

# Gold for Bayley and Davies in Italy

**Author:** Paul Stimpson

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Paralympic champions Will Bayley (men's class 7) and Rob Davies (men's class 1) made a great start to qualification year for Tokyo 2020 by taking gold in their respective singles events at the Lignano Master Open in Italy today. On a good day for the British Para Table Tennis team Josh Stacey took silver in men's class 9 and there were bronze medals for Megan Shackleton (women's class 4), Fliss Pickard (women's class 6), Jack Hunter-Spivey (men's class 5), David Wetherill (men's class 6), Martin Perry (men's class 6) and Kim Daybell (men's class 10). Men's class 8 World champion Ross Wilson withdrew from the tournament with a hamstringing injury.

Both Bayley and Davies had to battle hard to secure gold. Bayley dropped a set to Bogdan Omelchuk from Ukraine but secured top place in his group and a bye into the quarter-finals with a 3-0 win against the Russian Alexei Samsonov. A 3-0 win over Thomas Westerberg from Sweden took him into the semi-finals where he overcame the Brazilian Paulo Salmin Filho 13-11 in the fifth to set up a repeat of the Rio 2016 Paralympic final against another Brazilian Israel Pereira Stroh. In another five set match Bayley ran away with the deciding set 11-3 to win his first tournament since the German Open in 2017.

"I played solid but not as well as I have been in training," said Bayley. "I had a few battles in the semi and final but it's good to win when you are not playing at your best. I've been training so hard and I set myself a target to win gold this year so I'm so happy to win the Italian Open."

On his way to winning gold Davies gained revenge against both Guillermo Bustamante Sierra and Fernando Eberhardt from Argentina who he lost to in the World Championships last October and showed his character and determination to come through some tough matches. He dropped the first set to Sung Joo Park but came back to beat the Korean 3-1 in the quarter-final and did the same against Eberhardt in the semi-finals before fighting back from 2-0 in the final to beat the talented Italian Federico Falco 13-11 in the fifth.

"It was a really big achievement to beat those two guys that I lost to last year," said Davies, "and a big boost to my morale. I'm really happy that I came back in the final and proved to everyone that I can win from that position. This is just a stepping stone and I've got to keep improving but it does give me confidence because it shows that I can compete at the top level again. Now I can push on and hopefully get back to where I was after Rio."

Fellow Welshman Stacey lost his opening group match to the Rio 2016 bronze medallist Mohamed Kalem 3-1 but fought back from 2-1 down to beat Pawel Jablonski from Poland 3-2 to reach the quarter-final where he came back from 2-0 down to beat the Ukrainian Lev Kats 11-8 in the fifth. The 19 year old showed his potential with a 3-1 semi-final win over the World number four Tahl Leibovitz from USA to set up a rematch against Kalem in the final. Once again he fought back to level at 2-2 and saved three match points in the final set but the Italian World number five used all his power and experience to edge the match 13-11 in the fifth and retain his title.

"I felt I performed a lot better in the final," said Stacey, "and brought some things into the match that had worked in the previous match we played. Of course I'm disappointed to have lost but to be competing with the best players in the world is a good sign for the upcoming year and towards Tokyo qualification."

Shackleton produced a great performance to beat the Rio bronze medallist and World number six Nada Matic from Serbia in the quarter-finals, coming back from 2-1 down to win the match 11-9 in the fifth. The 19 year old lost her semi-final against Sandra Mikolaschek, the World number three from Germany, 3-0 but is improving all the time.

"I'm over the moon to have had such a great win early on in the season against such a well decorated player," said Shackleton. "We've had a lot of close battles in the past so I'm really glad that I managed to pull through and secure myself a bronze medal."

Pickard had a tough start against the Russian World number two Raisa Chebanika who took their match 3-0 but she secured her place in the quarter-finals with a 3-1 win against Emelie Andre from Sweden and edged a close fourth set 13-11 to beat World number three Katarzyna Marszal from Poland 3-1 in the quarter-finals. Her reward was a semi-final against World number one and World champion Maryna Lytovchenko and the Ukrainian was too strong today in a 3-0 win.

Hunter-Spivey began with a hard-fought 3-2 win against the Korean Jae Hyeon Park but reached the quarter-finals with wins against Maura Depergola from Argentina (3-1) and Roberto Punzo from Italy. He reached the semi-finals with a 3-1 win against the Korean Kyung Young Kim and lost out to former World champion Valentin Baus in another five set match, fighting back from 2-0 down to level at 2-2 before the German held on to win 11-9 in the fifth.

"I've had to fight every match," said Hunter-Spivey, "and I've loved being back on court and competing. I've put a lot of work in since the World Championships last year and it's definitely paying off. Although I did lose to Baus in a very close match I feel I didn't play my best level and there is definitely more to come from me this season."

Wetherill received a bye into the quarter finals after winning both his group matches and was a convincing 3-0 winner against Thomas Rau from Germany but was then hampered by a back injury in a 3-0 semi-final defeat to the eventual gold medallist Bobi Simion from Romania.

"The quarter-final was spot-on," said Wetherill, "but unfortunately I injured my back which made the semi-final a bit of a non-event."

Perry put up a great performance to beat World number six Simion 3-0 in their group match and after coming back from 2-1 down to beat Matteo Parenzan from Italy 3-2 in the quarter-final he was just edged out in the semi-final by Matias Pino Lorca from Chile 3-2.

Daybell topped his group in men's class 10 with wins against Benoit Grasset from France (3-0), Alexandros Diakoumakos from Greece (3-0) and Luka Bakic from Montenegro (3-1). He was a comfortable 3-0 winner in his quarter-final against the Russian Pavel Lukyanov and had a great battle in the semi-final against Mateo Boheas which the French World number nine eventually won 3-2.

Tom Matthews also topped his group in men's class 1 with three wins from three and joined Davies in the quarter-finals where he was beaten by the much improved Korean Hakjin Kim. In men's class 8 Aaron McKibbin was beaten in the quarter finals by World number one Viktor Didukh from Ukraine while Billy Shilton just lost out in his last 16 match to Zeev Glickman from Israel 11-8 in the fifth.

Ashley Facey Thompson (men's class 9) progressed to the quarter-finals but was beaten 3-0 by World number six Daniel Gustafsson from Sweden and Paul Karabardak (men's class 6) also lost out in the quarter-final to Simion 3-0. Paul Davies (men's class 1) won his last group match against Timo Natunen from Finland but earlier losses to the Argentinian Fernando Eberhardt and Hakjin Kim from Korea left him in third place in his group.

The full squad for the Lignano Master Open is as follows:

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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