



Pitchford determined to build on stellar year

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Posted On: December 24, 2018

By any standards, it's fair to say Liam Pitchford has had a sensational year, starting with Team World Cup bronze and ending with smashing into the world's top 20, via Commonwealth Games gold and a string of victories over the world's best players.

But England's No 1 – at No 16 in the world, our highest-ranked player since 1980 – is not planning to rest on any laurels and is focused on working hard to reach even more exalted heights.

He does allow a brief reflection on his work in 2018, though not surprisingly he struggles to pick out one particular highlight.

"Results-wise and ranking-wise it's definitely the best year of my career," said the Chesterfield man.

"There have been ups and downs, but mainly ups and that's very positive and gives me a lot to take into 2019.

"It's difficult to choose one highlight. Beating Ma Long (at the Bulgaria Open) was massive – he never really loses to European players, so that was a massive confidence boost.

"At Gold Coast (the Commonwealth Games), even though I didn't play to my best level, I came away with a gold medal, which is something I'd dreamed of, so that was a big moment.



Liam and Paul celebrate winning Commonwealth gold (Photo by Matt Roberts/Getty Images)

"On the World Tour, I was winning consistently and got to two semi-finals, just missing out on the Grand Finals.

"And back in February the team World Cup was a good one to start the year and everything got better from that point. So they were all different but all good."

Dimitrij Ovtcharov, Timo Boll and World Tour Grand Finals champion Tomokazu Harimoto are on the list of players beaten by Pitchford this year, but it is not just the results but the manner of them which has caught the eye, with Pitchford able to impose his game on opponents for sustained periods.

It is something he puts down to a combination of mental, physical and technical work.

"Being a lot stronger mentally and having a lot more belief in myself, even when it's not going well, being able to turn things in my favour, has been important," he said.

"Physically, I've never had a problem with the running side of the game. I've not got the biggest muscles, but that's my body type. But I've been working on that and I feel I'm a lot stronger – and that gives me confidence going on the table.

"I've worked on a few small things on my technique too, so everything just kind of clicked together this year.

"There's a lot of things still to work on. You can never be perfect, but I'll keep working and hopefully getting better."



Liam Pitchford defeated Dimitrij Ovtcharov at the Czech Open

After Christmas with family, it's back to his Copenhagen training base to prepare for the Hungarian Open, which starts on January 15, and after that the Europe Top 16 in Montreux on the first weekend in February – the latter a new experience for Pitchford and for which he will be seeded fourth.

"I'm spending Christmas in England and then going back to Copenhagen and getting back to putting the work in," he said.

"Hopefully I can play well in Hungary and then it's the Europe Top 16. It's the first time I've qualified – I was first reserve once and went out there and got to practise with the guys and watch the tournament.

"I'll be going there as the No 4 seed. I'm not putting expectations on myself. There will be 16 strong players there and there's no easy matches. I'm going to try and enjoy it and the opportunity is there to go on and qualify for the Men's World Cup. I just need to keep working hard."

Further confidence could be taken from the results at the World Tour Grand Finals, won by 15-year-old Tomokazu Harimoto of Japan and where Brazilian Hugo Calderano reached the semi-finals.

Pitchford has beaten both men on two occasions this year, in the case of champion Harimoto defeating him 3-0 at both the Team World Cup (11, 8, 5) and World Team Championships (5, 5, 3).

And Pitchford said: "Table tennis is for the most part a game of styles, and some players you like playing against more than others.

"He's 15 years old and has won the World Tour finals. To beat him twice 3-0 definitely gives me confidence I can to what he's done."

English fans will have a chance to watch Pitchford at the PG Mutual National Championships in Nottingham from March 1-3, where he goes in as defending champion having last year picked up his fourth Men's Singles title at the Copper Box Arena.

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And while the Nationals is understandably not the biggest tournament on his horizon, he still wants to win – and he points out that the standard is the highest it has been for some time and spectators are in for a treat.

He is taking nothing for granted, with the rest of the England Team World Cup squad – Paul Drinkhall, Sam Walker, David McBeath and Tom Jarvis – all capable of turning it on in Nottingham.

"I'll go there and try to win – I've got four, so five would be nice," said Pitchford. "But equally, the European Games are coming up and the Olympics next year and those are obviously bigger tournaments.

"Me and Paul have won 10 of the last 11 Nationals – he's one of the best English players ever, and hopefully people think of me that way too. It would be nice to go down in the record books with another title.

"There's definitely going to be some good matches. Paul wasn't in his best shape last year, but he'll be back, and Sam is fighting for his first singles title and that's quite important to him, so he'll be hungry.

"David got his first senior title in the doubles last year and obviously beat Paul in the singles and you wouldn't underestimate him. And Tom is improving and can surprise people, and he's got time on his side – in fact, we're all still young.

"It's definitely good for English table tennis and good for the spectators."



Liam Pitchford is the defending Men's Singles champion at the PG Mutual Nationals (picture by Alan Man)

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