



## Pitchford: I want to be at this level all the time

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Liam Pitchford hailed a “massive step” in his career as he reflected on a Qatar Open performance which saw him reach his first singles final on the ITTF World Tour – a day after reaching his first doubles final.

And although both ended in defeat to opponents from the all-powerful Chinese camp, Pitchford can take huge confidence from a string of eye-catching performances, including beating world No 1 Xu Xin of China 4-2 (3-11, 11-7, 11-9, 6-11, 15-13, 11-9) in the semi-finals.

The final against World No 2 Fan Zhendong was equally impressive, though Pitchford ultimately lost 4-2 (11-9, 11-7, 8-11, 11-4, 6-11, 11-7).

The Chesterfield man, who will move up from world No 22 as a result of his run, said: “It’s a bit mixed emotions. It’s always disappointing to lose a final, but overall it’s been a massively positive tournament. It’s a massive step and the next step is to win one.

“I had my chances in the final and maybe on another day it could have gone my way, but I made him play his best and pushed him to the limit.

“Especially against the Chinese, you’ve got to mix up the play and I think I did that really well.

“The fifth set was one of the best sets I’ve played and it was probably the same for him. That’s what you’ve got to do against these players and that’s the level I want to be at all the time.”

The singles final appearance followed Pitchford & Paul Drinkhall – who were unseeded – reaching the Men’s Doubles final, where they lost 3-1 (11-8, 8-11, 11-1, 11-6) to world champions Xu Xin & Ma Long.

Pitchford said: “We hadn’t played together for a while but I think we proved we’re the best pair together. It’s a shame we can’t play together in the team events, but now we’ll play a few more tournaments together and hopefully kick on.”



Liam Pitchford is congratulated by Gavin Evans after beating Xu Xin (ITTF picture)

Pitchford hailed the influence of coach Gavin Evans, adding: "Me and Gavin and Paul have been working on a lot of small things that Gavin felt I needed in my game. We set a plan and worked on it really well.

"It takes time to come together but in the last few weeks I've started to find it. I trust all the advice he gives me. I'm really happy I've got someone in there who I believe in and who believes in me.

"Overall, I think I've improved my short game. We've been working on that and in the semi-final I felt like I dominated the short game and serve and receive, which I'd never done against Xu Xin and which is a major step for me."

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