



Vecko braced for tough test for GB stars

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British Para Table Tennis Performance Director Gorazd Vecko is expecting one of the toughest challenges for his team ahead of the 2020 Paralympic Games in Tokyo at next week's PTT Slovenia Open in Lasko (May 8-11).

"It will be the biggest tournament in Para table tennis history with more than 450 players from 48 countries," said Vecko. "Almost all the top 10 players in all classes will be there and I personally think it is stronger than the World Championships last year.

"This means the tournament could be even more important than the European Championships in September for a lot of players with regards to Paralympic qualification because the players who are currently borderline cases for qualifying for Tokyo have a great opportunity to play a lot of matches against better ranked players.

"They can get a lot of points in Slovenia which could put them in a position to qualify for Tokyo on their world ranking.

"For the GB players that are currently ranked in the top six in the world we want to be satisfied that they are where they are by right and they can beat all the top players in the world.

"Slovenia is always the strongest international tournament we play apart from the major championship – that is why we will go out four days earlier to have a training camp with Japan, Korea and Norway so that we can be as best prepared as possible for the tournament.

"It is a big test for all of the athletes and coaches and I hope that they will have great performances and beat the players they need to beat to be top in the world."

With a strong Chinese team competing Paralympic champion Will Bayley's opposition in men's class 7 will include world No 1 Yan Shuo. The pair have not met since the German Open in 2015 when the Asian champion edged two close matches and Bayley, who made a winning start to this season in Italy in March, is looking forward to the challenge.

"It will be great to have the chance to play against the Chinese players," said the 31-year-old world No 2, "because I don't have a lot of opportunities. In the Paralympics Yan was on the other side of the draw and I didn't get the chance to play him in the Worlds either so it will be great to have the opportunity.

"I've played well against Keli Liao the number two Chinese player and it will be interesting if I do play Yan. But I'll just take it one match at a time as you never know what can happen.

"I've made great improvement since Italy and I know I have to be at my best to do well in Slovenia so I have been really focused in training. I didn't play my best in Italy and I've gained a lot of confidence from winning it and now I want to do my best here. It is going to be a huge tournament and I'm looking forward to it."

Men's class 1 is currently dominated by Korea with four players in the top 10 including world No 1 Young Dae Joo, who could renew rivalry with Paralympic champion Rob Davies for the first time since their final in Rio 2016 when the Welshman won in four sets. Davies bounced back from a disappointing season in 2018 to win gold in Italy and is aiming for a fourth consecutive European title in September.

"I was really surprised with how well I played in Italy," said the 34-year-old from Brecon. "I just wanted to get out of my group really so to win it was a big surprise but it has given me confidence that I can kick on from there and I'm looking forward to Slovenia now.

"Whether I win this tournament or don't get on the podium as long as I qualify for Tokyo next year that is all I'm worried about. It is really important to test yourself and I want to play against the top players but if results don't go my way I'm not going to be too worried as it is all about next year. I'm looking forward to playing and see what happens.

"The European Championships is my main goal for this year but I want to go to Slovenia and play as well as I can. I haven't seen all the players before so I'm just excited about that – I'm not going to put too much pressure on myself."

Davies will also face tough opposition from fellow Welshman Tom Matthews, who took bronze in the World Championships last year, while the strong British squad includes World and Commonwealth champion Ross Wilson (men's class 8), Commonwealth medallists Kim Daybell (men's class 10) and Josh Stacey (men's class 9), World bronze medallist Fliss Pickard (women's class 6) and European silver medallist David Wetherill (men's class 6).

The full British squad for the Slovenia Open is: Will Bayley MBE, 31 years old (men's class 7), Paul Davies, 52 (men's class 1), Rob Davies MBE, 34 (men's class 1), Kim Daybell, 26 (men's class 10), Ashley Facey Thompson, 24 (men's class 9), Sue Gilroy MBE, 46 (women's class 4), Jack Hunter-Spivey, 23 (men's class 5), Paul Karabardak, 33 (men's class 6), Tom Matthews, 26 (men's class 1), Aaron McKibbin, 27 (men's class 8), Martin Perry, 24 (men's class 6), Fliss Pickard, 24 (women's class 6), Megan Shackleton, 19 (women's class 4), Billy Shilton, 20 (men's class 8), Josh Stacey, 19, (men's class 9), David Wetherill, 29 (men's class 6), Ross Wilson, 23 (men's class 8)

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