



## Awesome foursome guaranteed medals in Tokyo

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On a memorable day for the ParalympicsGB table tennis team four players including men's class 7 defending champion Will Bayley reached the semi-finals in their respective singles events to guarantee themselves at least a bronze medal.

Tom Matthews (men's class 1), Jack Hunter-Spivey (men's class 5) and Paul Karabardak (men's class 6) all came through their quarter-finals while Aaron McKibbin, Billy Shilton and Ross Wilson all won their last 16 matches in men's class 8 and will contest their quarter-finals tomorrow morning.

You can watch live table tennis action from Tokyo on the [Channel 4 website](#). Paralympic coverage is also on Channel 4 and More4.

### Men's class 1

Matthews and Borgato were meeting for the third time in consecutive major championships, the Welshman having won in five sets at the World Championships in 2018 and the Europeans in 2019 although the Italian led their head-to-head 9-6.

Two nets for the Italian in the first three points helped him to establish a 5-2 lead but Matthews levelled at 5-5 and the pair then traded points until a backhand winner at 9-9 gave Matthews game point and he clinched the game with a perfectly timed shot known as a tetraloop, where the ball bounces just over the net and then spins back making it impossible to return.

Borgato is a world team gold medallist and a former world and European bronze medallist and he used all his experience to hit back straight away, establishing a 9-3 lead in the second game. Although Matthews battled his way back to level at 10-10 the Italian clinched the game 12-10 on his third game point.

Matthews responded well to take the third game 11-4 and was 5-2 up in the fourth when the Italian coach called

a timeout. Matthews kept his composure and at 10-6 had four match points. One by one they slipped away and at 10-11 Borgato had a point to level at 2-2 but the Welshman was not to be denied and he finally clinched the game 14-12 on his sixth match point and the match 3-1.

"I'm ecstatic," said an emotional Matthews. "I really can't put it into words to be honest. To come to my first Paralympic Games and medal – if you had told me that before I came here – I literally thought I only wanted to win a match and here I am a Paralympic medallist and I can't believe it."

"When I lost the four match points it was almost like, 'Oh God, here we go' but I held my nerve and as I said yesterday Andy Hill (psychologist) has done an amazing job with me and my coach Neil Robinson in the corner has done a great job by slowing me down and we got through so I'm really happy with that."

Although assured of at least a bronze medal Matthews is not intending to rest on his laurels.

"I want to change the colour," he said. "We'll go for the semis now and see what happens but I'm going to fight all the way and try to get to the final and become Paralympic champion."

Men's class 5



Jack Hunter-Spivey reacts to reaching the semi-finals (ITTF photo)

Hunter-Spivey took on his friend and regular team partner Tommy Urhaug, the London 2012 Paralympic champion and world No 3 from Norway. The 26-year-old from Liverpool fought back superbly after losing the first game and facing game points in the second to take it 13-11 and then led 2-1 after taking the third 11-9. But Urhaug is a former world No 1 and world champion and took the fourth 12-10 to take the match into a decider.

Hunter-Spivey has had some heart-breaking losses in major championship quarter-finals and when Urhaug saved two match points to level at 10-10 he held his nerve superbly to take the game 12-10 and the match 3-2.

"It doesn't feel real," said a very emotional Hunter-Spivey. "Going into this match I felt nervous. Tommy is the guy I'd idolised when I was a kid, the guy I watched YouTube videos of and the guy I wanted to be and he's one of my best friends. But I just knew I've worked so hard for this; I've been through a hell of a lot on and off the table and

it's paid off. I only wanted to be the kid who wasn't watching the TV but was on the TV and now I'm a Paralympic medallist. It doesn't feel real.

"I was down in every set but I just kept on fighting and kept on believing in myself. I've been through such a journey and it is quite a good metaphor for life I suppose – being down and coming back and prevailing and I just want to say if anyone is out there and struggling it does get better I promise – I've just won a Paralympic medal.

"Going 2-1 up and losing deuce in the fourth was tough but Rushy (coach Andrew Rushton) did an incredible job in the corner. He got me focused and we managed to go again and it wasn't a chance missed it was another chance to take a medal so we managed to do it now and I'm so proud of myself."

Like Matthews, Hunter-Spivey is not content with just a medal.

"Absolutely not," he said. "I'm going all the way. I really think I can take this gold. It sounds so strange coming out of my mouth but I don't think anyone realises how much hard work I've done in lockdown. Having a table in my living room – training on it, going underneath it to do my press-ups, eating my dinner off it.

"Table tennis has been my whole life for 16 years and my whole family's life as well and this medal isn't just for me it is for everyone back home and everyone who has supported me."

Men's class 6

Karabardak made his international debut 20 years ago and although he has won world and European medals a Paralympic medal had always eluded him. He faced the world bronze medallist Hong Kyu Park from Korea in his quarter final and at 2-0, 9-6 he appeared to be on course for a 3-0 win. But the last point is always the hardest to win and so it proved as Park saved six match points in a nail-biting third game to take it 18-16 and another in the fourth to win it 13-11.

In the deciding set the Welshman raced into a 8-1 lead and although Park kept fighting Karabardak clinched the game 11-3 and the match 3-2.

"I can't put it into words," said Karabardak. "I've waited a long time for this – I've waited 20 years and you don't know whether it is going to come. But you keep trying your hardest and you suffer setback after setback and bad loss after bad loss and you think 'it's never going to happen for me'. It meant so much to me and I think that is why I couldn't put him away and let him back in. Even at 9-2 up in the fifth I still didn't quite believe that I could win.

"I was thinking 'just go away, just give up, I've got you beat' but credit to him (Park) he didn't let me win and that is real Paralympic spirit that he showed that he didn't let me win. He made me work as hard as I've ever had to work for any match in my life so huge credit to him and I'm over the moon to have won and to be in the semis now.

"I definitely want more than bronze. It's not so much the way I'm playing it is being relaxed and enjoying it more. I think coming through lockdown massively helped with that as I realised how much I missed table tennis.

"When I came back and I could play again I realised how much I love the sport so I think that has been a massive contribution to my enjoyment because you don't know what you've got until you can't do it anymore. It showed me how much table tennis has meant to me and how much it has given me."

Men's class 7





Will Bayley on his way to victory (ITTF photo)

Bayley had to wait until the last session of the evening to play his quarter-final and faced a new opponent in the 49-year-old German Bjoern Schnake, who has had a meteoric rise up the world rankings since making his international debut in 2019, winning the Costa Brava Spanish Open in 2020 and the Czech Open last month.

Schnake was clearly not overawed by the occasion or his opponent and having led 8-5 in the first Bayley had to work hard to win it 13-11. He took the second 11-8 and survived a mini-crisis in the third when the German came back from 7-2 down to level at 9-9 before Bayley secured the game 11-9 and the match 3-0.

"He's a good player," said Bayley, "and although he is new to Para table tennis he's played a lot of German league and it's a good level. He is also a very difficult style – he plays slow balls, he plays fast balls – he tries to change the pace and he is always adapting in the game. Right at the end there he was still trying to change things and that is why he is so difficult to play so it's good to get that match out of the way.

"I feel really happy with the way I am playing. I always knew before this tournament I was playing the best of my career and I've got full confidence in my ability but table tennis is so hard at this level. You don't know how you are going to get on but I'm in there and the next match is a semi-final so let's just go.

"It's massive to win another medal. I live for these moments and to get another Paralympic medal – that's five Paralympic medals and I never would have dreamed of getting five. I'm getting a bit older so every one I cherish a bit more. This one means as much if not more than any of the others because of the injury and everything that has happened these last few years so it's good to be back winning medals."

#### Men's class 8

McKibbin celebrated his 30th birthday in style today with a gutsy 3-2 win over Linus Karlsson from Sweden, the world team gold medallist, Paralympic team silver medallist and former European medallist.

"He's a smart player – that is his strength," said McKibbin. "He's smart tactically and good at manipulating the game. I felt the whole match I was quite in control but when it was getting to the sticky stages I was just making unforced errors. I could see what he was going to do to me and I was just a bit too slow to react to it.

"In the third game I had a comfortable lead and I let that slip and then that's when it started to change and in the fourth game I said 'I just want to tone it down a bit, play a bit basic and get into the match' and in the fifth set I felt that I could pull through.

"I heard Jack win and Tom win and it was really inspiring to see the young boys get some medals and I thought 'I don't want to be the one that's out now'. I'm glad I've got another day to fight; I play the world No 1 tomorrow and I really fancy my chances."

Shilton put up a superb performance to come from 2-1 down to beat the hugely experienced former world No 1 and Rio 2016 bronze medallist Piotr Grudzien from Poland 3-2.

"It is hard to say how much it means in words," said Shilton. "I'm so happy with the way I performed the whole match. I was very nervous going into it as he is such an experienced player in these sort of matches and I knew it was going to be very difficult. I knew I had to stick to my game and be as positive as I could and it was enough today so I'm really happy to have won that game.

"I think now it is important not to get too ahead of myself. It was a really good win and I'm really happy but tomorrow I've got a quarter-final and I'll fight for a medal. So I'm very happy but all focus is on tomorrow now."

Wilson faced another former world No 1 and Paralympic medallist in Emil Andersson, the Swedish player who beat him in both London and Rio. Wilson had won their previous two matches and despite Andersson rallying in the third from 9-6 down to level at 10-10 the world champion kept his composure to take the game 15-13 and the match 3-0.

"I'm just enjoying it so much," said a delighted Wilson. "Win or lose at the moment I'm just enjoying myself – I'm having the most fun you can have and I can't explain it really. He's a fantastic player and we have had so many battles. We've had so many matches that have gone either way over the years and I knew it was going to be a close one today.

"I think a 3-0 scoreline doesn't really reflect how close it really was. He's a fantastic player and I've got a lot of respect for him. I think he is a really good person and I really enjoy our matches.

"I think you still get a little bit shaky at those close points and some of the time you kind of faze out a little bit and then kind of zone back in and that is quite hard to deal with from lack of matches but I'm definitely playing myself into the competition.

"But today is Jack's and Tom's day. I'm so proud of them; they've done themselves so proud, they've done everyone proud in the team and I think they have done incredibly well. I think today is about them and I loved seeing them do well."

#### Men's class 9

Joshua Stacey was bitterly disappointed to lose a five-set thriller to the Russian world silver medallist Iurii Nozdrunov, who used all his experience to recover from 2-1 down and eventually took the match 11-7 in the deciding game.

"I don't really know what words to use," said Stacey. "He made me play how he wanted to and forced his skill set on mine and came out on top at the end of the match. It's not a bad result for my first Games and it's a learning experience.

"I've played everyone here year in, year out from 2017 so I've always felt I can compete and I think I've shown it here but I'm still disappointed. It's an experience I'll take on board and make sure I keep it in the back of my head for when these times come back around."

Stacey will be back in the men's class 9-10 team event with Ashley Facey Thompson.

"We definitely have a chance in team," he said. "I think I'll have my disappointment evening and trudge through all the emotions in my head and tomorrow I'll be raring to go for the team event."

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