



Liam and Paul now single-minded on road to Tokyo

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Liam Pitchford and Paul Drinkhall admitted the squad did not perform after Great Britain were unable to secure a team place at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics – but they are now focused on qualifying as individuals.

The seventh-seeded GB squad, which also featured Sam Walker and Tom Jarvis, started well enough at the qualifying tournament in Portugal, defeating Argentina 3-0.

That earned them a tough match against ninth seeds Croatia, in which the winner would confirm their place at the Olympics.

Drinkhall & Walker lost the opening doubles, but it looked as if Pitchford would level when he led Tomislav Pucar 2-1. However, world No 32 Pucar fought back to win 3-2 (7-11, 11-6, 9-11, 11-6, 11-8) and Drinkhall then also saw a 2-1 lead evaporate as he lost 3-2 (11-9, 7-11, 5-11, 11-7, 11-2) to Andrej Gacina.

That meant GB's only hope was in winning three matches to finish top of the second stage of qualifying. They were drawn against 17th-ranked Hungary and surprisingly went down 3-1, despite Pitchford making it 1-1 by defeating Bence Majoros 3-0. Drinkhall was beaten 3-1 by Adam Szudi and Pitchford's 3-1 defeat by Nandor Ecseki spelled the end of the road for GB.

Pitchford said: "We can't beat around the bush – it just wasn't good enough from any of us, really.

"I think we knew the doubles is a weak point which we need to focus on – something we all need to come together and work on.

"Against Croatia, me and Paul had chances in our singles. It felt like we were in control of our matches but maybe we put a bit too much pressure on ourselves and it didn't work out.

"I thought I played okay, but not allowing ourselves to play how we can – that's disappointing. I felt in control

and let it slip and Paul I'm sure would agree about his match.

"They are a good team and they were better than us on the day. After that match it was always going to be tough to come back after a tough loss and have to go again."



Drinkhall agreed, saying: "We put in a strong performance against Argentina and, to be fair, we took a lot of that form into the Croatia match.

"Losing 3-0 isn't good, but they played a really good match. There were a few little things that could have changed the outcome, but there wasn't much wrong. Credit to them because they did the same and came out on top.

"Against Hungary, we weren't as good as we were in the other two matches and as soon as you give anyone a chance at this level, they have the right to take that chance.

"The guy (Szudi) played well against me – he actually said afterwards it was one of the best matches of his life. I got myself in a winning position in games and felt on top, but I didn't manage to close them out. I got to the point where I was in control, but let it go – or my opponent got control back. That's something I'm working on.

"It's disappointing that we're not going to have a team in Tokyo, because we truly believe that on our day we are one of the best teams in the world. We've got to ensure it's our day more often."

The first step to secure a singles place is at the European Olympic Singles Qualifying Tournament in Moscow in April.

Pitchford said: "I'm quite relieved that I'm getting another chance in the singles qualifiers. There's an opportunity for us to go there and if we play the way we can, there's definitely a chance.

"We can't rely on rankings – when it comes down to it, we've got to go out and perform. We've done it before but that's in the past and we've got to do it here and now.

"We've got the World Championships before the Olympic qualifiers and that's another chance to prove we can perform.

"That's the beauty of sport that you get another chance to prove yourself. One week you can have a bad week but the next you can play well."

Drinkhall added: "It's going to be hard. We've got a bit of time to train and put things right for the individual qualifiers.

"I've got to focus on myself and get to the point where I am the best I can be when the tournament comes, and perform as I have been over the last year or 18 months."

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