



## Wetherill wins gold weeks after heart surgery

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England's David Wetherill led Britain to victory at the European Para Table Tennis Championships – just weeks after undergoing heart surgery.

The Paralympian, who was born with a rare heart condition and a bone development disorder, won the deciding game against Greece to secure gold in the team class 6 event with a 2-1 win.

It meant that Wetherill, along with team mates Paul Karabardak (Wales) and Martin Perry (Scotland), retained their European title.

Speaking about the achievement after returning to England, he said: "Initially I just felt relief because I was so tired, but now a bit of time has passed I'm just so pleased. It was the big tournament of the year and we achieved what we were aiming for."

However, there had been doubts as to whether or not Wetherill would compete after undergoing heart surgery – and those doubts put a question mark over his qualification for Tokyo.

"One of the wires going into a vein had come loose and needed replacing," he explained.

"I was trying to put it off until after Tokyo, but the doctors said it had to be done.

"It's more complicated than just replacing a pacemaker and it was a little bit scary."

Doctors said he would need a minimum of six weeks to recover and would have to limit the use of his upper body to avoid dislodging the new wire. However, the year's biggest tournament – which would help Wetherill qualify for Tokyo – was just four weeks away.

"I'm expected to qualify for Tokyo and I've got a good chance of getting a medal next year, but the surgery put a little bit of a question mark over it," admitted Wetherill.

"I did feel a little bit nervous and I thought maybe I won't qualify and that was playing on my mind a bit.

"We ummed and ahed for ages about whether I could go, and I only found out a couple of days before that the doctors and coaches had agreed I could go and I just had to be mindful and not go all out."

So Wetherill headed out to Sweden, having only picked up a bat once in two months.

"I stopped playing table tennis a month before the surgery because I was focusing on my fitness and prehabilitation instead", he said.

"So by the time the competition came round, I had only picked up a bat once in two months, but I don't think it's always about that though.

"I think you can over train and burn yourself out, and sometimes when you are constantly training, you don't realise you are making mistakes, and that break helped me think more logically and to rectify the mistakes in my game.

"I came back so fresh and open-minded."

And that new mindset also helped Wetherill secure himself a bronze in the class 6 singles event, after a 3-1 win over world number one Alvaro Valera in the quarter-finals.

"It was probably the best match I have ever played," he said.

"I knew my chances weren't as high as in previous years, but it was so good to win the quarter-finals – even if I had lost I would have been very pleased with how I played. Although it did take it out of me and I knew my fitness wasn't great and maybe that let me down in the later stages of the competition."

But it wasn't just the performance that made it so special – it was the player he beat in the process.

"Valera has always been a bit of a nemesis for me and the guy to beat," admitted Wetherill.

"I last beat him in 2007 and since then he has beaten me in every major tournament."

In 2015 Wetherill lost to Valera in the semi-finals of the Europeans, and was defeated again in 2017 in the final. Valera also ended Wetherill's run in Rio when he knocked him out, despite Wetherill holding a match point at 2-0, 10-9.

"He is the guy I have always struggled to get past, so it was really special", he said.

"If someone had asked me who I wanted to avoid in the draw, he would be that player, but that win filled me with a lot of confidence.

"I'm only getting better and better now and I feel like I'm not scared to play anybody."

That strong self-belief shone through in the final of the team event against Greece, when despite going 1-0 down in the deciding match, Wetherill never doubted he would win.

"I was so mentally strong this time and I felt calm as anything before the match. I went into the deciding game with such a good feeling," he said.

However, Wetherill found himself 1-0 down after the first game.

"Mouchthis definitely surprised me by going 1-0 up and I was battling and tired," he said.

"Sometimes my bones turn to concrete and it is hard to get the feel for the ball, but I had told the team there was no chance I was going to lose."

Wetherill then fought back and went on to level the score by taking the second set 11-9. He then pulled ahead by taking the third 11-2 and secured the gold by winning 11-6 in the fourth.

"After the second set there was no chance I was going to lose," said Wetherill.

"I'm just so thankful that the coaches and the surgeons trusted me with playing.

"It wasn't easy and people have said I dealt with it so well, but I did struggle a bit and it takes so much energy to be mentally strong.

"A lot of people said to me 'It will just be like you to go and play out of this world and smash it' and that filled me with confidence going into the competition.

"I'm just so pleased I managed to deal with it and really thankful to my team mates and the coaches."

Wetherill's sights are now set on Tokyo 2020, where he hopes to win his first Paralympic medal.

"Qualification for the Paralympic is more stringent this year and you need to be in the top 10 in the world to qualify.

"I'm now ranked 4th, so it's nice to make my ranking safe to the point where I don't have to worry about that.

"I've won European medals, I've won World Championship medals, but I still haven't got the Paralympic one.

"So that's the one missing at the moment and fingers crossed I can rectify that next year."

As well taking gold in class 6, Great Britain were also on the podium in:

- Men's class 8, where Aaron McKibbin, Billy Shilton and Ross Wilson took silver
- Men's class 10 where Kim Daybell, Ashley Facey Thompson and Joshua Stacey took bronze
- Women's class 4-5 where Sue Gilroy and Megan Shackleton took bronze

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