

Commonwealth Games Round Up

Author: Russell Moore

Posted On: October 27, 2010



England International Liam Pitchford

With the London Olympics now less than two years away, the marker that was laid down by England's emerging table tennis team at the Commonwealth Games could hardly have been more timely.

Paul Drinkhall, Andrew Baggaley and Liam Pitchford each finished with two medals (a silver and a bronze), while there was also some encouraging performances from the women, not least in their passage to the semi-finals of the team event.

On the face of it, a total of three medals might seem like an expected return for a nation that is traditionally among the most powerful in this competition, yet it was the manner of some of the results that have provoked such hope.

And, while Drinkhall and Baggaley were so influential in securing England's place in the final of the team event, it is difficult to look beyond Pitchford, just 17, for the outstanding individual English moment of the games. First on, playing in the team final against the world number 17, he produced an extraordinary performance to overcome a two-game deficit and defeat top seed Goa Ning 3-2.

That, though, was as good as it got for England as the Singapore men then put together three consecutive wins to clinch another gold of a table tennis tournament they collectively came to dominate.

In the team semi-finals, Drinkhall had starred against hosts India with victories over Amalraj Anthony and Sharath Kamal Achanta, while Baggaley was also a 3-0 winner against Subhajit Saha.

There was further English medal success in the men's doubles, with Pitchford and Baggaley securing bronze after a dramatic five set win over the Australian pair William Henzell and Robert Frank.

Baggaley's input was particularly impressive as he had played despite a dose of 'Delhi-belly'. Their narrow 3-2 semi-final defeat against Indian number one seeds Achanta and Saha had been one of the most dramatic matches of the tournament, with Baggaley and Pitchford actually reaching a match point in the fourth set before eventually being overhauled in front of a partisan Indian crowd.

"There was a big chance for us to win the match," said Baggaley. "The Indian team really played well and it was a very tight match. In the fourth set we should have won. It was a 50-50, but we didn't succeed."

Earlier, Baggaley and Pitchford had produced an excellent performance to even reach the semi-finals by beating the Singapore pair, Cai Xiaoli and Ma Liang, 6-11, 11-7, 11-9, 11-4.

Baggaley had been going for a third Commonwealth Games gold medal, but could still reflect with some pride on the achievement of what was a fifth medal in his third appearance in the competition.

England's other medal came in the mixed doubles courtesy of Drinkhall and partner Jo Parker who, in one of the most entertaining matches of the entire tournament, beat their Australian rivals in four sets. The match ultimately came to hinge on the third set, which England won 13-11, with Parker's outstanding defence proving to be particularly crowd-pleasing. Indeed, upon clinching a bronze medal, the English pair were mobbed in appreciation of the entertainment they had provided.

Drinkhall and Parker had been ousted in the semi-finals by Singapore pair Yang and Wang.

In the singles events, it was fifth seed Drinkhall who carried England's hopes for longest before eventually losing to Singapore's Yang Zi in the quarter-final. Drinkhall had recovered from 2-0 down to draw level at 2-2, but was eventually defeated 4-2. He admitted that concentration and fatigue had been a problem.

"My focus went totally wrong and I was really tired because of the tight schedule we had," said Drinkhall. "I couldn't eat properly so there was no energy and it was difficult. I should have brought noodles from England. I didn't like the pasta they made here, so I couldn't get enough food."

Baggaley had been presented with a particularly harsh singles draw and was beaten 4-0 by top seed Gao Ning, while Pitchford, Danny Reed and Darius Knight were also all defeated by opponents from Singapore.

In the women's singles, Kelly Sibley was beaten by Australia's Vivian Tan, while Parker lost in four sets to Singapore's Jiawei Li. In her first Commonwealth Games, Andover's Hannah Hicks made it through the group phase before being ousted in straight sets by India's Madhurika Patkar.

The women's team also performed with considerable credit in the team event when they came agonisingly close to a bronze medal in their play-off match against Malaysia. With Hicks and Parker both recording individual wins, the medal came down to the deciding set of the deciding match, with Sock Khim Ng ultimately beating Sibley 11-8. England had been beaten 3-2 in all three of the matches that the Malaysians had won. It meant the English women had actually been defeated despite winning three more individual sets throughout a match that had lasted well over three hours. Even so, a fourth placed finish represented a huge improvement on their performance in 2006 when they finished down in ninth.

"It's a bit emotional; it's really disappointing to miss out on bronze," said Parker. "We were two-nil down and fought back to two-all. But in the end the deciding game didn't go our way. Perhaps, we didn't play as well as we can, which is disappointing. To come so close to a medal shows our potential. We're still a very young team and hopefully we'll be together for a number of years."

That assessment could also be applied to the men's team and, while the level of competition at the Olympics will clearly be at another level completely, it was a tournament to provide hope that English table tennis will again produce some genuinely world class talent.

By Jeremy Wilson

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