



Pitchford bows out in thriller

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Liam Pitchford exited the China Open in the last 16, but not before taking it all the way to 11-9 in the decider and saving EIGHT match points on the way.

Pitchford's opponent was world No 9 Koki Niwa, and the diminutive left-hander took the first game 11-8 before the Englishman hit back by the same score.

It was 11-6 in the third to Niwa, the most one-sided of the games, and from that point on the players could barely be separated.

Pitchford led the fourth 8-5 and 9-8, but Niwa took a run of three points, culminating in a huge stroke of good fortune on the game point when his return looped off the net and caught the back edge of the table.

The fifth was nip-and-tuck to 9-9 before Niwa brought up a single match point, saved by Pitchford, who then added the next two points to keep himself in the match.

If that was a standalone drama, what followed in the sixth was the full mini-series as Pitchford saw a 6-5 lead turn into a 6-10 deficit, only to then go on a run of six points of his own – Niwa taking his timeout at 10-7 – to level it up.

And there was an insight into the Chesterfield man's mental strength as he saved those match points with aggressive play, including two blistering backhand winners from 8-10 down.

More of the same in the seventh and again Pitchford had to face a 6-10 scoreline. Again, he showed unshakeable belief and brought it back to 9-10. But he drifted just long in the next rally and a visibly relieved Niwa had won, to set up a quarter-final against world No 1 Fan Zhendong.

Result

Men's Singles

Round of 16

Koki Niwa (JPN) bt Liam Pitchford 4-3 (11-8, 8-11, 11-6, 11-9, 11-13, 10-12, 11-9)

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