



Wetherill, Karabardak & Perry take European gold again

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The British men's class 6 team of Paul Karabardak, Martin Perry and David Wetherill successfully defended their European title today at the European Para Table Tennis Championships in Helsingborg, Sweden. Aaron McKibbin, Billy Shilton and Ross Wilson were silver medallists in men's class 8 and Kim Daybell, Ashley Facey Thompson and Joshua Stacey took bronze in men's class 10.

Karabardak and Wetherill started their semi-final against France with a 3-0 win in the doubles but Wetherill, who had heart surgery only last month, had to dig deep to come back from 2-1 down to beat former World number one Bastien Grundeler 11-6 in the fifth to take his team through to the final against Greece.

The British pair made the perfect start by winning the doubles against Georgios Mouchthis and Marios Chatzikyriakos 3-0 but Chatzikyriakos kept Greece in the tie with a 3-0 win against Karabardak. Wetherill again had to battle his way into the match after losing the first set and when Mouchthis won four points in a row from 10-5 down, coach Andrew Rushton called a time out and Wetherill clinched the set 11-9 to level at 1-1. He took the next 11-2 and secured the gold 11-6 in the fourth.

"I felt very confident going into the final singles," said Wetherill, "and maybe the only time that confidence wavered was when he won a few points at 10-5 in the second and a little bit of negativity came into my brain. But we called a time out and winning that set was crucial as I never felt I was going to lose after that. I was very tired – I didn't play well in the semi-final and that took it out of me a bit but the big W is what matters at the end of the day. I didn't even have the energy to celebrate at the end – that is how tired I am. Sometimes my bones turn to concrete and it is hard to get the feel for the ball but I was just pleased to get the win to be honest. We were expected to win so there was a bit of pressure on us which is why it is nice to come through. It has been a good week and I would have taken it five days ago."

"Our doubles massively improved today," said Karabardak, "but it helped that the teams we were playing in the doubles today were not so awkward. They were more orthodox and easier to play even though they were better

teams and I think that was important because when you win the doubles it puts you in the driving seat and that was crucial in our semi-final and final victories today. It is fantastic to be the best team in Europe and to have done it twice is really special so I'm really pleased."

Although Perry did not play he has been an important presence in the team.

"Obviously we have been knocking up as a three with our coach Andrew as well," said Perry, "and it makes everyone have the perfect practice which has been good. So I feel that regardless of who has played in the match everyone has come in well prepared and well-focused to go on and get the job done. Paul and Dave ensured that we came out on top but we have prepared as a unit from start to finish and that is what a team does. It is brilliant to come away as two-time European champions and I hope that I can up my level in the next few years and come back to the next Europeans more in contention to get on the score sheet. But at the moment these guys are levels above and so I just have to keep pushing myself to hopefully one day match them."

McKibbin, Shilton and Wilson took bronze in men's class 8 team two years ago and they improved on that today by beating Sweden in their semi-final. McKibbin and Wilson won the doubles 3-0 and World champion Wilson then recovered from dropping the first set to beat Tobias Andersson 3-1.

They faced World and Paralympic champions Ukraine in the final and made a great start by taking the first set in the doubles and had points to take the second but Viktor Didukh and Ivan Mai came back to win it 12-10. They took the third by the same score before winning the match 11-5 in the fourth. McKibbin played well against Didukh but the World number one was just too strong and secured the gold for Ukraine with a 3-0 win.

It was nevertheless a promising performance from the British team with Tokyo 2020 in mind.

"I think maybe some mistakes at the end of the games made the difference in the doubles against Ukraine," said Wilson, "and it was disappointing because we had such a good chance. We had a 1-0 10-8 lead and we should be getting over the line from there, getting a bigger lead and then pushing to finish the match. There are a lot of positives to take away from it regarding our doubles because we worked well together and going forward we will be able to work on it a lot. Billy has played a bit more this time and we are always strengthening as a team. It is a shame it couldn't be gold but I am sure next time we will be able to push even harder for it."

"I think I played a good match," said McKibbin. "He (Didukh) is the best in the world and I was quite happy to find my level and improve my performance from the singles. I was obviously disappointed with the way I played in the singles event and I feel that I raised my level today although it wasn't enough. There are some things to go away and work on but I think doubles wise, although we have pushed them further before and lost deuce in the fifth, as a performance that is the best we have given against them. Before we didn't have as much belief as we do now and after that performance I definitely feel we are so close to beating them. There are a few things we need to work on but we will improve as individuals and with Billy as well. It is our first major team final so that is a positive and I'd much rather lose now and win in Tokyo."

"On the whole I didn't have the best tournament in singles but in team we all managed to pull it around," said Shilton, who helped to secure group wins against Norway and Romania. "I have learnt a lot just from watching the boys against Ukraine and in the group against Poland. It was a really good level of table tennis and I'm happy to win silver."

The men's class 10 team of Kim Daybell, Ashley Facey Thompson and Joshua Stacey started their semi-final against France in great style with Daybell and Facey Thompson winning the doubles 3-0 having come back from 8-5 down to take the first 12-10. Stacey had a tough task in the first singles against Mateo Boheas and pushed the class 10 World number seven, particularly in the first set which the Frenchman took 13-11 before completing a 3-0 win.

That left Daybell to play Gilles De La Bourdonnaye in the deciding singles and the former World, Paralympic and European champion established a 2-0 lead. Although Daybell kept fighting and took the third 11-7 he could not find his best form and the Frenchman took the match 3-1 to take his team through to the final.

Although disappointed Daybell, Facey Thompson and Stacey can take plenty of positives out of the tournament

in addition to a bronze medal.

“Me and Kim played a really good doubles match,” said Facey Thompson, “better than yesterday which was a bit shaky because of the situation we were in. But this time we played well throughout the whole match and played really good doubles to be fair. The only doubles team we have lost to in two Europeans now is Poland who are World champions and that is the target in doubles we need to get to so we can challenge for higher medals. It is good to have another major medal and good for Josh to get a medal at his first Europeans, especially after yesterday playing so well under such high pressure.”

“I think I struggled and felt quite nervous playing in the singles,” said Daybell. “The feeling wasn’t quite there and in those big moments he played some good points so hats off to him. The doubles was good – it is just a shame I couldn’t quite find my highest level for the last game. We have shown we are a really good doubles pair and obviously Josh has played really well through the whole tournament and has looked really strong. We have some different options now and if one of us is struggling then we can put someone else in and that is what you do as a team.”

“I’m really pleased overall,” said Stacey. “I was a bit disappointed in how I played in the quarter finals of the singles event but I think I found my level quite quickly in the team event and played better and better as the team event has gone along. Boheas was a bit better than me when it was tight and that is what made the difference. He served really well and attacked. After the disappointment of the singles my first major has finished on a high and I’m looking forward to keeping my level as high as it was here. To take a medal and win the deciding match that gave us a medal yesterday is a good feeling and good motivation for the tournaments coming up and qualification for Tokyo.”

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