



Honour in defeat for Pitchford in Qatar Open final

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Liam Pitchford lost the match but won universal respect in his first appearance in an ITTF World Tour final at the world-class Qatar Open.

England's No 1 was beaten 4-2 (11-9, 11-7, 8-11, 11-4, 6-11, 11-7) by world No 2 Fan Zhendong of China, but showed he belonged in the world's highest company in a match of outstanding quality.

And, having beaten world No 1 Xu Xin earlier in the semi-finals, the Chinese powerhouse will be even more aware than before of Pitchford's high and rising stature in the world game.

<https://twitter.com/ittfworld/status/1236661259803578369>

Pitchford had served notice of the threat he poses to the very best in a blistering match against Fan at the Team World Cup in London in 2018.

Today, he made a fast start and stood 9-6 up in the first game. So, the serve he sent long off the table at that point would have annoyed him, more so when Fan used it to launch a run of five points to take the game.

In the context of the match, though, that serve illustrated that Pitchford was prepared to mix up his game and to be brave in search of the winning formula – tactics shaped alongside Gavin Evans in his corner.

Those tactics were reinforced by Evans at every changeover, when the talk was of variety, bravery and positivity. And, though he lost the second game too, those qualities stayed with Pitchford as he won the third to narrow the gap.

Fan won the fourth 11-4, the two players' status in the world elite underlined by an amazing rally at 8-3, with Pitchford lobbing a series of Fan smashes back to the table and then working his way back into the rally, only to have the door slammed in his face.

The quality if anything upped a level in the fifth, Pitchford winning two sensational rallies, the one at 5-2 in particular showcasing some incredible skill as the two players varied pace, spin and trajectory to try to find a way through. A couple of points later, Fan won an equally hypnotic rally, belting a winner which produced a smile of admiration from Pitchford. He was smiling more a minute or two later when he took the game 11-6.

Halfway through the sixth, it stood at 6-6 and both timeouts had been taken. Fan winning the next two points on Pitchford serves was probably the final key phase, and he went on to win it 11-7.

But the confidence Pitchford can take from his first ITTF World Tour final, not to mention his [doubles final appearance alongside Paul Drinkhall yesterday](#), can only be good for him personally and English table tennis as a whole.

[Click here to watch Pitchford v Fan Zhendong](#) (registration required).

[Click here to watch the medal presentation](#)



In the semi-finals earlier, Pitchford took down Xu Xin, bouncing back from losing the first game 11-3 to beat his illustrious opponent in six.

[Click here to watch Pitchford v Xu Xin](#) (registration required).

With a performance of focus, control and intelligence, Pitchford thoroughly deserved his victory – this was no case of the world's current top player having an off day.

Indeed, when Xu took the first game 11-3, barely missing a ball, the fear was that Pitchford faced a bridge too far against an opponent he had never take a set against.

That changed in the second when Pitchford began to exert a control he rarely lost for the rest of the match, his touch game spot on, limiting the number of balls he gave Xu to attack.

There was still a huge threat of course, never better illustrated than by an amazing rally at 8-5, Pitchford repeatedly forcing Xu from one side of court to another but seeing the left-hander somehow return everything and eventually win the point.

Not that Pitchford shrunk as a result of losing a rally he probably would have won four times over against most

opponents. Trusting his game, he levelled with an 11-7 scoreline and then took the next 11-9.

Xu's fast start to the fourth game – going 4-0 up, set the platform for an 11-6 scoreline to level the match. With matters intriguingly poised, what followed was simply mesmeric.

The extraordinary, pinpoint forehand by Xu Xin to take the point at 6-6, followed two points later by an exquisitely bent forehand down the line by Pitchford which left Xu flat-footed, was merely the hors d'oeuvre to a series of deuce points as both players battled to take the key game.

Pitch was the first to miss out, at 10-9, but he saved two game points at 10-11 and 11-12. He engineered another at 13-12 but again saw the chance go by as he failed to deal with Xu's serve.

When Pitchford took the next point to lead 14-13, Gavin Evans called the timeout and, with the advice to trust himself in his short game ringing in his ears, he did just that and took the point to stand one game from the final.

The sixth was tight, Xu Xin taking an early time out at 3-4 and the score making its way to 9-9. Pitchford brought up a match point, a Xu backhand drifted wide and the Englishman had booked his first ITTF World Tour final appearance.

<https://twitter.com/ittfworld/status/1236585895802920960>

Results

Men's Singles

Semi-final

Liam Pitchford bt Xu Xin (CHN) 4-2 (3-11, 11-7, 11-9, 6-11, 15-13, 11-9)

Final

Fan Zhendong bt Pitchford 4-2 (11-9, 11-7, 8-11, 11-4, 6-11, 11-7)

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