

In the last BEA report, we looked at the curse of second place and how tight the relegation battle in particular was becoming. The conclusion of the season saw both the continuation of the curse, and one of the tightest-ever finishes at the bottom of a league table.

First things first though, and the main story of the season was an emphatic title win for **Enniscorthy**, who had first place secure with a match to spare and who ultimately won all 11 of their matches, three of them by the maximum 5-0. They averaged 4 points per match over the course of the season and took home three board prizes in addition to the title; only Gonzaga's Armstrong team managed a higher percentage score over the course of the season.

The question from a long way out has been who will join them in the O'Hanlon next season. To recap the Curse – **Dublin** were in second place at Christmas, but picked up 2½ points from their next four matches and were out of it. **Portmarnock**, who beat Dublin 5-0 in that first match after Christmas, then took over second, and immediately suffered four consecutive 4-1 losses. **St Benildus** were next up – and promptly lost 3½-1½ to Naomh Barróg in a match which saw them without three regulars due to a clash with the school's TY musical. That put **Naomh Barróg** in pole position, and though they won in Drogheda in round 10, Benildus beat Portmarnock 4-1 to ensure the teams were level going into the last round – though crucially for the Curse, Naomh Barróg retained second place on tie-break.

On the final day, Benildus were up against struggling Balbriggan, while Naomh Barróg had to face champions Enniscorthy. In a nice touch, both matches were played in the main room, otherwise filled with the six Armstrong matches, while the rest of the BEA was alongside the Ennis on the next floor down. Even without being on the right side of the Curse, Benildus were big favourites for promotion – they just needed to outscore Naomh Barróg – but Naomh Barróg and Balbriggan had something to say about that on a very tight final day. Benildus and Enniscorthy both went 2-0 up, but then Enniscorthy lost two in a row, were in trouble on the third, while Benildus weren't any better in any of their games.

But when Naomh Barróg lost their final board on time when a pawn up, Benildus just needed half a point across their three remaining games to go up. In the event, they picked up two draws to be promoted as runners-up to Enniscorthy for the second season in a row.

For **Balbriggan**, though, the question now was whether 3-2 would secure their BEA survival. Having lost their first seven matches, they were 3 points adrift at the time of our last update (after round 8), but two wins had seen go ahead of both Phibsboro and **Rathmines** (though the latter were technically doomed to relegation anyway by virtue of their scratch against Portmarnock earlier in the season). So, having picked up two points

on the last day against Benildus, they needed to see if **Phibsboro** could beat that against Dublin and stay up. The answer was an emphatic yes – Phibsboro won 4-1, and Balbriggan were down by a point.

But that still wasn't the end of the story – remarkably, it turned out that Phibsboro's board 1 hadn't played all season, and so was ineligible to play in the final round. He had won, but the result was awarded to Dublin – and now Balbriggan and Phibsboro were tied on 21 points apiece. Not only that, but they'd drawn 2½-2½ in their individual match, so relegation came down to board count. There had been only one win apiece in the match – Balbriggan's win on board 3 was worth 3 points, but Phibsboro's win on board 2 was worth 4, so they were the ones who stayed up.

There were five board prizes over the season – **Dovydas Pocevicus'** 10/11 was only matched by Conor O'Donnell in the Armstrong and John Loughran in the O'Hanlon. His Enniscorthy teammates **Agustin Plaza Reino** and **Dean Copeland** also made the cut, as did Benildus' **William Kenny** and Drogheda's **Michael Johnston**, who was the presumably quite willing beneficiary of a walkover win on the final day! **Seán Waldron's** score of 8/9 for Naomh Barróg is worthy of mention, while **Seán Devilly** (St Benildus) and **Martin Burns** (Inchicore) could also have had board prizes had they played all 11 games.

Like the BEA, the Bodley was wrapped up with a match to spare, and Trinity rounded off their season with a final-day victory to bring them to 11 wins from 11; only Gonzaga's O'Hanlon matched Enniscorthy and Trinity in that feat this season. With the Intervarsities returning earlier this month for the first time in many years, and UCD likely to re-join the leagues next season for the first time in around 15 years, the college chess scene is looking healthier than it has for many years.

Behind them, **Blanch A** took the second promotion spot; they had been just a point clear of Malahide going into the final round, but **Malahide** lost 4-1 to Trinity, meaning Blanch needed just a half point against Benildus to go up – a task which would never have been in doubt even had most of the Benildus team not gotten called up to the help their O'Hanlon in their survival battle.

Malahide, captained by Tom O'Sullivan, after whom the O'Sullivan Cup (Div 7) is named, were pipped to third place by last year's O'Sullivan Cup champions, **Enniscorthy**. Whether they can follow their first team up the leagues next season will depend in part on how they cope when their top player moves up to become the sixth player on their O'Hanlon.

At the bottom, **Blanch B** went into the final day 1½ points adrift of **Bray/Greystones**, having lost their individual match. Their hopes were pinned on the fact that they were playing already-relegated Rathmines – but with only one league win all season, this in itself was far from straightforward. In the event, it was **Rathmines** who ended the season on a high, their 3½-1½ win taking Blanch B down with them regardless of how Bray fared against Naomh Barróg (they lost 3-2 in the end)

Surprisingly, there were no board prizes given out for the season. Only **Robert McLoughlin** of Blanch A even had a chance of a board prize going into the last day, but he was unable to play in the end, and ended just short on 8/10; Dún Laoghaire's **Liam Farrell** joined him on the same score. None of the Trinity players played enough game to get a board prize, though **John Kelly**, **Diarmuid Reidy**, **John Shanley** and **Christopher Young** scored an unbeaten 27/29 between them.