

Southern Cross
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Empire Table Tennis Club Has Proud Record

Seven times A grade champions inside ten years is the record of the Empire Table Tennis Club, Petone, whose representatives will play Y.M.C.A. (Dunedin) to decide Dominion supremacy in the N.Z.T.T.A.'s champion club team contest for the Jones Shield in the Sports Centre, Wakefield Street, Wellington, tomorrow night, commencing at 7.30 p.m.

Few clubs in New Zealand can have better records than the Empire Club, which was founded in 1934 and has since won fourteen grade championships—with the possibility of more being added to that number this winter.

The birth of the club was primarily a venture to keep together members of the Empire Cricket Club, now amalgamated with Gracefield and known as Petone United in the Hutt Valley Association, during the winter months and, as such, it functioned for the first year or so of its existence.

Enthusiastic members of the club who practiced throughout the summer placed the club's name on the championship records in 1935, winning the B grade. This gained the club A grade status in the following term.

It is recalled that in their first year, two members, Jim Halligan and Andy Wood, journeyed to a place in Taita known as "Jackson's factory" to play a match in the lowest grade and were full of confidence as to the outcome. The result was a complete reversal, the team losing 20 to nil. Individual results showed instances of scores of 31-4, with one score actually reading 31-1.

It was a setback, but the players were not through. The lesson spurred them on to greater efforts and, inside two years, these same two players had gained Hutt Valley senior representative honours.

On another occasion, representatives of the club played a match against the Alicetown Trinity Club and the result stirred one member of the home team to ask in all sincerity whether the motto of the club was "Cheek and Confidence."

For some years that story was freely voiced and many old-timers, still playing the game in the Valley, are apt to apply the title when facing teams representing the Empire Club.

SUCCESS ACHIEVED

In 1937, the club had grown in strength. It was in this year that they first won A grade honours. The club's D grade team was also successful that winter.

The A team that year beat Hutt Cricket Club in the final, the latter's team including Barney Roberts and Mrs. M. G. Valk.

The Empire team was A. R. Harding (captain), J. Wall, A. T. Wood and J. J. Halligan.

Members of the winning D grade were J. R. Capstick, Miss J. Riddler and Bill Bates.

In 1938 the club lost its A grade title, but teams playing D and E grade inter-club matches added two more championships to the record of the club.

The following winter the B and C grade teams carried off championship honours and in the first winter of the war years Empire recaptured the A grade championship, which they won again in 1941, 1942, 1943 and 1944, losing to St. Ronans in 1945, from whom they first lifted the title in 1937.

It was in 1939 that the club was forced to close its membership at a few over the sixty mark. In that winter they had eleven teams competing in the Hutt Valley inter-club matches.

The call made upon manpower for the New Zealand forces resulted in a sharp drop in membership from 1941 onwards, but in 1942 the club was classified as strong with every possibility of it seeing out the war to a successful conclusion.

Fate intervened in May of that year, when Wellington experienced a severe earthquake resulting in the club having to vacate the premises they used in favour of a manufacturing firm.

With no clubroom, and a smaller membership, the club almost went into recess during the next two seasons, and but for a loyal band of players who continued (without a hall) playing inter-club matches, there might not have been an Empire Club today.

With the cessation of hostilities former members began to return to New Zealand and this winter found the Empire Club once again a force to be reckoned with in Hutt Valley table tennis.

A feature of the team which is to represent Empire against Y.M.C.A. is that two of the members, Jack Wall and Alf Harding, were members of the club's first successful A grade team in 1937.

The name "Empire" does not give any indication as to the district the players represent and in this respect the club, which is a Petone one, is often not accorded as much public support as it might otherwise get.

Southern Cross ascertained this fact from officials of the club, one of whom stressed the point that the club does not represent any firm or public house, as the name might imply, but is one of the very few clubs open to the general public, catering for both sexes, and paying particular attention to learners, who are coached by the club's coach, Mr. A. T. Wood.