



Athletes welcome Olympics delay

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Britain's top table tennis players have welcomed the decision to postpone the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics until next year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The announcement was made in a joint statement by the Games organisers and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which said it was based on information provided by the World Health Organisation.

The statement said: "In the present circumstances and based on the information provided by the WHO today (Tuesday), the IOC president and the prime minister of Japan have concluded that the Games of the XXXII Olympiad in Tokyo must be rescheduled to a date beyond 2020 but not later than summer 2021, to safeguard the health of the athletes, everybody involved in the Olympic Games and the international community."

No British table tennis athletes had yet qualified for Tokyo 2020 – Liam Pitchford, Paul Drinkhall and Tin-Tin Ho had planned to attend next month's singles qualifying tournament in Moscow, which was cancelled by the ITTF earlier this month.

England No 1 Pitchford said: "Obviously, it's a shame for who the athletes who have prepared mentally and physically, but it's got to be the right decision for the health and safety of everybody involved.

"I think they needed to make a decision rather than say it might still happen. It's better to have that certainty and now we can relax a little bit and then get focused and prepared again when it does come round."

Drinkhall added: "Each week while they were delaying a decision, it meant those athletes who were preparing for it were putting themselves and others at risk. Now that doesn't have to happen.

"We can do bits and pieces at home but for a sport like ours which is very technical, you need to feel bat on ball. It's good to know that there will be time to get that back once this has all passed."

Ho, who had taken a year out from her medical studies at the University of Nottingham to focus on qualifying for the Olympics, said: "It's a good decision. The most important thing is the health and safety of the athletes and

everyone else involved.

"I think a lot of athletes were quite worried and had a lot of pressure to keep training, which put them and others at risk. Now they can focus on trying to get through the pandemic."

Pitchford and Drinkhall's qualifying efforts have been supported by the Aspiration Fund, which UK Sport launched to allow sports not currently in receipt of full funding to develop plans to help teams and athletes qualify for Tokyo 2020. Table tennis was awarded £275,000 after Table Tennis England made a bid to the fund on behalf of the British Table Tennis Federation.

Table Tennis England Chief Executive Sara Sutcliffe said: "We recognise that an unprecedented decision such as this would have been a very difficult one to take, but ultimately the welfare of athletes, coaches, officials, volunteers, spectators and everyone else involved in the biggest sporting event in the world is paramount, so we therefore welcome this decision.

"To have the certainty that the Games will not take place this year allows the athletes to focus on keeping themselves and their families safe, which is the most important thing. We will support our elite athletes, as we will all our members, during this difficult time and beyond."

UK Sport welcomed the postponement and said they were "working hard to identify the wide-ranging impacts and scenarios and are in close contact with government to establish how best to support our summer Olympic and Paralympic sports and athletes to be ready for the Games when they do take place".

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