



## Liam and Paul make history before lockdown bites

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Back at the start of the year, as a new coronavirus emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan, who could have predicted the global ramifications it would have?

It was business as usual in the first two months of the year, before the pandemic began to take hold and table tennis, in common with the rest of the world, was effectively shut down.

Here, we take a look back at the first six months of 2020 – when our leading men Liam Pitchford and Paul Drinkhall made British table tennis history at the Qatar Open.

At the tournament in March, they became the first Brits to reach a World Tour doubles final, [going down 3-1 to Chinese greats Ma Long & Xu Xin](#).

Liam then beat the World No 1 Xu Xin in the singles semi-finals to reach his first World Tour Final, and the first by a Brit at a Platinum event. He [battled hard against China's Fan Zhendong](#), losing 4-2, and afterwards spoke about the ["massive step" for his career](#).

Liam had started the year by being part of the [ITTF 2019 showreel](#), for his stunning behind-the-back shots against Jun Mizutani, and he continued spreading some inspiration at the [Jack Petchey Schools Team Finals](#) and, alongside Paul and their England team-mate Tom Jarvis, [at a TT Kidz session](#) in Nottingham.

On the table, things did not go as planned as both the [GB men's team](#) and the [GB women](#) were knocked out of the Olympic Team Qualifying Tournament and therefore missed out on Tokyo 2020.

There was better news for London 2012 Olympian Andrew Baggaley who, on a dramatic sudden-death championship point, [retained his World Championship of Ping Pong title](#), lifting the trophy for a record fourth time.



Andrew Baggaley lifts the trophy at Alexandra Palace (picture by Michael Loveder)

There was an [international gold medal for Bournemouth-based Sophie Barcsai](#) at the Hungarian Cadet Open, where she was representing the host nation.

There were also two big developments off the table – it was announced that a series of top table tennis events will feature on a [new online streaming platform](#), GB Sport, while family insurance company [Mark Bates Ltd](#) [became sponsors of the National Championships](#) series after signing a five-year deal with Table Tennis England.

**February** started with GB players Pitchford and Sam Walker [talking candidly about mental health](#) in a #TowardsTokyo2020 podcast.

England's No 1 Pitchford was running into form, and it showed as he later [reached the semi-finals of the Hungarian Open](#). Meanwhile, No 2 Drinkhall was also looking good, [reaching the quarter-finals of the Portugal Open](#).

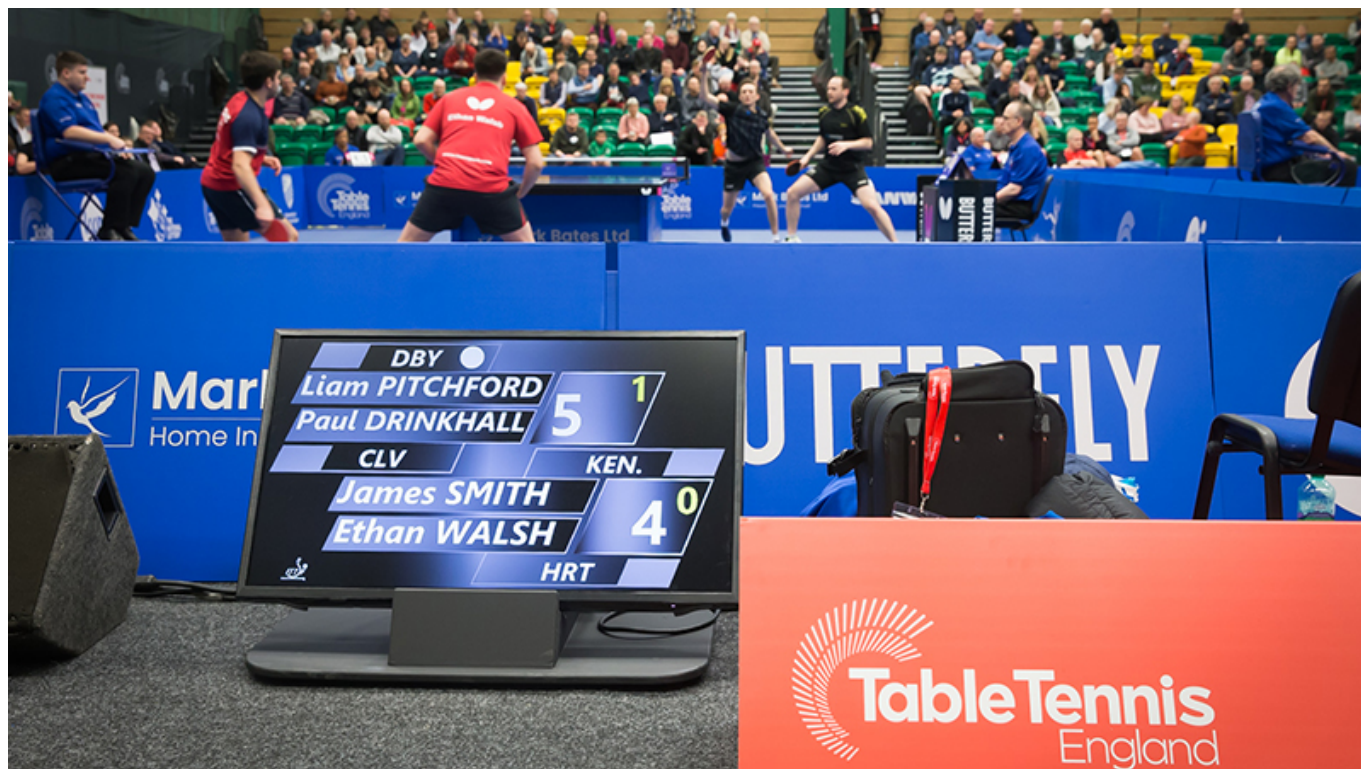
They weren't the only English players enjoying success on the international scene – there were medals too in the junior and para ranks.

Josh Stacey improved his chances of qualification for the Tokyo Paralympics by [winning gold in the men's class 9 singles at the Polish Para Open](#), while at the same event, [Martin Perry won team gold](#) alongside Italy's Matteo Parenzan.

Jasmin Wong teamed up with Anna Hursey of Wales to [win bronze in the Junior Girls Doubles](#) at the Swedish Junior & Cadet Open.

The newly-named Mark Bates Ltd National Championships straddled February and **March**, and there was a boost pre-tournament as the [sponsor increased the prize money](#) by 25%.

Off the tables, [spectators enjoyed an enhanced experience](#) at the event, including real-time score updates.



The live scoring system at the Nationals (picture by Alan Man)

On the tables, [Denise Payet and Luke Savill were the first champions](#), in the Under-21 events, followed by [Sam Walker & Tin-Tin Ho in the Mixed Doubles](#).

[Finals day saw the senior winners crowned](#) as Pitchford and Ho won the respective singles events, Ross Wilson and Jack Hunter-Spivey the para crowns and Pitchford & Drinkhall and Payet & Emily Bolton the doubles titles.

And there was the chance for our top volunteers to share centre stage with the champions as we [presented our Pride of Table Tennis Awards](#) to the winners.

Also this month, there was delight for Brighton TTC, which cemented its status as an inspiring club by winning a prestigious award – the club was named [winner of the Community Engagement Award](#) at the 2020 Community Sport and Recreation Awards.

A 24-hour table tennis marathon at the BBC headquarters in Manchester [raised more than £1,500 for Sport Relief](#) – with some big names from the sport joining in.



Joe Bradshaw and Matt Parratt with Maria Tsaptinos at the BBC

And Table Tennis England Board member Doug Livingstone became a champion for [ending the stigma of mental ill-health in the workplace](#).

Back on the table, Ackworth School [were double champions at the Butterfly School Team Championships](#) – but who would have imagined at the time that it would be the last big domestic table tennis event to be held in 2020?

As the world got to grips with the effects of the pandemic, the sporting landscape took on a very different complexion. The 'new normal' saw all of us make adjustments – and members of the table tennis family were soon showing their creativity and adaptability, as well as reaching out to help people across our own community and beyond.

World Table Tennis Day in **April** was one of the first events to go online, with the creation of [a 'world's longest rally' video](#) involving people all over the world.

As people adjusted to spending more time at home, there was an [upsurge in people ordering table tennis equipment](#) to play at home, as covered by the BBC and Sky Sports News, among others.

Meanwhile, Table Tennis England Technical Director Alan Cooke became our sport's version of Joe Wicks as he put together a [table tennis-specific fitness routine](#) to help keep our members in trim and ready for a return to play.

Brothers Sam and Joseph Cooper [raised more than £5,000 for charity](#) with a 24-hour table tennis marathon, and our No 1 female player Tin-Tin Ho showed how multi-talented she is by [composing and performing her own lockdown song](#).

There was still news from the performance arena – Liam Pitchford's stellar display at the Qatar Open saw him [climb back into the world's top 15](#) before the rankings were frozen. And Jenny Sanders and Jo Outhwaite joined the global ranks of officials after [passing their International Umpire exams](#).

Two England Pathway players undertook charity running challenges in **May** – just two example of several fundraising initiatives.

[Megan Jones pounded the streets](#) to raise money for Mind, and Bethany Ellis received some unexpected support

with her efforts for Cancer Research UK from none other than [world heavyweight champion Tyson Fury](#).

Paralympic champion Will Bayley was also on the fundraising trail, [launching a range of facemasks](#) in aid of Great Ormond Street Hospital.



Bethany Ellis and Tyson Fury running on Morecambe's Promenade

Table Tennis England [started work with Rackets Cubed](#) to introduce table tennis to young people in some of the most deprived areas of the country.

And Table tennis personality Dan Ives went through the pain barrier and [broke a world record](#) to raise money for the NHS.

**June** saw 1980 European champion [John Hilton featured on the hit BBC show QI](#), and in the same month Liam Pitchford targeted future glory in the European game by [signing up for Champions League contenders UMMC](#) from Russia.

Keeping the European theme, table tennis was [confirmed as part of the multi-sport European Championships](#) in 2022.

And there was the heart-warming tale of how 15-year-old Mari Baldwin, who reached the women's singles final at the Nationals at the start of March, is [inspiring her mascot from that day](#), Jemima Choudhury, to work hard to emulate her.

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