



Seven athletes bid to seal Tokyo places

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Two-time Paralympian and NHS hero Kim Daybell, who has spent most of the past 15 months working as a doctor on the NHS frontline against the covid-19 pandemic, is one of seven British Para table tennis players who will be bidding to qualify for the Tokyo Paralympic Games when they compete in the World Qualification Tournament in Lasko, Slovenia this week (June 3-5).

Nine British players have already qualified for the Paralympic Games on their world ranking and this week's tournament is the final opportunity for the rest of the Performance Squad to earn a qualification spot.

This is the first time that a Para table tennis qualification tournament has been held for a Paralympic Games and with only one place available per class it will be 'winner-takes-all', creating a unique challenge for the athletes in their first tournament for more than a year due to the pandemic.

While his British team-mates have been training full time since last August, Daybell has only recently returned to training with the team at the English Institute of Sport in Sheffield and acknowledges that his preparation has been far from ideal.

"I'm not where I want to be right now so close to a big tournament," he admitted. "I'd like to have more hours of training under my belt, but you can't change the situation. I'm just pleased to be in a position where I can be there and play after the year that I've had; just to be there physically fit and with a chance of doing well is enough for me so I'm looking forward to it."

"It would mean the world to me to go to Tokyo and would offer some closure after what has been a really difficult year, to have something positive at the end of it."

Daybell's team partner Ashley Facey Thompson is also hoping to book his place at what would be his second Paralympic Games and is looking forward to competing again after such a long period of training.

"I thought the whole team would struggle with no competitions but as a team we've trained really well," he said. "I'm excited to play a tournament for the first time in over a year. I don't feel nervous, I'm going to go out there

and have fun.

"I feel that I have improved a lot mentally, physically and in life and I'm really happy with my progress over the last year. It will be a difficult tournament – you have to win it to get to the Games and that is hard but nothing changes; it is still table tennis, and you still have to win."

Primary school teacher Sue Gilroy will be trying to qualify for her sixth Paralympic Games and came heartbreakingly close to winning her first Paralympic medal in 2016, losing her bronze medal match 3-2.

"Training has been going well despite losing two training venues that I normally use due to covid restrictions," she said. "Obviously, it's going to be really challenging this week with the strict guidelines and the fact that we haven't competed for well over a year, but I am as ready as I can be. All I can do now is go out there and try to play the best I can and hopefully that will be enough to secure my place in Tokyo, which is something I have been working towards for the last five years."

Liverpool's Jack Hunter Spivey made his Paralympic debut in Rio 2016 and just missed out on automatic qualification for Tokyo on his world ranking of eight. The 26-year-old is first alternate for men's class 5 in Tokyo but will be hoping to secure his place this week.

"I think that I've definitely improved and have used the lockdown to my advantage," he said. "I feel like a different player but I don't know what my opponents have been doing so it is a strange situation as we haven't been able to gauge our level against other people. But this is the best prepared I've ever been for a tournament."

"Qualifying for Tokyo would mean everything. My life is about being a Paralympian, being the best in the world and winning medals for my country so to put on that ParalympicsGB shirt again would be an absolute honour and I can't wait to see if I can do it."

The British athletes spent four months at home during the initial lockdown last year when the EIS was closed and 22-year-old Billy Shilton, who is hoping to qualify for his first Paralympics after experiencing Rio as part of the Paralympic Inspiration Programme, paid tribute to the work done by the coaches during that period when they were unable to train.

"Since the start of the pandemic the coaches have been amazing," he said, "organising online gym sessions and shadow play sessions – and they made the transition back to training really easy so I'm really thankful for that."

"I think the last year has been a good opportunity to really knuckle down and focus on the things I'm not so good at, so I feel a lot more confident in myself and I'm looking forward to it. It would mean everything to get to Tokyo. Playing in a Paralympic Games has been a dream of mine since I started playing table tennis so it would be amazing to be there."

Fliss Pickard won bronze in women's class 6 at the World Championships in 2018 and admits that the pandemic has given her a new perspective on life and table tennis which she hopes will stand her in good stead in Slovenia.

"I'm excited to just go out there and compete," she said. "I think I've done everything I possibly can and I'm the best prepared I possibly can be so I'm ready to go. I worked really hard during lockdown and got my head down and made huge improvements in my game, not just physically but mentally as well. It would mean the world to me to go to Tokyo; I've worked so hard and to finally earn my spot and get on the plane with the team would be fantastic."

Like Pickard and Shilton, Martin Perry is also hoping to make his Paralympic debut in Tokyo. The 27-year-old Scotsman set up a crowd-funding page to enable him to compete in additional tournaments during the original qualification period and is excited to have the opportunity to secure his place in men's class 6.

"If I do get across the line and I can call myself a Paralympian then that is everything," he admitted. "That is why we do what we do. I've been so fortunate with the amount of support I've had on and off the table from people I've known all my life and from people I've never met and may never meet, it would be such an honour to repay that by getting to the Paralympic Games."

"I need to go and perform to my best so there is that pressure, but it is really exciting. I think I'll be crying come Saturday because win or lose it's going to mean so much to me and I'll be an emotional wreck, but hopefully it's happy tears."

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