

Ross Wilson, Rob Davies and Will Bayley spearhead Euro bid

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Ross Wilson bids to add European gold to world and Commonwealth titles, while Paralympic champion Rob Davies goes for a fourth consecutive singles title at the European Para Table Tennis Championships next week.

The championships get under way in Helsingborg, Sweden, on Tuesday, and the squad of 18 British athletes also includes Paralympic champion Will Bayley – in between his commitments on *Strictly Come Dancing*.

After winning World and Commonwealth gold in 2018, 24-year-old Wilson has had to overcome a couple of niggling injuries this season but reached the final in the Japan Open last month, losing to World number one Viktor Didukh from Ukraine, and is feeling positive ahead of another major championship.

"I'm feeling really good," he said. "Training has been going well and I'm really looking forward to the Europeans. I've been working a lot on my game and on getting myself fitter and getting my joints a bit stronger again by doing a lot of conditioning work in the gym.

"I don't feel any pressure as world champion and I don't feel any different to previous major competitions. Maybe at the end of my career I can look back on the Worlds and be happy that I have won it but you have to put it behind you.

"Now it is about the next competitions and as soon as this year started it was all focused on the Europeans and Tokyo next year.

"Since Japan it has been a case of sharpening up which we always do before a major – the factor 40 competitions like Japan are good but you are not really at the very top of your game and you base your season around the major competitions.

"Everything is coming together now for the Europeans and hopefully I can go out there and do everyone proud."

Bayley has regained the world No 1 ranking in men's class 7 after taking gold in Italy, Slovenia and Japan this season and is hoping to add another European crown to his collection having taken the title in 2011.

"I've played really well this season," said the 31 year old. "I'm really enjoying my table tennis and I'm a bit more relaxed. It is going to be a tough tournament so I'll take it one match at a time but I'm playing well and I'm happy with my game.

"It's been such a long time since I won the Europeans – it seems like a lifetime ago – and it would be so nice to win it again. I've come up short a couple of times and lost in two finals and a semi-final since I won it so I've had some good runs.

"It would mean the world to me to go all the way but I'm going there to enjoy it and have fun and I think that is when I play my best table tennis."

Bayley will return from the Europeans in time for his first live performance on *Strictly* and feels that preparing for his dancing debut has also helped his table tennis.

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"I really think it is going to improve me a lot when I'm playing table tennis," he said, "because already I'm becoming more aware of my balance and my movement and I'm getting stronger in my core."

"When I'm playing table tennis now I'm thinking more about my balance and the way I stand and using my body to help me in my shots. It is helping me understand my body more and that can only help with table tennis."

Meanwhile, 35-year-old Welshman Davies bounced back from a disappointing performance at the World Championships in 2018 to win gold at the Italian Open in March and returned from a four-month absence to take bronze in the Czech Open last weekend.

"I'm happier with the way I'm playing this season," said Davies, "but I've still got a way to go. It's nice to pick up a few medals but for me it is all about building for Tokyo now."

"I'm proud to have won three European titles but I don't want to think about it too much. I'm just going out there to enjoy it; I play my best when I'm enjoying my table tennis and hopefully the results will take care of themselves."

"Of course it is special to be going for my fourth; I'm proud of the three I've already got and another one would be nice but I'm not putting all my hopes on it."



The Class 1 podium two years ago, featuring Rob Davies, Tom Matthews and Paul Davies

At the last European Championships in 2017 Davies led a 1-2-3 for Britain and for Wales, beating Tom Matthews in the final with Paul Davies taking the bronze.

"It would be brilliant if that happened again," he said. "Tom and Paul are both playing really well – in the Czech Open Paul had a really good win against the Korean world champion and Tom also played really well in stages. They are both really good players so I'm sure we can do it again and hopefully we will."

Matthews took bronze in the World Championships last year and the 27-year-old former mountain bike rider from Aberdare has shown he can perform on the big stage.

"I feel that I played well in Czech Republic," he said. "I've been recovering from a shoulder problem which has kept me out for about 14 weeks so to come back and show that I can compete with the top guys was quite satisfying and to dust the cobwebs off before the Europeans was great."

"I think my form is a bit better than it was before the Worlds last year. I've had a lot of time to think about my game and to analyse other players while I've had time off and that has really helped me so hopefully that will be good for the Europeans and the competitions to come."

The British squad also includes World Championships bronze medallist Fliss Pickard, London and Rio Paralympic team medallist Aaron McKibbin, Commonwealth medallists Kim Daybell and Josh Stacey, former European champion Sue Gilroy, Ashley Facey Thompson, who took team silver with Daybell in the last European Championships two years ago, and European silver medallist David Wetherill, who has made a remarkable recovery from recent heart surgery and will also defend the men's class 6 team title he won two years ago with Paul Karabardak and Martin Perry.

"I've got to be realistic," said Wetherill, "I had heart surgery four weeks ago so I'm just happy to be playing and I'm not really thinking about performance."

"I feel really good although I'm not firing on all cylinders and I can't go out and play at 100% yet but in a way I'm not going there with the European Championships in mind but with the aim of qualifying for Tokyo next year and

I'm pretty confident that my level will be good enough to get the job done.

"Defending our team title is a more realistic aim for me than anything in the singles because a week ago I didn't think I would be competing, so anything is a bonus. I'm not really expecting to play too much in the team event and I'm sure Martin and Paul will do the business and I'll be more than happy to sit on the bench and see them win it and I'll back them to do that."

The full squad for the European Championships is:

Will Bayley – men's class 7 (singles only)
Dan Bullen – men's class 5 (team event only)
Paul Davies – men's class 1 (singles only)
Rob Davies – men's class 1 (singles only)
Kim Daybell – men's class 10
Ashley Facey Thompson – men's class 9
Jack Hunter-Spivey – men's class 5
Susan Gilroy – women's class 4
Paul Karabardak – men's class 6
Tom Matthews – men's class 1 (singles only)
Aaron McKibbin – men's class 8
Martin Perry – men's class 6
Fliss Pickard – women's class 6 (singles only)
Megan Shackleton – women's class 4
Billy Shilton – men's class 8
Josh Stacey – men's class 9
David Wetherill – men's class 6
Ross Wilson – men's class 8

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