



## Stacey strikes gold on road to Tokyo

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Joshua Stacey made the perfect start to Paralympic year and improved his chances of qualification for Tokyo 2020 by winning gold in the men's class 9 singles at the Polish Para Open in Wladyslawowo today.

Billy Shilton took silver in men's class 8 and there were bronze medals for Sue Gilroy (women's class 4-5), Tom Matthews (men's class 1) and Ashley Facey Thompson (men's class 9).

Stacey topped his group without dropping a set in his three matches against the Asian Championships bronze medallist from Hong Kong, Wong Chi Yin, European team bronze medallist Dezso Bereczki from Hungary and 14-year-old Marcin Zielinski from Poland.

In the other group in men's class 9, Facey Thompson recovered from dropping the first set to beat Lucas Didier, the talented 16-year-old Frenchman, 3-1, and then came up against the world silver medallist Lurii Nozdrunov in top form with the Russian winning 3-0. The 24-year-old Londoner was beaten in five sets by Tibor Chmela from Czech Republic but took second place in the group on countback to progress to an all-British semi-final against Stacey.

The 19-year-old Welshman beat his English team mate 3-1 and then had to fight off a determined challenge in the final from Wong Chi Yin, who twice levelled the match before Stacey took the deciding set 11-6 to claim the gold.

"I felt that I performed at a good level throughout the tournament," said Stacey. "The final against Wong was a little tougher; he played at a higher level and really pushed me. The deciding factor was in the fifth set when I attacked his serves and he struggled being put under pressure early on in the rally.

"I feel that my game has definitely improved over the winter period and I feel more solid in the beginning of the rallies and it definitely helps my game plan."

In contrast, Facey Thompson was disappointed with his performance, saying: "I didn't play my best at all here but onwards and upwards for the rest of the season."

Shilton was a comfortable 3-0 winner against 16-year-old Anton Grankvist from Sweden and recovered from dropping the first set against the former world No 2 Thomas Bouvais to beat the top seed from France 3-1.

He progressed to the knockout stages as group winner after a 3-0 win against another former world No 2 Gyula Zborai from Hungary and defeated the Russian Artem Iakovlev 3-0 in the quarter-final to set up a semi-final against the Rio 2016 silver medallist Andras Csonka. Shilton had won their last two meetings and fought back from 2-1 down to beat the Hungarian 11-3 in the fifth.

He played home favourite Piotr Grudzien in the final and the former world No 1 and world and Paralympic team gold medallist from Poland was just too strong in a 3-0 win.

"I was really pleased with my level," said Shilton, "and my mental approach into the matches leading up to the final. I felt that the semi-final really took it out of me and I found it hard to focus in the final and get the job done. Overall it's been a good singles competition and I need to focus for the team event now."

In her opening match Gilroy edged the first set against Carlotta Ragazzini 19-17 and although the 18-year-old Italian came back to level at 1-1 Gilroy took the match 3-1. She then fought back from 2-0 down against Caroline Tabib to beat the class 5 world championship bronze medallist from Israel 3-2 and progressed as group winner despite losing her final match to Jelena Susic from Croatia in five sets.

It was close again in the semi-final against Oejeong Kang from Korea and Gilroy twice came back to level before the class 5 world champion took the deciding set 11-6 and the match.

"I struggled to find my form yesterday," said Gilroy, "but played with resilience against Caroline (Tabib) pulling the game back from 2-0 down to win 3-2 so I know my game is improving since getting more access to focused training in January.

"I was disappointed with my match against Susic as I know I can play much better than that. Today I played better and my shots were flowing especially on my forehand which I struggled with yesterday. Hopefully I will have another chance to play Kang in the team event and I'm happy to have won bronze."

Matthews had a tough start against world No 1 Young Dae Joo from Korea and the Paralympic and world silver medallist was on top form in a 3-0 win. The Welshman was a 3-0 winner against the unranked Italian Luca Chiarini and secured second place in his group with a 3-0 win against another Italian, the very experienced World team gold medallist Andrea Borgato.

That set up a semi-final against Hyeon Uk Kim and the World champion from Korea took the match 3-0.

"My match against Borgato was a must-win," said Matthews, "so it was good to deal with the pressure situation and come out on top. He's been playing well this tournament so to have a 3-0 victory over him was a confidence-building win.

"Against Kim I feel I gave him too much respect and didn't stick to my game plan as well as I wanted to. But it was more of a learning curve for the next six month block of training.

"There are a few things I know I need to work on but nothing major – just controlling a few things. All in all I feel in a good place and I'm now looking forward to the Spanish Open in a couple of weeks."

In men's class 6 Martin Perry beat Irish teenager Conor O'Callaghan 3-0 and then fought back from 2-0 down against Danny Bobrov to level at 2-2 before the 2017 European team bronze medallist from Israel took the deciding set 11-7.

Perry took second place in the group with a 3-1 win against 15-year-old newcomer Piotr Manturz from Poland which took him through to a quarter-final against Marios Chatzikyriakos. The pair had met on five previous occasions with four matches decided over five sets and Perry leading their head-to-head 4-1 but today it was the European team silver medallist from Greece who came out on top in another five set match, taking the deciding set 11-7 after Perry had levelled at 2-2.

Megan Shackleton was unlucky not to join Gilroy in the knockout stages of women's class 4-5. She led Kang 2-1

before the Korean came back to win 3-2 and was just edged out in her second group match by 18-year-old Irem Oluk from Turkey, losing a titanic battle in the second set 22-20 and levelling at 2-2 before Oluk took the match 11-8 in the fifth.

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