing average age of the league players, has not been reversed.

In fact the percentage of over 40s in the first division has risen from 63 per cent (22 out of 35) in 2000 to 75 per cent (30 out of 40) today.

The first division of ten years ago had two players over 60. Today there are ten.

While it is encouraging that players are prolonging their careers much more these days (over 60s were pretty rare in the league 30 or 40 years ago and only exceptions, Charlie Wheeler for instance, played at the top level), it is not a good basis on which to plan for the future.

The good news is that there are two teenagers playing in division one and a clutch further down the league and coaching sessions at Netts and Black Notley continue to bring in new players. Whether it is enough to sustain the league for another ten years is another matter.

At an individual level, there have been some notable achievements during the decade.

Sarra Wang, who took her early steps in the league, won the England under 15 singles title and went on to reach the semi final of the ladies' singles in the English closed.

Mark Palmer also became a national champion, in his case in the wheelchair category.

Off the table there was further recognition at national level when Steve Kerns, Braintree League general secretary for nine years, became the press officer for the British League, and Netts supremo Brian Davison took on the role of the English Table Tennis Association's regional chairman.

Kerns also made his mark on the table when he remained unbeaten in the league for seven years and after 15 semi finals and six runners-up medals finally became men's singles champion in 2002.

There were seven men's singles champions in all during the decade, only Kerns and Paul Davison winning it more than once.

On a team front, Black Notley A and Rayne A won the first division title three times, Netts A twice and Cressing and Bocking once each.

One of the saddest aspects of the past few years has been the decline in the number of women playing the game, so much so that it has not been possible to run a ladies' singles for the past three years.

Hopefully the introduction of Nikki Kennard and return of Kelly Skeggs and Helen Barnett could mean the end of that drought this year.

Also sad has been the disappearance of two of the league's leading clubs, Colne, whose first team won the division one title a record 13 times, and Witham FC, league winners themselves six times and a club that once had four teams in the top five.

Finchingfield, Feering, Panfield and Maycast Nokes have also departed while Cressing and Braintree Tennis Club came and went and Lucas changed their name to Delphi and then to Nomads. Sible Hedingham, now in their second season, are the latest club to join the league.

Netts came and went and came back again, but the club continues to have a major impact away from the league with its coaching programmes and British League sides.

It was in conjunction with Netts that the league ran a two-a-side league for three years.

Two-a-side is seen by some as the future of the game, but it has not proved universally popular. But neither are matches that finish after 10.30 popular with younger teenagers, or particularly their parents.

Playing the game up to 11 points, introduced during the decade, was not universally popular either, but has now been accepted by most players, and preferred to 21-up by many.

What changes 2010-2019 have in store remains to be seen.