



Golden boy Will leads medal roll-call

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Gold for Paralympic champion Will Bayley in men's class 7 was the highlight of the singles events at the PTT Slovenia Open in which the British team took a total of seven medals including silver for Paul Karabardak (men's class 6) and bronze for Rob Davies (men's class 1), Jack Hunter-Spivey (men's class 5), Ross Wilson (men's class 8), Aaron McKibbin (men's class 8) and Josh Stacey (men's class 9).

With nearly 450 athletes competing here including 16 Paralympic gold medallists from Rio 2016 this is the biggest Para table tennis tournament outside of the major championships and the strongest competition that the British team will face before the next Paralympic Games in Tokyo.

Bayley had to win four matches today, fighting back from 2-1 down in the last 16 to beat the Frenchman Stephane Messi, the 2004 Paralympic champion and former world No 1 who is still an awkward opponent. That set up a quarter-final against his old rival Jochen Wollmert from Germany in a rematch of their London 2012 final and this time it was the 31 year old from Tunbridge Wells who came out on top with a 3-0 win.

In the semi-final against Liao Keli from China he edged a tense third set 13-11 and then ran away with the deciding set 11-1 after Liao had levelled at 2-2. He lost the first set in the final against Israel Pereira Stroh, the Brazilian who had earlier defeated both the Chinese world No 1 Yan Shuo and the current world champion Jordi Morales from Spain, but levelled at 1-1 and then took advantage of a good timeout call from coach Greg Baker to clinch the third 11-8 before coming from 8-6 down in the fourth to take it 11-8 and win his second title of 2019.

"It feels amazing to win the biggest tournament I have every played with so many amazing players," said Bayley. "I'm overwhelmed with happiness. I'm training so hard and now I have won two big tournaments from two this season so I think the training is paying off. All my matches were so close and it took all my skill to win this tournament so I'm very proud. Now I'm looking forward to playing team event with one of the legends of the game Jochen Wollmert."

Karabardak produced a brilliant display in the last 16 to beat the world and Paralympic champion Peter Rosenmeier from Denmark 3-1 and then survived a fightback from Valentin Kneuss to beat the Swiss player 11-7

in the fifth. World No 4 Hong Kyu Park from Korea knocked Karabardak out of the singles in Rio in five sets but today it was the 33 year old from Swansea who proved the stronger to take their semi-final 11-3 in the fifth. In the final against Alvaro Valera he levelled at 1-1 before the Spanish world No 1 showed all his talent and experience to take the match 3-1.

"Losing the final was disappointing but I'm really pleased to have won silver," said Karabardak.

After winning his group yesterday Rob Davies received a bye into the quarter finals where he played Fernando Eberhardt. The world bronze medallist is a tough opponent and Davies had to dig deep to win 11-8 in the fifth after the Argentinian had fought back from 2-0 down to level at 2-2. In the semi-final he faced the newly crowned world champion Hyeon Uk Kim for the first time and the 23 year old Korean just edged a tremendous battle 12-10 in the fifth.

"Like any sportsperson I'm never happy losing but I have lots to work on and I knew that before coming out here," said Davies. "I really enjoyed playing in the semi-final against the world champion – that's why I'm still playing as those matches are the ones you want to be involved in.

"I will work hard to hopefully be on the other side of that result in Tokyo! I'm proud to have come through a tight quarter-final and there are a lot of positives to take from the event for me. I'll get prepared for the team event now where I hope to get a chance to play some more of the top guys in my class."

Hunter-Spivey beat Hamza Caliskan from Turkey 3-0 in the last 16 and then came through in five sets against the former world champion and Rio 2016 silver medallist Valentin Baus from Germany, fighting back from 2-1 down to take the match 11-5 in the fifth. The 23 year old from Liverpool lost the semi-final 12-10 in the third to his regular team partner and former Paralympic champion Tommy Urhaug from Norway, who went on to take the gold.

Wilson was impressive in beating the Rio bronze medallist from Poland Piotr Grudzien 3-0 in the last 16 and then came through his quarter-final against Maksym Nikolenko from Ukraine in three close sets. In the semi-final he faced the world No 1 Viktor Didukh and the Ukrainian took the match 3-0. Although disappointed, 23 year old Wilson was reasonably happy with his first tournament since his World Championship triumph last October having endured a series of niggling injuries over the past few months.

"It's nice to be back playing again but I was disappointed with my performance in the semi-final," he said. "The overall performance in the competition was okay and hopefully I can build it up for the rest of the season."

McKibbin beat Peng Weinan from China 3-0 in the last 16 and then produced a great performance to come back from 2-1 down to beat world No 4 Ivan Mai from Ukraine 3-2. He lost his semi-final 3-0 against the double Paralympic champion Zhao Shuai from China but took a well-deserved bronze medal.

"I'm really happy with how I performed, even in the semi-final," said the 27 year old Sheffield-based Londoner. "It's been the strongest competition of the year and I'm happy with the level I've shown. It's great to get a top four win and I've shown myself that the World Championships last year was a one-off bad performance. I've finally shown the level I can perform in a competition that's probably stronger than Tokyo 2020."

After beating world No 3 Juan Bautista Perez Gonzalez yesterday Stacey received a bye into the quarter-finals where he beat Wong Chi Yin from Hong Kong 3-0 to set up a semi-final against Mohamed Kalem, the Italian who had won their previous three meetings including the final of the Italian Open in March. Although Stacey took a close first set the world No 4 used all his power and experience to take the match 3-1.

"I was really happy with the way I played to beat Perez and as a whole throughout the event," said the 19 year old Welshman. "Taking bronze in such a strong event has given me a lot of confidence.

"Against Kalem I felt I was always in with a good chance but he covered the table really well with the anti-spin and I struggled to deal with it at times. Overall I could have received a bit more positively and looked to attack with my forehand which would have put him on the back foot. But he was the better player and I'm sure I'll get the chance to play him again throughout the year to put those things right."

Kim Daybell (men's class 10) came through a tough last 16 match against the improving 19 year old Italian Lorenzo Cordua 3-2 to play Jose Manuel Ruiz Reyes in the quarter-final. The 26 year old won their last meeting in the European Championships in 2017 but the former world champion from Spain led their head-to-head 16-1 and proved just the stronger in the fifth set, taking it 11-9 and the match 3-2.

Fliss Pickard (women's class 6) lost her quarter-final to the world champion and world No 1 Maryna Lytovchenko from Ukraine 3-0. In women's class 4 Megan Shackleton and Sue Gilroy both went out in the last 16, Shackleton losing 3-2 to Carlotta Ragazzini from Italy and Gilroy beaten 3-0 by Rio bronze medallist Nada Matic from Serbia.

Billy Shilton (men's class 8) took a set off world No 1 Didukh but the Ukrainian was just too strong and took their last 16 match 3-1. Paul Davies and Tom Matthews (men's class 1) lost in the last 16 to Sung Joo Park from Korea and the Italian Andrea Borgato respectively, while Martin Perry (lost 3-0 to Valera) and David Wetherill (lost 3-2 to Matias Pino Lorca from Chile) also went out at the last 16 stage as did Ashley Facey Thompson (men's class 9) after losing 3-0 to the Chinese former world and Paralympic champion Ma Lin, who now represents Australia.

The tournament continues with the team events that conclude on Saturday.

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