



Champs safely through group stage

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Paralympic champions Will Bayley (men's class 7) and Rob Davies (men's class 1) and world champion Ross Wilson (men's class 8) came through their respective groups to reach the knockout stages of the European Para Table Tennis Championships in Helsingborg, Sweden.

On a good day for the British team there were also significant wins for Ashley Facey Thompson (men's class 9) against Juan Bautista Perez Gonzalez, the world and European bronze medallist from Spain, and Kim Daybell (men's class 10) against world number five Jose Ruiz Reyes from Spain, the former world and European champion.

Men's class 1

After edging a tight opening set 12-10 Rob Davies showed all his class to beat Dmitry Lavrov, the 2015 European bronze medallist from Russia 3-0. Last week in the Czech Open he came through in five sets against Federico Falco, the European bronze medallist and world team gold medallist, but he beat the young Italian 3-0 in his second match today to secure top position in his group and move through to the knockout stages.

"I'm happy with the results today and quite surprised by them," said Davies. "I'm getting there slowly and hopefully I can keep it going. I really enjoyed that match against Falco. We've had a few close games so to beat him like that just makes it a bit sweeter. I got some tactics from last week and it really helped so I'm happy with the result. Hopefully I can keep it going tomorrow."

Tom Matthews was a comfortable 3-0 winner in his first match against Kristof Oszlanczi from Hungary and then fought back from 2-1 down against Andrea Borgato, the 2014 world bronze medallist and world team gold medallist from Italy, to win 11-8 in the fifth. He plays his final group match tomorrow against Timo Natunen from Finland, who was a surprise 3-0 winner against Borgato.

"I'm really pleased with my performance," said Matthews, who took bronze in the World Championships last year. "I kept my head throughout the match and even at 2-1 down I felt quite confident to come out of that

game. He is such an experienced player – he has been there before and been to Paralympics so to beat him on a stage like this is an amazing feeling, to be honest. I've just got to keep taking it one match at a time and see where it goes from here. I'm feeling quite confident and feeling good so let's see where it goes."

Paul Davies lost his opening match to the Polish Open gold medallist Endre Major from Hungary but can still progress if he beats Sylvio Keller from Switzerland.

"I prepared well and I thought I was going to do better than that but he was better on the day," admitted Davies. "I can perform better than that. I've just got to ignore that result and do it the hard way. It's not over yet – I've got to beat Keller tomorrow and get through the group. I've done it before and I can do it again. I'm always up for a challenge."

Men's class 5

Jack Hunter-Spivey began with a 3-0 win against 19 year old David Olsson from Sweden and then gained revenge for a defeat in the Czech Open last week against the former European champion Nicolas Savant-Aira, coming back from 2-1 down to beat the experienced Frenchman 11-5 in the deciding set. He plays his final group match against Milos Tesar from Czech Republic.

"I just believed in myself which is something I've not done for a while," said Hunter-Spivey. "In the Czech Open I wasn't happy with my performance, not just on the table but how I conducted myself. I got too frustrated with myself and today I kept my emotions under lockdown and played in a mature, precise way. I said I would use the Czech Open as motivation and that is what I'm doing so I'm happy with the way I played."

Men's class 6

Paul Karabardak lost a tight second set against Slawomir Brak from Poland 16-14 but came through 3-1 in his first match. He was 2-0 down against Danny Bobrov, the European team bronze medallist from Israel but fought back to win 3-2 and plays his final group match tomorrow against Benedikt Muller from Germany.

"I'm really proud because I've beaten him the two times I've played him before," said Karabardak, "but this time it was a bit different. He changed his rubbers and used different tactics. I knew that I needed to get a foothold in the match but I couldn't do that and he took the first two tight sets which was disappointing. I knew then that I had to try and frustrate him which I managed to do and I knew going in to the fifth set that I had a great chance. The aim for me is to win the group and I've put myself in a good position to do that."

Only four weeks after undergoing a heart operation David Wetherill won his first match against the Russian Mars Gabdullin 3-0 and then showed his character with a 3-1 win against the talented Italian teenager Matteo Parenzan. He plays the European team bronze medallist Alexander Nagy from Slovakia in his final group match.

"I can tell when I'm a little bit out of practice," said Wetherill, who took silver in the last Europeans two years ago. "Sometimes you've got to grind out the victory and that is what I did in the second match. I didn't feel very comfortable at all – part of that is physical but that is why I'm pleased. At 1-1, 9-9 that is where I am good these days and I showed that so I was pleased. All that matters is the win. I've only picked up a bat once before I came out here but that is irrelevant now – I'm here to win it. Let's not alter our expectations because I have had surgery – I'm here and I feel good so I really want to do well and I feel like I can do as well."

Martin Perry won team silver with the Frenchman Esteban Herrault in the Japan Open and Czech Open but today they were on opposite sides of the table and it was Perry who came out on top with a 3-1 win. He found the Romanian world number five and European bronze medallist Bobi Simion too strong today but can still progress if he beats George Mouchthis from Greece in his final match.

"Bobi is a difficult player but I was a bit disappointed with some of my execution on the shots," said Perry. "I felt it could have been a bit sharper but he served really well, really intelligently which allowed him to implement his tactics of pinning me in certain places. It was good in terms of understanding what I need to be aware of for tomorrow's match. It is obviously a very important match and I've just go to prepare well and make sure everything is in place for tomorrow."

Men's class 7

Bayley looked to be on course for a 3-0 win against Vladimir Anikanov but some clever play from the veteran Russian took the third set 11-9 before the 31 year old from Tunbridge Wells clinched the win 11-5 in the fourth. He secured top position in his group and a place in the next round with a 3-0 win against 20 year old Maksym Chudzicki, the Polish Open silver medallist, taking the match on his fifth match point.

"I'm really happy with the way I played," said Bayley. "There were signs of some really good table tennis and little bits of my game were really brilliant. My focus went a couple of times during both matches but overall I was really pleased. I think there is a lot of improvement to be made but the Polish boy has taken a lot of the top players really close over the last year so I knew he was going to be a good player. I don't think he played badly I just played really well. But on to the next stage now and I need to be so focused for tomorrow."

Men's class 8

Wilson was down in both the first and second sets against the 20 year old Russian Artem Iakovlev, last year's Costa Rica champion, but came through in the end 3-0. He was also given a tough match by the very experienced Hungarian Gyula Zborai, the European silver medallist in 2015, who took the second set 11-7 to level at 1-1 before Wilson took the match 11-3 in the fourth to secure top place in his group.

"It was interesting today to get a feel for the hall and everything," said Wilson. "They were a couple of hard matches as they are both awkward players. You've got to respect all of your opponents and they are two good players. I didn't play too well but hopefully I can improve on that going forward for the rest of the competition."

Billy Shilton had a tough start against the World number four Ivan Mai from Ukraine and the World and European bronze medallist won their match 3-0. The 20 year old from Gloucester can still progress if he beats the French teenager Clement Berthier tomorrow.

"It was a difficult match to start with," said Shilton. "He had played a match this morning and he is a very good player. I had a chance in the first set and if I could have won that it might have been a little bit different. He played really well but I'm disappointed that I lost. The winner of the match tomorrow will go through from the group so it is an important match; I'll rest now and try and get prepared for tomorrow."

Aaron McKibbin recovered from dropping the first set to beat Joshua Wagner from Germany 3-1 and then had to dig deep against Marcin Skrzynecki from Poland, the former European champion, World and Paralympic team gold medallist, who fought back from 2-0 down to level at 2-2 before McKibbin edged the deciding set 11-9. He plays his final group match tomorrow against Alyn Nicolae from Romania.

"It is the European Championships so everyone is looking to play well," said McKibbin. "Skrzynecki is known for playing well in the big tournaments so I knew it was going to be hard. I haven't played him for a few years and to be honest I haven't really felt like myself in the matches here. I've been training well and I'm mentally very good but it is just not clicking. That is part of sport to be fair and in the past that would maybe have cost me the match but I've learnt over the years to persevere and I think I fought my way through that game. I wouldn't say I played fantastic but tactically I played very well and that is the reason I pulled through in the end. I'm obviously happy to get the win and hopefully I can finish it off tomorrow and top the group."

Men's class 9

Ashley Facey Thompson was 6-2 up in the first set against David Pulpan from Czech Republic but lost it 11-9 before taking the next three sets to win 3-1. He produced some of his best form to beat the Spaniard Juan Bautista Perez Gonzalez, the World and European bronze medallist 3-0, holding his nerve to take his fifth match point, and will top his group if he can beat Pawel Constantyn from Poland tomorrow.

"It was a tricky start," said Facey Thompson. "The first match at the Europeans is very nerve-wracking but I pulled through mentally and I think that is what helped me with the second game as I was mentally ready to do what it takes to win. I'm really happy with my performance overall but I've still got work to do tomorrow. At the end of the match he (Perez Gonzalez) made me play and wanted to see if I had the positive mind-set to win when it was getting nerve-wracking so all credit to him. He is a top player but I played well today and I'm very

happy with my performance.”

Josh Stacey started well against Lucas Didier to take the first set 11-4 but the 16 year old Frenchman edged the second 12-10 and then grew in confidence, taking the match 3-1. The 19 year old Welshman showed great composure to beat the World number six and European silver medallist Daniel Gustafsson from Sweden 3-0 in his second match and plays Tonnie Heijnen from Netherlands tomorrow for a place in the knockout stages.

“It was difficult to come back after the first match,” admitted Stacey. “On paper I was expected to win and I didn’t really perform to my best. My opponent played very well and I didn’t which is why he came out on top. To win against Gustafsson who is quite a bit higher ranked than me was great and I feel I performed really well and got the job done. I felt that I didn’t have the same focus this morning but in the second match I felt I was focused from the word go and performed a lot better. I’m playing someone I’ve never played before tomorrow so I’m looking forward to trying to match that performance or better it tomorrow.”

Men’s class 10

Kim Daybell began with a 3-1 win against Luka Bakic from Montenegro and then fought back from 2-1 down against the former World and European champion from Spain Jose Ruiz Reyes to win the match 11-7 in the fifth. He plays the World and European team gold medallist Igor Misztal from Poland tomorrow.

“I’m really pleased,” said Daybell. “Obviously it is nice to get the result but I think the feeling I had on the table and the way I portrayed myself was really good and I’m proud of that. I have struggled this season mentally a little bit so it feels really good to get the win. I’ve got a lot of respect for him (Ruiz Reyes) – he’s a really good player and he’s beaten me a lot of times so any win against him is really difficult. He’s a tough opponent even when things are not going his way as he’s very clever so I was pleased, especially after going 2-1 down I thought the way I came back was good. Every match is going to be tough – the Polish lad is a good player so I’m going to have to bring my best game but hopefully I can play the same tomorrow.”

Women’s class 4-5

Megan Shackleton was a 3-0 winner against Lisa Hentig from Germany and was not disgraced in a 3-0 defeat to Borislava Peric-Rankovic from Serbia, the Paralympic, World and European champion. She can still progress if she beats the Italian Carlotta Ragazzini tomorrow.

“I feel that I did bring out some good stuff in that match,” said Shackleton, “but there were a few cheap errors along the way that in the tight sets cost me. I can work on those things and maybe next time round it could be a different story and I could be 2-0 up instead of 2-0 down. Fingers crossed I can. The girl I play tomorrow I tend to be 50/50 with so as long as I prepare well I think I have a good chance of hopefully getting out of the group.”

From 2-0 up Sue Gilroy survived a spirited fightback from Andrea Dolinar to win 3-2 after the Slovenian had levelled at 2-2. She lost 3-0 to Ingela Lundback from Sweden, the class 5 former European champion, and plays Jelena Susic from Croatia in her final group match tomorrow.

“Obviously I’m disappointed with how I played,” said Gilroy. “She is a very good player and has got such good reach being a class 5 but I know I can play a lot better. I played a lot better than this morning when I didn’t play well at all. So it is disappointing because I know I have the game to beat her but I just can’t get it together at the moment. I’ve just got to start playing a lot better and being more consistent and play the game I know I can play.”

Women’s class 6

World Championship bronze medallist Fliss Pickard had a tough start against Maryna Lytovchenko from Ukraine but took the first set against the World number one and World champion and lost nothing in a 3-1 defeat. She plays Gabriela Constantin from Romania in her second and final group match tomorrow.

“I’m definitely pleased as that is the best I have ever pushed her,” said Pickard. “I believe I’m there now, it is only little margins and I believe I can compete with her. She is an unbelievable player and very talented so I am just so pleased to be able to push her and I’m going to build on that for the rest of the tournament. I like the

atmosphere in the hall and with the team behind me anything is possible tomorrow – I've just got to keep fighting."

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