

Shackleton stars for Para GB at Euros

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One the first day of the team events at the European Para Table Tennis Championships in Helsingborg, Sweden there were some great performances by British players, notably Megan Shackleton beating the class 5 world silver medallist Ingela Lundberg in women's class 4-5 and Josh Stacey's narrow defeat to the class 10 bronze medallist Igor Misztal in five sets.

Paul Karabardak, Martin Perry and David Wetherill are defending their men's class 6 team title here and they started with a 2-0 win against Germany. After a slow start to the doubles Karabardak and Wetherill fought back from 2-0 down against Tim Laue and Benedikt Muller to come through 11-6 in the deciding set and Wetherill secured the tie with a 3-0 win against Muller.

"We didn't play very well to begin with," said Karabardak, "and we gave ourselves a lot to do. There is a lot to improve on still but I think we started playing better which enabled us to get the win, which was good as the doubles was important because it might have been difficult otherwise. So I'm really pleased to win the first game."

The Welshman produced a spectacular winner to set up match point and said: "The ball popped up and I thought I'm going to try and get my bat on it. He hit it straight at me so I just put my bat to it and lucky enough it just went on."

Wetherill joked afterwards that he had set up the shot for Karabardak and was also pleased with their fight back in the doubles.

"We just had no feeling for the ball at the start," he said, "and it was quite tough. We had a good knock beforehand but sometimes you come in and have a bad start and it is hard to stop the momentum."

"We went 2-0 down and couldn't get any feeling on the ball but that happens sometimes. Paul has this serve that we call the sausage because he sizzles it. It was more of a raw little thing in the pan at the start but we were getting it sizzling nicely and they were cooked and ready to serve by the end so that was very nice."

In men's class 8 Aaron McKibbin, Billy Shilton and Ross Wilson began with a comfortable win against Norway. McKibbin and Shilton won the doubles against Pablo Jacobsen and Fredrik Johansen 3-0 and Shilton beat Johansen 3-0 in the first singles.

Their second match against the former world, Paralympic and European team champions Poland got off to a bad start as McKibbin and Wilson found themselves 2-0 down in the doubles to the former world No 1 Piotr Grudzien and former European champion Marcin Skrzynski. However, the British pair kept fighting and after taking a close third set 11-9 they took control of the match and won it 11-6 in the fifth.

Wilson then finished off the tie with a 3-0 win against Grudzien and they will secure top place in their group and a place in the semi-finals if they can beat Romania tomorrow.

"Poland are a very good team," said McKibbin. "I don't think Ross and I have played doubles together since Rio which explained the slow start. We spent the first couple of sets getting used to each other and how we play again but once we got into the groove in the final three sets I felt we were quite in control and I think our quality came through."

"We had to dig deep in the doubles but we managed to do it," said Wilson. "Billy did brilliantly in the match against Norway to bring us through and I was lucky to do it in this one. I think it is about grinding some matches out and that is what I did today."

"The Norway match went well," said Shilton. "Aaron and me have played doubles together all year so we had a lot of confidence going into the match and in my singles I was quite happy with how I played. He is quite an

awkward style for me to play against so I was happy I could get the win."

Kim Daybell, Ashley Facey Thompson and Josh Stacey also played Poland in their first group match in men's class 10 and Daybell and Facey Thompson made a great start in the doubles against the class 10 world champion and world No 1 Patryk Chojnowski and Igor Misztal, bronze medallist in the class 10 singles here. They took the first set and pushed the world champions all the way despite losing 3-1.

Stacey then showed why he is such an exciting young player by fighting back twice against Misztal, taking the fourth set 16-14 having lost the third 21-19 before the Polish player secured the win 11-9 in the fifth.

"I think I played positively throughout the whole match," said Stacey. "I don't think the tide changed at all. It was an up and down match, very close at the finish and a good match to play in. I was a little unlucky in the fifth for him to get the three point lead but I'm pleased with how I played and it puts us in good stead for the rest of the tournament. I'm going to try and keep it relative as tomorrow is a new day and you never know how you are going to play."

"I feel that we played a good doubles match," said Facey Thompson. "We got unlucky in a few points but they are a very good team and we did well to push them and hopefully next time we can beat them. We've got Italy tomorrow and if we play like that and put pressure on them we can take the doubles but we'll see what happens."

"It is nice we are in a position now where we can mix and match the teams depending on who we think is playing well and who has the best chance," said Daybell. "Everyone is playing at quite a similar level now and with three strong players it does make a big difference. Josh played really well today against a tough opponent, playing out of his class against one of the singles medallists from class 10 so to put on a show like that was really good."

Women's class 4-5 is a round-robin event and Sue Gilroy and Megan Shackleton made the perfect start to their campaign with a 2-0 win against Russia, combining to win the doubles 3-0 against Aleksandra Vasileva and Nadejda Pushpasheva before Shackleton showed great composure to win a tight fourth set 14-12 to beat Vasileva 3-1.

They produced some good doubles again in their second match against Ingela Lundback and Anna-Carin Ahlquist from Sweden, saving a match point in the fourth set to take it 13-11 before the Swedish pair proved too strong in the deciding set. Shackleton then played a great match to beat the class 5 world silver medallist Lundback 3-1 to level the tie at 1-1. Gilroy began well against Ahlquist but the class 3 world No 1 took the deciding singles 3-1.

"I played a lot better than in the singles," said Gilroy. "We played really well this morning but I'm really disappointed because I just made too many errors in the doubles this afternoon. To be taking a very experienced team like Sweden to five sets is excellent – I was just making too many errors. Megan has played really well and I'm really proud of her today."

"I'm really happy with how I played today," said Shackleton. "Coming into the competition I felt a bit shaky to start with but as it has gone along I've been growing in confidence. I know at a major championship people are nervous to play me and I'm looking forward to playing on that as we go along. I think me and Sue have played really well in the doubles so far; we have taken Serbia to five sets before and we've beaten Germany so as long as we practice hard I think if we get a good start in the matches it is all to play for."

Gilroy and Shackleton play their final two matches against Germany and Serbia tomorrow.

Jack Hunter-Spivey and Dan Bullen began their men's class 5 team event against the defending champions France and after losing the first two sets of the doubles against Nicolas Savant-Aira and Alexandre Delarque they fought back superbly to level at 2-2. The experience of the French proved decisive and they ran away with the deciding set but it was a really promising performance from the young British pair in their first major competition together.

Hunter-Spivey played really well to beat the class 4 world No 3 Maxime Thomas 3-1 before Delarque won the tie

for France with a 3-0 win against Bullen.

The 21 year old is making his major championship debut in the team event here and after an understandably nervous start he produced some great play in the doubles.

"I felt the first two sets in the doubles I was a little bit tense and it was a bit overwhelming but then I got into it," said Bullen. "I felt we played really well in the doubles and then I felt that I was relaxing in the singles so I could play my game rather than just being tense. It's very different from the nationals to playing on a big stage like this so it was quite intimidating for me going out there to start with but then I got into it and really enjoyed the experience. Hopefully I'm settled in now and I can do better tomorrow."

For Hunter-Spivey it is the first time he has played team event at a major and he was full of praise for his partner.

"I'm so proud of him," he said. "I thought he was a bit nervous in the first two sets and then he hit some unbelievable shots. He was really brave in the doubles and to lose that close to the European champions, I think we should be very proud of the effort we put in.

"We can definitely win tomorrow and get through to the quarter finals and then who knows. Beating Maxime Thomas was a good win for me as he is one of the best players in the world so I think it was a good performance from both of us and if we can carry it on we can do well."

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