



GB stars ready for Tokyo shot

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Four British players have Tokyo in their sights at the World Olympic Qualifying Tournament starting in Doha, Qatar, on Sunday.

Liam Pitchford, Paul Drinkhall, Tin-Tin Ho and Wales' Charlotte Carey will represent Great Britain, with four men's singles places and five women's singles places at the Tokyo Olympics to be decided.

The three English players have prepared by competing at two WTT tournaments at the same venue, with mixed results, but all are relishing being back on the international stage and ready to give it their all to secure that spot at the delayed Olympics.

If the players do not make it through in Doha, there is another chance at the European Olympic Qualifying Tournament in Portugal next month.

Pitchford, whose preparations have been disrupted by an injury to his right thumb which meant he was playing in varying degrees of pain and had to rest for periods when he could have been practising, will be top seed in the men's tournament.

The Chesterfield man said: "There's still a bit of pain but there's a lot less than there was a few days ago.

"The first match I played (defeat to world No 144 Andreas Levenko at the WTT Contender event), I couldn't really play without feeling it and thinking about it, whereas the second, I could block it out."

That second match, against world No 29 Kristian Karlsson in the WTT Star Contender, saw a narrow defeat 13-11 in the fifth after both men had match points.

Pitchford said: "I played okay, I felt I was dominating in some parts of the match. I had a match point and could have done things a bit differently. But at the end of the day, I've not played enough matches recently and that's probably why I lost.

"The physio has told me to rest it, so I hadn't been practising as much and at points I wasn't quite confident in my game and a little bit stressed at times. If I'd played a few matches, I'd have been a lot more calm in some situations.

"It's frustrating to lose such a close match and frustrating because I could have won, even feeling not 100%."

However, Pitchford says he does feel his confidence coming back, despite far from ideal preparation which, as well as the injury, saw a trip to Japan for league matches and training called off.

"I think a lack of quality training affected my confidence a bit," he said. "We've been in Nottingham for the last three months and being able to practise every day there has been good, but not what I need to be doing to challenge the top guys.

"I know in the lead-up to an event, I need to be away for high-level practice against different styles, pushing me every day. But I don't want to complain, because it's a tough situation.

"It's been hard, but the lucky thing is we have been able to practise. And even being able to practise with different players here has given me a bit more confidence and I'm slowly getting back to where I want to be.

"The qualifying tournament is another chance to play matches and hopefully, I'll find the level I need and be in a better place thumb-wise as well.

"Obviously, I want to qualify and if I do the work in the training hall and get confidence from that, it's a big opportunity."

England No 1 Ho picked up a victory in her first match in the WTT Contender, but was not able to add to that.

She said: "The first two competitions were pretty tough but I've learned a lot from being here and it's been good to practise with the other players here.

"I'm feeling excited for the qualifiers. I think it will be very hard but I've done the best preparation I could and have been training a lot between the competitions here.

"I'll try my best and if I do manage to qualify, I would be incredibly happy because it's been a goal of mine since I was quite young. But right now I'm just focused on the journey."



Tin-Tin Ho competing in Doha (ITTF photo)

Drinkhall managed to get a couple of wins under his belt in the Star Contender – beating Andreas Levenko and Mizuki Oikawa before going out in the final qualifying round.

The victory over Austria's Levenko avenged a defeat in the first WTT competition and, in both matches, both players had match points.

Drinkhall said: "I'm feeling good – two competitions so far and though neither have gone to full plan, I feel like I'm playing well and have prepared well, and now I've got a couple of matches under my belt as well.

"Levenko is a good player and he played well but I felt I was almost the better player in many ways in that first match. But you've got to get over the line and do the right things at the right times and there were a couple of decisions I made when I was leading which allowed him back in, and he took his chance.

"I didn't think much was different in the second match but it was more 50-50, even though I ended up winning. He had a match point and it could have gone either way, but for me it was about not rushing when I was leading and taking that chance when I had it."



Paul Drinkhall in action in Doha (ITTF photo)

Having, like Pitchford, played at the London and Rio Olympics, Drinkhall is eyeing a place in his third Games and he added: "It's going to be very hard. There's a lot of good players and a lot of hungry players and everyone has been working to get into the best possible shape and to be ready for this tournament.

"There's a few players looking at it and thinking they can take one of the spots – and I'm definitely thinking I'm in that field. But you've got to take everything you've been doing in practice and fight to win."

Wales No 1 Carey is the one member of the squad who has not had the chance to compete in the WTT tournaments, though she has had a series of matches in the Portuguese League, where she plays for Azores-based club San Sebastian. She arrived in Doah on Tuesday and had to spend the first two days in isolation before being able to get into the practice hall.

She said: "I'm feeling good, I've been training quite well and played a few matches in Portugal, so I feel I'm ready for the competition to start. Isolation was fine – I was in a nice hotel room with a big balcony and there was plenty of space to do workouts.

"It's been good to get into the hall with the other players and be in a big arena. It feels kind of like starting over

and not knowing how it's going to be. I'm still finding my feet a little bit and finding out how everything is working with the covid regulations.

"It's going to be a bit different playing internationally – some of the matches in Portugal are not as high quality as the matches I would have had if I'd been playing internationally, but I'm looking forward to it.

"It's obviously going to be really tough and the main goal is to play as well as I can and enjoy it and try to cause a few upsets. It will be really difficult to cause a few upsets and qualify, but there's normally someone who qualifies unexpectedly, so why can't it be us?"



Charlotte Carey

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