

A Norwegian on Song and Pitch Perfect

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Liam Pitchford (Dy) and Sonja Obradovich (NOR)

Sonja Obradovich from Norway and Liam Pitchford from Derbyshire were both "On Song" with their respective highly tuned games being in pure harmony in winning the Women's and Men's Open titles on the final day of the Tees Sport Doncaster Grand Prix on Sunday the 13th of February.

Sonja and Liam justified their top seedings by cruising to victory at the Doncaster Dome Leisure complex and it was a pleasure to greet the ice cool Norwegian and (possibly the new English National Men's Champion?) with their winner's cheques.

For the Bosnian born Obradovich who has been resident in Norway now for 3 years, decided to visit England for the first time plus take in a week's training in Bournemouth and compete in the Grand Prix as part of her seven day holiday. Sonja has been playing for eleven years since she was nine and has played at the highest level for Bosnia including at the World Championships. She now plays for Club Storfors near Karlstad in Sweden in the Women's elite league to ensure she gets top quality matches, as our top players do by regularly travelling abroad. The Grand Prix organisers are always very happy to welcome "new faces" from other countries plus of course the added bonus of watching top foreign players perform as it adds spice to our home events. Having said all that Sonja had to be at her very best even at the group stage where she was fully extended by Lindsey Reynolds coming back from 0-2 down in games to pull through 3-2 and we saw a wonderful match by both players giving it everything. She then went into cruise control with her brilliant style of play (aka Jo Parker) to reach the final by courtesy of victories against Lisa Radford and Alice Loveridge (both high quality players) but neither could penetrate the Norwegian's solid defence.

In the lower half of the draw Lindsey Reynolds continued in her rich vein of form to displace Caroline Hallows then play her best table tennis to oust 2nd seed Egle Adomelyte in straight sets which caused shockwaves throughout the hall. This put Lindsey into the semi final and await her opponent. Meanwhile more high drama was unfolding on an adjacent table as Lauren Spink had just come through two titanic battles against Melisa Wright (who won Women's Band 1 on Saturday) then had to face another top quality defender in Hannah Hicks with the winner to face Reynolds in the last four. The patient controlled attacking of Spink against the "wall" like qualities that Hicks brings to the table and was yet another classic match worthy of any final with Lauren playing simply "bootiful" shots with a firm belief in herself coming back from a 0-2 deficit in games to grind out a fantabulous result winning 3-2 over the gallant Hampshire and England International defender. Spink then squared up to Reynolds in an all action attack v counter attack semi final with the winner taking on the super-cool Norwegian in the final. Lauren weathered another storm to come through 3-0 against Lindsey and take on yet another defender!



Lauren Spink (Nk) (left) runner up with Sonja Obradovich (NOR) winner of Women's Singles

The Women's final was a joy to behold and I was privileged to have had a ringside seat throughout this captivating encounter between Lauren Spink (controlled attacker) against the ice cool Sonja Obradovich (top class defender) and no-one in the forty or so spectators was disappointed. Watching two athletes battle it out head to head as though it was a 100 metres sprint with the perspiration from each players brow, yet at the same time a game of chess with placement of shots to all areas of the table, change of spin, heavy attack, slow roll, cute short pushing after a heavy chopped returned ball after ball sent shivers up my spine with rallies seeming to last forever to win a point, it was simply sensational. I would have gladly paid to watch this superb match and was just in awe of how Sonja just kept returning everything Lauren could muster up in her aggressive attacking and the way Lauren tried to unlock the solid defensive wall between her and victory. As the match panned out after two fantastic games that had the audience spellbound both going to deuce to the Norwegian none of us wanted it to end. Both these young ladies were winners in my book showing so much passion in wanting to win,

however after possibly her earlier exertions Spink just ran out of steam, ideas and energy and was just exhausted in the 3rd game, which went to Sonja 11-3.

England number 2 ranked player Liam Pitchford confirmed his superiority in ability to ease his way to another Men's Open Grand Prix title. How far Liam has come since his cadet days is truly remarkable with his backhand to die for that leaves all his opponents floundering in his wake. He is a superstar of table tennis and a very likeable young man who we hope will carry our Olympic dreams in 2012. His pathway to the title saw him gain straight sets victories against Ivan Lewis, Simon Nouch, with only quarter finalist Mike Marsden taking a game of him. He eased past semi finalist Matt Ware and then another 3-0 performance over unexpected finalist Damien Nicholls to take the title.

Nicholls had been on fire and in the zone after his incredible run that saw him displace Owe Karlsson, Will Maybanks (in a five game belter) then go up through the gears to take the huge scalp of 2nd seed Danny Reed in the quarter final after a 1-2 comeback in games followed up by a last four victory against Stephen Jenkins (who replaced Gavin Rumgay in the draw) in straight sets. Damien's superb run however came unstuck at the hands of Pitchford in the final but nevertheless gained huge credibility for his efforts and the reward of a nice runner's up cheque.



Liam Pitchford (Dy) winner & Damien Nicholls (Sp) runner-up of the Men's Singles

Later in the day the under 21 events plus Restricted and Veteran competitions were soon in full flow.

I start with my roundup of the Under 21 events and the Women's competition that probably had more drama in it than combined episodes of Coronation Street, Eastenders and Emmerdale all thrown in.

How can you come back in a semi final from two games to love down to level but then find yourself 0-7 and 6-10 down in points... but miraculously return back from the jaws of defeat and win!... 13-11... No way you say!

But no word of a lie, Alice Lovridge did... the Guernsey star would not surrender and gave it everything to fight back with her never say die attitude against Emma Vickers, who must have thought, I've won this and into the final! Alice then went onto to gain the huge respect of everyone in the playing hall by winning the title over brave finalist Caroline Hallows (who had a brilliant event beating Charlotte Binley and Chloe Thomas to reach the final)! Ps. spare a thought for losing semi finalist Emma Vickers who as always was very gracious in defeat.

Not so much drama in the Under 21 Men's but nevertheless some! Top seed Matt Ware lost his semi final 1-3 against an "in the zone" Will Maybanks with also 2nd seed Damien Nicholls going out of the event at the quarter final stage to Kim Daybell (who yesterday won Men's Band 2). Kim then fell at the last four hurdle to Alim Hirji with Alim continuing his great recent Grand Prix form to take the title from his good friend Will Maybanks by 3-0 in the final.

Chris Main took the Restricted title (age 22- 39) over Zoltan Hosszu whilst Tomasz Rzeszotko won the final of the Veteran's competition against Brian Johns.



Player of the Tournament: Richard Main (SCO)

The Player of the Tournament award and £50 in Tees Sport vouchers was presented to Richard Main of Scotland.

A final word of thanks to Referee Eileen Allison, deputy Mick Strode, Tournament Organiser Peter Bradley plus all the helpers and Boys in Blue that kept the show moving along and ahead of schedule.

The next scheduled main Grand Prix is to be held at Blackpool over the weekend of the 16th/ 17th of April.

Results from day 2 at Doncaster:

Men's Singles

Liam Pitchford (Dy) beat Damien Nicholls (Sp) 11-8, 11-7, 11-4

Women's Singles

Sonja Obradovich (NOR) beat Lauren Spink (Nk) 13-11, 13-11, 11-3

Under 21 Men

Alim Hirji (Mi) beat Will Maybanks (He) 11-8, 11-2, 11-8

Under 21 Women

Alice Loveridge (GGY) beat Caroline Hallows (Ch) 11-7, 11-8, 11-5

Restricted Singles

Chris Main (SCO) beat Zoltan Hosszu (Sy) 9-11, 12-10, 11-8, 5-11, 11-9

Veteran Singles

Tomasz Rzesztokto (La) beat Brian Johns (Ch) 11-6, 11-6, 13-11

By Geoff Ware

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