

Team Northumbria vs London Polonia

The men's semi final saw 2nd vs 3rd in the league, as Team Northumbria men took on London Polonia. The power of both teams was evident from the off, with Northumbria feeding a lot of their play through to Andrew Sinclair who was despatching some monstrous spikes with ease. The first technical time out was taken as Northumbria opened an 8-4 lead. Rob Flay continued from where he left off, putting the ball on a plate for the Northumbria hitters. Polonia were never allowed to settle and couldn't live with the consistency of Northumbria, as they progressed to a 21-14 lead. Some big serves from Robert Rapi pulled the scores closer, however a successful block from Rob Nicholson gave them their first set point. Polonia's Vytenis Suklys saved the first with a massive cross-court spike. More solid defence from Polonia saw them save a further 2 set points however the run of points was ended as Northumbria took the first set 25-22.

Big serves was the theme at the start of the second set, as Polonia raced into a 5-1 lead. Some solid service receiving from Andrzej Saller enabled Polonia to set up some high quality attacks, with Robert Rapi nailing some backcourt hits through the middle. A 5 point lead at the first technical time out turned into a 7 point lead at 12-5 as Northumbria coach Dave Goodchild called a time out for a change of tactics, however it was Polonia that once again came out stronger, cruising to a 16-7 lead. The cohesion that Northumbria displayed in the first set had disappeared, allowing Polonia to score point after point, winning the 2nd set 25-15.

Whatever Dave Goodchild and assistant coach Audrey Cooper said to the Northumbria boys at the turn around seemed to work. The tempo had increased, the plays were sharper and the hits harder. However a 6-2 lead was pegged back to 7-5, causing Goodchild to introduce Paul Welsh into the action. The 2 point lead was maintained at the first technical timeout, but it was soon reduced to 1 as Polonia began to find their rhythm again. Northumbria often had 2 specialist setters on court at once as Rob Flay showed his versatility acting as both a setter and hitter, with Kieran Sowden taking over the responsibility of setting when called upon. The extra option showed its worth, as Northumbria gained the advantage, opening up a 3 point cushion at 16-13. This quickly became a 6 point cushion, as a few unforced errors from Polonia looked to have given Northumbria a decisive lead. A time out taken by Polonia coach Mamas at 22-17 created a break in play. This benefitted the team from London as they took the next 3 points to set the Northumbria nerves jangling at 22-20. Andrew Sinclair and Attila Berndt showed their talent though, stepping up to the plate with some big hits at crucial times to see their side through to 25-21.

Just as they did after losing the 1st set, Polonia once again came out and forced an early 5-3 lead despite some great defence from Northumbria Libero John Chapman. The lead had increased to 3 points at the first technical time out, and then to 5 as coach Goodchild called a time out for Northumbria. The 5 point gap never decreased as Polonia once again began to dominate, forcing Northumbria's second time out at 19-13. It was now or never for Northumbria as they were staring down the barrel of a 5th set decider. Rob Flay and Kieran Sowden once again started to mix things up at the front, however it wasn't enough to unsettle the Polonia boys, who kept their composure to win 25-20 and send the match to a nail biting decider!

Northumbria took the opening point, but were forced into an early time out as Polonia carried their form to a 4-1 lead. An ace made it 6-2, which quickly turned into 7-2. A second time out saw Northumbria desperately trying to regroup as they knew, with the 5th set only being played to 15, they didn't have many points to work their way back in. 3 straight points saw yet another shift in momentum to Northumbria, with the scores at 8-6 to Polonia at the change of ends. Little differences in the Northumbria play were starting to have big consequences, as Polonia edged closer and closer to a place in the final. Polonia reached the crucial match point first with the score at 14-9. They only needed the one serve to seal victory, sending their fans into rapturous applause, as they appreciated the awesome exhibition of volleyball that provided so many highs and lows for both teams.