

Bayley and Wilson head British challenge in Japan Open

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Paralympic champion Will Bayley and World and Commonwealth champion Ross Wilson head a squad of 11 players from the British Para Table Tennis Team that will compete in the Japan Open in Tokyo next week (August 1-3).

Although the tournament will be played in a different venue to next year's Paralympic Games the experience of travelling to Tokyo and competing in the city will undoubtedly benefit the players, who will be hoping to return next year to compete for ParalympicsGB.

After the disappointment of losing his World title last October Bayley has bounced back this season with gold medals in Italy and Slovenia that have seen him regain the World number one ranking in men's class 7.

"This has probably been one of my best seasons ever in terms of results but I haven't played my best yet so I'm hoping I can play even better in Japan next week," said the 31 year old from Tunbridge Wells, who trains full time with the British squad at the EIS in Sheffield. "My targets in January were to try and do well in every single tournament whereas before I've just focused on the majors. But every single tournament is very difficult now and I've definitely improved my match play in the smaller tournaments leading up to the majors which is good.

"We play a lot of tournaments in Europe so to go outside of Europe to play in Japan, especially as the Paralympics are going to be there next year, is going to be a real test. There are some really good Japanese players in class 7; they are all training full time and are professional players so it will be tough as they have really improved and it is always a challenge against players in front of their home crowd."

Due to a series of niggling injuries Wilson has competed only once since claiming the men's class 8 World title last October, taking bronze in the Slovenia Open in May, but the 24 year old from Minster is hoping to get back to the form he showed last year ahead of the European Championships in September.

"I played very well last year and that showed in my results," he said. "I used my strengths well and exploited everyone else's weaknesses and that is what served me really well. Physically I'm feeling really good at the moment. Training is going well and I'm trying to improve everything and basically focus on consistency, keep playing as much as I can and hopefully that will improve my game and get me the results I want.

"Although it will be a different venue to the Paralympic Games it will be exciting to be in Japan and experience it a bit so when we go next year we won't be so excited about being in Japan we'll be more focused on getting results."

Wilson will also play the men's class 8 team event in Japan with Aaron McKibbin and Billy Shilton who combined to win gold in the Polish Open. McKibbin, Paralympic team medallist in London and Rio, has reached a career-high of World number eight after some big wins in Italy, Slovenia and Poland which have improved his chances of qualification for Tokyo 2020.

"This season so far has been really positive for me," said the 27 year old Londoner. "I always believed in my ability that I could beat the world's best players. I just want to continue how I've been playing; I feel anyone who plays me will have to play really well to beat me and that's all I can ask I think."

Shilton produced a great performance in Poland to also take silver in the men's class 8 singles and the 20 year old from Gloucestershire is hoping to build on that in Japan.

"I feel like everything is going in the right direction and I've made more improvements since Poland," he said. "I'm really excited to compete again."

Paisley's Martin Perry has also climbed up the World rankings after a consistent season and the 24 year old is now ranked 14 in men's class 6. Josh Stacey has just returned from representing Wales in the Commonwealth Championships in India and the 19 year old has also attained a career-high ranking of 11 in men's class 9 after taking medals in Italy, Slovenia and Poland.

The squad is completed by World Championship bronze medallist Fliss Pickard (women's class 6), World team bronze medallist Megan Shackleton (women's class 4), Commonwealth silver medallist Kim Daybell (men's class 10), European team silver medallist Ashley Facey Thompson (men's class 9) and 2017 US Open champion Jack Hunter-Spivey (men's class 5).

The full squad for the PTT Japan Open is:

Will Bayley MBE, 31 years old (men's class 7) – Tunbridge Wells (home town)/ Sheffield/Brighton (lives)

Kim Daybell, 26 (men's class 10) – Sheffield/London

Ashley Facey Thompson, 24 (men's class 9) – London (Stratford)/Sheffield

Jack Hunter-Spivey, 24 (men's class 5) – Liverpool/Sheffield

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) – Cardiff/Sheffield

Ross Wilson, 24 (men's class 8) – Minster/Sheffield

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