



England stars well prepared for competition return

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Posted On: February 24, 2021

The long wait for competitive action is nearly over for the England stars heading off to compete at the World Table Tennis (WTT) Middle East Hub.

Liam Pitchford, Paul Drinkhall, Sam Walker and Tin-Tin Ho fly out this week to Doha, Qatar, in preparation for a double-header of WTT tournaments beginning on Sunday.

All bar Walker will remain in the Gulf state for the World Olympic Qualifying Tournament later in March, for which the GB contingent will be joined by Wales' Charlotte Carey.

All events are being held in a 'Bio Bubble' to minimise the risk of spreading coronavirus, with all players having to provide negative tests a week and 72 hours before leaving their home nations.

Pitchford has already been inside the bubble at similar events, having played in the ITTF #Restart tournaments in China in November, but for the other three it is the first chance to compete on the global stage in almost a year.

Drinkhall and Walker have competed in French league matches and Walker in the Champions League in recent months, but Ho has not played a competitive match since the Mark Bates Ltd Nationals Finals Day on March 1 last year.

They have all been working hard alongside England team-mates and coaches at the University of Nottingham, where training has been taking place in the last few weeks within the elite sport protocols, on competition flooring which has been installed at David Ross Sports Village.

England men's coach Gavin Evans, who has been supervising the training, says the players are well prepared to give a good account of themselves in Doha, irrespective of who they will face.

He said: "The beauty of it is you can go on believing you will beat anyone because some people will have trained a lot, some won't have trained as much and it's just to play every ball, fight for every ball and you've got every opportunity of beating any person who's in front of you.

"You don't know what their preparation has been – we've had great preparation, so we're confident and we've just got to take it to the opposition."

The competitions get under way on Sunday, with qualifying for the \$200,000 WTT Contender event, which runs through to March 6.

Focus then switches to the WTT Star Contender, which has a \$400,000 purse and runs from March 8-13, with the Olympic qualifier starting on March 14.

Pitchford, who is seeded into the main draw for both WTT events, said: "I feel like I'm in a better place than I was going into China. I'm playing well and working hard and feel like I can hit the ground running.

"Hopefully it's going to be like any normal tournament, though obviously there are restrictions in place. It might take a bit of time to get used to, but having played in China, I think I'm definitely at an advantage.

"I honestly feel like I'm in a really good place, I'm hitting the ball well and playing well. I'm confident and for me that's the main thing – if I'm confident and I'm going in like that and hitting the ball well, I believe I can beat anybody."

Ho has been the longest without competition, but said she was feeling the benefit of being able to train at the University, where she is also studying a medical degree.

The England No 1 said: "I've been really lucky to train here at David Ross, alongside studying as well. The set-up has been really good and I'm feeling good.

"It'll be tough, I haven't competed for a year but I've done lots of matchplay and things like that and I'll just have to go out there and see how it goes.

"I'm really excited to start competing again and even better that we're going out for three tournaments and I'm really excited to play in all of them."

Ho did have the setback of having to self-isolate after returning a positive covid test – she was asymptomatic and none of the other players or staff were affected.

Ho added: "I'm good, luckily I didn't get any symptoms. The hardest part was just mentally self-isolating and not being able to practise but I still got a lot of stuff done, so it was all right."

Drinkhall and Walker also feel in a good place to give a good account of themselves back in international competition.

Drinkhall said: "It's almost a year since we were in Qatar last March, which is probably the longest time for me since playing internationally that that's happened.

"Personally, I have confidence in what I can do and I know I can go on and perform, whether it's a year later or six months or one day, or whatever it is, I go on with a belief that I can win . . . I think that's a big thing that can help me in this situation.

"I've been training well when I've been coming up here and I've spent more time with my family than I would have normally, which is also a positive. Just managing going away from all those things is going to be the important thing."

Walker said: "There's probably a bit of excitement more than normal. I guess before, I kind of took it for granted a little bit with the amount of travel and the amount of tournaments and league matches that we played, but now I feel more excited to start this one again because obviously it's been a year since I played any tournaments. So I'm just excited to get out there and be back playing tournaments.

"We've all been able to practise together here and the conditions are really good for us. We're lucky we can practise still.

"It's about trying to focus in on getting prepared and getting my game ready as best I can for Qatar and that feels quite good at the minute."

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