

Para players highly motivated for Italy tournament

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Paralympic champions Will Bayley and Rob Davies and world champion Ross Wilson head a strong squad from the British Para Table Tennis Team that will head to Italy next week for the Lignano Master Open (March 14-16), a tournament that marks the start of the sport's qualification period for Tokyo 2020.

After taking a medal at seven consecutive major championships Bayley's defence of his men's class 7 world title last year ended with defeat at the quarter-final stage to the eventual champion Jordi Morales from Spain, a disappointment that has been driving the 31-year-old from Tunbridge Wells throughout the winter.

"I'm really motivated at the moment," he said. "Looking back on the World Championships I think I could have done more in my preparation and probably could have had a better season.

"I didn't win that many tournaments last year and I think it is important for my confidence that I can take medals in the smaller tournaments so it builds me up for the majors. I haven't missed a training session since January 2 and that builds my confidence up as well and I'm excited to see what I can do in Italy."

Davies is also on the comeback trail after a disappointing 2018 season and is focused on trying to win his fourth consecutive men's class 1 European title in Sweden later this year.

"Last year is definitely a big motivating factor," said the 34-year-old Welshman. "I just want to get back to enjoying my table tennis and enjoying the matches again. The overall aim is to qualify for Tokyo and try and defend my title but I've just got to take it one step at a time, not get frustrated and try and get some wins on the board.

"Obviously I want to be fighting fit for the Europeans so I want to get more hours on the table and get back to where I was by the end of the year. It is a building process for me now and it might be frustrating at times but I'll get there in the end."

By contrast Wilson enjoyed the best year of his career in 2018, winning the Para class 6-10 at the Commonwealth Games and the men's class 8 title at the World Championships. Although the 23-year-old from Minster admits that he is hungry for more titles he is not feeling any pressure going into the new season as a world champion.

"It doesn't feel any different to be going into a new season as world champion," he said. "I'm just focused on Tokyo now and the Europeans. During qualification year for the Paralympics everyone is a bit sharper and everyone wants to qualify so it is going to be a tough year but I am really looking forward to it and seeing what I can do.

"I picked up a minor back injury recently (causing him to miss the PG Mutual National Championships), so I haven't had great training for the last couple of weeks but hopefully I'm on the mend now. I've just got to stay positive and keep working towards Italy."

Also included in the 16-strong squad for Italy are World Championship medallists Tom Matthews and Fliss Pickard, London and Rio Paralympic medallist Aaron McKibbin, Commonwealth medallists Kim Daybell and Josh Stacey and European medallists David Wetherill, Paul Karabardak, Martin Perry and Ashley Facey Thompson.

"This is a very important year for the team," said BPTT Performance Director Gorazd Vecko. "The qualification period for Tokyo finishes at the end of March 2020 and to be sure of qualifying for selection the athletes have to be ranked in the top six of their class.

"They have trained hard through the winter and Italy will be the first opportunity for them to test themselves against some of their toughest competitors and see where they are."

The full squad for the Lignano Master Open is:

Will Bayley MBE, 31 years old (men's class 7) – Tunbridge Wells (home town)/ Sheffield (lives)

Paul Davies, 52 (men's class 1) – North Cornelly

Rob Davies MBE, 34 (men's class 1) – Brecon

Kim Daybell, 26 (men's class 10) – Sheffield/London

Ashley Facey Thompson, 24 (men's class 9) – London (Stratford)/Sheffield

Jack Hunter-Spivey, 23 (men's class 5) – Liverpool/Sheffield

Paul Karabardak, 34 (men's class 6) – Swansea

Tom Matthews, 26 (men's class 1) – Aberdare

Aaron McKibbin, 27 (men's class 8) – London (Wandsworth)/Sheffield

Martin Perry, 24 (men's class 6) – Paisley/Sheffield

Fliss Pickard, 24 (women's class 6) – Burnley/Sheffield

Megan Shackleton, 19 (women's class 4) – Todmorden/Sheffield

Billy Shilton, 20 (men's class 8) – Stonehouse (Gloucestershire)/Sheffield

Josh Stacey, 19, (men's class 9) – St Mellons/Sheffield

David Wetherill, 29 (men's class 6) – Torpoint

Ross Wilson, 23 (men's class 8) – Minster/Sheffield

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