



Big guns set sights on British Para titles

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Paralympic champions Will Bayley and Rob Davies and world and Commonwealth champion Ross Wilson head a star-studded entry for the Michael Hawkesworth British Para Table Tennis National Championships taking place at Grantham Meres Leisure Centre on April 6-7.

The event provides an opportunity for young up-and-coming players to compete against leading internationals and the battle for any National title is always fiercely competitive.

Bayley (men's class 7) and Davies (men's class 1) made a winning start to the international season, winning gold in their respective events at the Lignano Master Open in Italy earlier this month. Wilson retained the National Open Standing title last year one week after becoming Commonwealth champion in Australia and will be hoping to have recovered from the hamstring injury that ruled him out in Italy.

"The Nationals is always an important competition," said the 23-year-old from Minster. "It is a really special feeling to be National champion and it is great to win when the standard is so high now. It would be amazing to defend my title again and I will give it my very best shot."

In addition to Bayley, among Wilson's strongest challenge for the Open Standing title is likely to come from Commonwealth medallists Kim Daybell and Josh Stacey, English National champion Ashley Facey Thompson, London and Rio bronze medallist Aaron McKibbin, former European bronze medallist Billy Shilton and Grantham College student Jack Stockdale, who took bronze in the men's class 10 singles at the Costa Brava Open last week and won the Open Standing doubles title with Stacey and the men's class 10 singles at last year's National Championships.

"The Nationals is very important to me," said the 18-year-old from Romford, "especially this year as I have the opportunity to retain two different titles, which is always the first aim.

"It meant a lot winning the class 10 singles title last year as it helped show how much I had improved. Even though I would like to win both titles again, doing well in the Open singles would mean a lot to me as well.

"Last year I got to the quarter-finals so if I can do better than that this year, I will be very happy as it shows I have made even more progress. Overall, I am looking forward the tournament and the whole atmosphere of it."

The Open Wheelchair event has been dominated in recent years by Jack Hunter-Spivey who will be bidding for this sixth National Open title and his seventh men's class 5 title. The 23-year-old from Liverpool returned from Italy with men's class 5 singles bronze and team gold but will face tough competition from world team medallist Megan Shackleton, as well as improving young players Dan Bullen and recently crowned Welsh champion Cellan Hall.

"I'm really proud of my National titles," said Hunter-Spivey, who will also be defending his Open Wheelchair Doubles title with Bullen. "I haven't lost a match in a National competition for six years but the competition gets harder and harder every year.

"Great Britain is one of the leading countries in Para table tennis and I'm so proud to be National champion of such a strong nation. I think it is great for players starting out to compete with British team members.

"I remember when I was a player coming through the ranks the excitement and anticipation to compete against leading international players at the National championships was a great feeling and something I looked forward to all year.

"It would mean a lot to me to retain my titles. The standard is getting better and better every year and if I am able to retain them it would be a proud moment for me."

In the men's class 1-2 event Rio gold medallist Davies will be strongly challenged by fellow Welshman Tom Matthews, who took men's class 1 bronze in the World Championships last October, while women's class 6 world bronze medallist Fliss Pickard will be bidding to retain her Women's Open Standing title and Harry Fairchild will bid be hoping to repeat his win in last year's Down's Syndrome final.

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