



Team GB trio ready to hit the Tokyo trail

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They may be in Minsk, but thoughts are already turning to Tokyo for Liam Pitchford, Sam Walker and Paul Drinkhall.

The top three England men are once again pulling on the Team GB kit at the European Games, which start tomorrow and complete a squad which also [includes Tin-Tin Ho and Charlotte Carey](#).

And there is a chance to secure further GB representation as the Games offer a potential qualifying route to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

The gold medal-winning team in Minsk will earn a place at the Olympics, as will the three individual medallists.

For Pitchford and Drinkhall, Tokyo would be a third Olympic appearance, having competed at London 2012 and Rio four years later, while Walker joined the line-up which reached the quarter-finals in Rio.

And while they are all focused on the European Games, they admit it's impossible not to have an eye on Tokyo as well.

Walker said: "It's probably been in most of our minds for the last few years because it's the pinnacle of the sport.

"Trying to get to the Olympics is always on your mind but it's more of a motivator than anything else, it's not going to put too much pressure on us. It's more just about motivating ourselves and getting ourselves ready. Hopefully, we'll do well."

Pitchford added: "You try not to think about it but it's always in the back of your mind. You want to be qualified as early as possible."

That was a thought echoed by Drinkhall, who said: "For me, I'd like to qualify for the Olympics next year as early as I can and the team event in Minsk is the first opportunity for that. This is a big event, but that's the main focus

for me from this event.”

With Team GB seeded fourth in the team event, and on the back of medal-winning exploits on the world stage in recent years, they are up among the contenders for gold. The team members are certainly taking confidence from that.

Pitchford and Walker are also in the singles competition, with Pitchford among the top seeds.

Pitchford said: “I think we’ve got a good chance. I’m No 4 seed in singles and we’re No 4 seed in team and it gives us a better draw, especially in the team.

“We know on our day we can beat anybody, we’ve shown in the Team World Cup and World Championships before that we’re capable of beating any team we play. We know it’s going to be difficult. We’ll just take one match at a time and hopefully we can play well and get some wins.”

Drinkhall, who is playing only in the team event in Minsk, said: “I think as a team we’ve got a good chance, we’ve had a lot of good performances over the last 18 months, two years. Individually I’m just looking to help the team the best I can and I think I’m in a good place to do that.

“Overall as a team we’ve got a really good shot but there’ll be a lot of teams thinking that so we’ve just got to get our game together and go out and deliver.”

Walker added: “I think we’ve got a good chance in the teams we’re seeded no 4. I think we start in the quarter-finals, so they’ll be tough matches but we can definitely beat everybody.

“In the singles, it’s about taking one match as it comes and just getting as far as I can.”

The Team GB squad spent a few days training in Nottingham before flying to Belarus and Drinkhall said that preparation was an important part of the pre-Games programme.

He said: “Getting together in Nottingham’s been good and hopefully we can use this preparation to do well in Minsk. The main thing for me is getting together as a team and team-bonding. You do it as individuals throughout the season but it’s nice being here as a team just before the event.”

The training has not been particularly different to what the athletes normally do, as Pitchford explained: “I try to prepare for any event the same.

“Maybe mentally it’s a little bit more difficult because it’s a multi-sport event with a lot more athletes and people and a lot more going on. You try to be more mentally prepared and try to do the same things you do day in, day out.”

It is not a new feeling for any of the players to pull on the Team GB shirt, but they admit to still getting a buzz from it.

Pitchford said: “Representing Team GB, you don’t get to do it as often as we put on an England shirt. Every time I put on a Team GB shirt I feel a sense of pride – you know it’s a big competition.”

Walker, the only one of the three not to feature at the previous European Games in Baku, said: “It never gets old putting on the Team GB shirt. That’s why we play table tennis and I think that’s why everybody starts sport, to reach the pinnacle and represent your country.”

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