



## Shackleton and Gilroy earn team bronze

**Author:** Paul Stimpson

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Sue Gilroy and Megan Shackleton are assured of a bronze medal in the women's class 4-5 team event and the British team have also reached the semi-finals of the men's class 6, men's class 8 and men's class 10 team events at the European Para Table Tennis Championships in Helsingborg, Sweden.

Gilroy and Shackleton came through a tense battle in the doubles against Sandra Mikolaschek and Lisa Hentig from Germany, holding their nerve to win the deciding set 11-8 after the German pair had edged the fourth 13-11 to level.

Shackleton has grown in confidence during these championships and she produced a great performance to beat World number four Mikolaschek 3-1, taking the match on her second match point, 13-11 in the fourth.

Their final match was against world champions Serbia and they fought back from 2-0 down in the doubles to level at 2-2 before Borislava Peric-Rankovic and Nada Matic took the deciding set 11-4. Shackleton then played another superb match against Peric-Rankovic, taking the first set and then saving four match points in the fourth to level at 2-2 and forcing the World and Paralympic champion to use all her experience to win the deciding set 11-7.

With Russia losing to Sweden it meant that Gilroy and Shackleton finished the round-robin event in third place and with the bronze medal.

"Throughout the tournament we have played so well in doubles," said Gilroy, "but I have really struggled for form out here. Megan and I have really gelled and played so well – I think it is the best doubles we have ever played.

"It has been a tough tournament but we've done really well and Megan has played fantastically well in the singles. I've not had the preparation I needed for this tournament – I knew that coming in and it has really affected my performance.

"I know I'm nowhere near playing at the standard I can which is really frustrating as a player because you feel that you are letting your partner down. But thankfully Megan has stepped up and played absolutely amazing

this week so I'm really proud of her."

"I'm really happy with how the tournament has gone," said 20 year old Shackleton. "I've really enjoyed playing team with Sue and we have gelled really well as a partnership. I felt relaxed in my singles and like I had a plan which has paid off in the close matches.

"This is the first time I have beaten Sandra (Mikolaschek) – she is a really great player and the future looks good for our team. Going in to the fifth against Peric I was feeling quite relaxed because I think I had played well all match and I knew the pressure was on her. I was just trusting in the tactics I had been given. Unfortunately it didn't pay off in the end but I'm really proud of my performance and I think next time she plays me she will be a little more wary.

"This medal means a lot to me. Over the years Sue has been the one carrying the team and it has been nice to support her when she has not been feeling as confident in tournaments so this one means a lot to me and it has been great to enjoy the doubles so much as well."

Paul Karabardak, Martin Perry and David Wetherill are defending their men's class 6 team title here and in their second group match against Sweden Karabardak and Wetherill once again started slowly in the doubles and had to save a match point at 9-10 in the third set against Peter Molander and Michael Azulay. After taking the set 12-10 they took the next two 4 and 7 to win the match 3-2. Karabardak then completed a 2-0 win for his team with a 3-0 defeat of Molander.

Karabardak and Wetherill made a better start in their final group match against Poland and took the doubles against Slawomir Brak and Rafal Kraft 3-0 before Wetherill secured the win and top position in their group with a hard-fought 3-1 win against Brak.

"It's been a tough day and I don't have any energy right now," said Wetherill. "That is testament to how tough it has been. It is nice to come from behind and win as it gives you confidence that when you are in a situation like that you can come through.

"Paul is a bit of a superman sometimes. He can just get the ball on the table which is what you have to do at the end of the day. It doesn't have to be pretty. Getting the job done is the most important thing. I think we can beat any team but we will see what happens.

"We have got potentially two more games tomorrow and we'll prepare as normal. We know that if we win the doubles it is difficult for us to be beaten so we need to maybe come out of the blocks a bit quicker, but we got the win today so it's all good."

"We struggled again this morning for two sets," said Karabardak, "but then started playing well again which was good. We are making hard work of it and we are not playing our best in the beginning – we are starting too slow but this evening I think we started the way we know we can and made it easier for ourselves which was really pleasing. Going into the harder games tomorrow we will need to be at the top of our game in doubles because it will be important."

Although not required to play in the team event yet Perry plays an important part in the team.

"It is difficult to watch," he said, "but that is what the team is here for – to have that strength in depth. I'm certainly getting my money's worth watching these guys in the doubles. It seems to be a bit of a pattern going 2-0 down then they come from behind. I think they have found that rhythm now and it is good to see. We prepare as a team quite well and it is just about making sure that whoever we face tomorrow we keep that preparation the same."

In men's class 8 Aaron McKibbin, Billy Shilton and Ross Wilson needed to beat Romania today to finish top of their group and the result was never in doubt. After combining with McKibbin to win the doubles against Mihai Miron and Alyn Nicolae 3-0, Shilton rounded off the win with a 3-0 defeat of Miron.

"I'm happy to beat Romania and reach the semi-final which was our first target," said McKibbin. "The semi-final tomorrow will be a tough game so we will re-boot and get ready for that. It is a real strength of our team that all

three of us can play together in doubles and be successful – Billy and me have been successful in doubles here and me and Ross yesterday winning against Poland who are one of the top teams.

“Also, in the singles having Ross at number one and either me or Billy at two depending on who we are playing against is a real strength and something that other teams get a bit worried about as they are never too sure who is going to play. If someone is not in great form we can always rely on the other person and we all chip in throughout the tournament which highlights why we are such a good team.”

“I’m really happy with how I played today,” said Shilton. “Whatever role anyone is asked to do, either playing or on the bench, is really important and I’m very happy that we won today.”

World champion Wilson was able to sit on the bench today and watch his team-mates get the job done.

“Billy has come in and won the match for us twice now,” he said, “against Romania today and Norway yesterday – so it is a big positive going forward that Billy can step in and Aaron as well. I think we are all ready to do our best tomorrow. We all lost out in the singles here and we are looking forward to redeeming ourselves and doing as well as we can in the team.”

The second group match for Kim Daybell, Ashley Facey Thompson and Josh Stacey in men’s class 10 against Italy was for a semi-final place and a certain medal. Daybell and Facey Thompson, who took silver in the last Europeans, made the perfect start by taking the doubles against Lorenzo Cordua and Mohamed Kalem 3-1 but Kalem, the class 9 world No 2 and Rio bronze medallist levelled for Italy with a 3-1 defeat of Daybell.

That left 19 year old Stacey to play class 10 Cordua and he showed a composure and maturity beyond his years as well as some brilliant play. At 2-0 and 10-6 he had four match points but with the score at 10-8 coach Mat Kenny called a timeout. At 10-9 the watching British team held their breath but there were cheers as the young Welshman sealed the win 11-9 in the third.

“I tried to go through my processes rather than think of the occasion and what the outcome would mean,” said Stacey. “I thought about what I needed to do to bring out the best in myself and I think I did that and it showed in the result.

“At 10-9 in the third set I was thinking about how I should serve against him – he was still really nervous about how much spin was on my serve so if I went with less spin he would receive it higher. Thankfully he did which gave me the opportunity to attack and I managed to win the point.

“I’ve been drilled to think about the process rather than the outcome of the match so I was just thinking about what I needed to do to win the point and it worked. It is great to know we have a medal but I would much prefer to be on the top of the podium rather than either side of whoever wins it so right now I’m happy but tomorrow I will be raring to go to try and get the gold.”

“I knew that doubles was really important in every match,” said Facey Thompson. “Kim and me have been playing doubles together for several years now and our experience came through. It was tricky and I was very nervous because it was in my mind that it was a medal match so obviously it was hard to get that out of the way and focus but we got through in the end.

“I know that Kim and me are really good team partners in class 10 – we have been in that situation many times and we know how to win and we did at the last Europeans. We are in the semi-final but we’ve still got a job to do.”

“Obviously the doubles is always so important,” said Daybell. “I struggled today against Kalem – he is a really good player and a Paralympic medallist and I’ve been struggling to find my form this season.

“That is what you have your team mates for – when you can’t quite find it they are there to pick you up and that is what Josh did in the singles. It was a really mature performance from a young player and it shows he is definitely destined for some big things.

“I think we can win against anyone with the team we’ve got now but every opposition in class 10 is tough and they are all really strong players. I think having won silver two years ago we are used to that situation and Josh



has already proved that he can play under pressure as well. We just need to keep it going.

“For me, having gone so long without winning a major medal to win two consecutively was quite important to me and I’m really pleased for the team and tomorrow should be good.”



Jack Hunter-Spivey and Dan Bullen with the Turkish team after their quarter-final (ITTF photo)

Jack Hunter-Spivey and Dan Bullen made it through their group in men’s class 5 with a 2-0 win against Belgium, combining really well to win the doubles against Bart Brands and Benjamin Marotte 3-0 before Hunter-Spivey secured the win with a 3-1 win against Brands.

That took the British pair through to a quarter-final against World team silver medallists Turkey and they lost the doubles to world champion Ali Ozturk and Hamza Caliskan 3-0. Hunter-Spivey levelled the tie with a 3-1 win against Caliskan and Bullen performed with great credit against Ozturk despite a 3-0 loss.

Although Hunter-Spivey and Bullen have won national titles together it was their first time competing as a team in a major competition as well as a major debut for Bullen.

“For a team that no-one has ever heard of we’ve got to the quarter-finals of a European Championships,” said Hunter-Spivey. “We were retrospectively one set away from a medal in the doubles against France yesterday and I’ve really enjoyed it.

“I’ve really struggled with my table tennis and my confidence the last few weeks and playing with Dan has been really enjoyable. I’ve only lost one match – 3-2 to the world champion – and if you had told me that a few days before the tournament after I’d had two maximum losses in Bangkok and the Czech Open I would have bitten your hand off.

“I’m really proud of myself for the way I’ve fought through it and come out on top and this has been a successful tournament for me – I might not have got a medal but to lose only one match in a major competition is very good.”

“It was a really good experience,” said Bullen. “I felt like I played the way I wanted to play. I got a bit tense in the

doubles this afternoon but this morning I thought I was playing with freedom. We kept to our tactics and we managed to win the doubles and Jack has been brilliant – I've learned a lot from him this week and he really helped me out.

"It was great to beat Belgium because as Jack said we are a new team and have only ever played nationals together so it was a whole new experience. None of the players out here knew what we were going to be like in doubles and it was really good to get the win under our belt.

"I was happy with how it went against Ozturk especially with the 11-8 in the second set. All I need to do is play with a little more control. I just felt that in the first set I rushed things a little bit and it took me a while to get into it but once I was into it I felt like I played well."

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