



Emotional Bayley to go for gold again

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Defending champion Will Bayley came through a nail-biting semi-final today to reach his third consecutive Paralympic singles final and will go for gold again tomorrow in men's class 7 against the world No 1 from China Yan Shuo.

Tom Matthews (men's class 1), Jack Hunter-Spivey (men's class 5) and Paul Karabardak (men's class 6) lost their semi-finals but will all take well-deserved bronze medals while there was also disappointment for Aaron McKibbin, Billy Shilton and Ross Wilson who all lost their quarter-finals in men's class 8.

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Men's class 7

Bayley came into today's match with a 10-2 win/loss record against world No 4 Keli Liao which included wins in both London 2012 and Rio 2016. At 2-0 and 7-5 he looked to be in control of the match, but the Chinese coach called a timeout and it worked as Liao reeled off the next six points to take the game 11-7.

From that point the momentum swung and Liao again came back from 8-5 down to take the fourth 11-8. Bayley led 8-6 in the decider but faced a match point at 9-10 before taking the game 12-10 and the match 3-2.

An emotional Bayley let out a roar and ran straight to celebrate with his team-mates before hugging coach Greg Baker.

"It was pure relief," he admitted, "and surprise as well because there were thoughts going through my mind at some points in that match that I had thrown it away. It is impossible to not have those thoughts but I tried to get my focus back during those times.

"I showed some real guts at the end and I played some really big points because Keli didn't stop. I was expecting him to stop playing so well but he didn't – after two sets down he just blew me away so it was difficult.

“He’s improved so much; he is not the same player I played in Rio, he is a better player now. I knew that before I played him as I’ve seen him in training here. He is a world class player and I knew I was going to have to be at my best. I managed to win but it was tough.”

To reach three consecutive Paralympic finals is a superb achievement and win or lose tomorrow Bayley can be incredibly proud.

“I used to laugh at Jochen Wollmert because in his career he’s got to five Paralympic finals and that still seems impossible so to get to three is amazing. I know that I might never get this chance again so I need to really enjoy tomorrow. I know this is my moment to really enjoy it and that’s what I am going to try and do.”



Will Bayley hugs coach Greg Baker (ITTF photo)

Men’s class 1

Matthews’ opponent in his semi-final was the world champion Hyeon Uk Kim and it was the Korean who made the better start, taking the first game 11-7. Matthews kept his composure well when the second game was halted for several minutes for a discussion between the umpire and a technical official and he had a game point at 10-9 but a service error allowed Kim to draw level and he went on to clinch the game 12-10. Matthews kept fighting and came back from 9-5 down to level at 9-9 in the third but Kim used all his experience to take the game 11-9 and the match 3-0.

“I feel I played well,” said the 29-year-old from Cwmbach. “Credit to him, he played really well and he came out on top today but I’ll be back. We’ve got the World Championships next year and I’m sure I’ll see him again there and hopefully I can come out on top next time.

“It’s my first Games so I’ve got to be proud of coming home with a medal – I didn’t think I’d do that. As I said yesterday, I thought I was only going to win a match but here I am a Paralympic medallist in my first Games.

“It’s been a massive experience – the team has been amazing and I’ve been so proud to be part of ParalympicsGB. I’ve loved these Games. The people in Tokyo have been very welcoming and friendly and I’d love to come back here and visit one day.

"I'd like to say thank you to the UK Lottery players again – without them we wouldn't be able to do this and achieve the medals that we have.

"This has given me massive motivation. I can't wait to get back to training. I'll have a bit of time off now, have a bit of a break to reflect and come back stronger."



Tom Matthews in his semi-final (photo by imagecomms)

Men's class 5

Hunter-Spivey had memorably beaten the 2014 world champion Valentin Baus when the German was defending his title in 2018 but he has never played a major semi-final before and the greater experience of the Rio 2016 silver medallist and European champion proved decisive today.

He took the first game 11-7 and although Hunter-Spivey fought back admirably from 5-1 down in the second to lead 10-8 Baus was able to edge the game 12-10. Despite shouts of 'fight!' and 'come on!' the 26-year-old from Liverpool could not reproduce the heroics of the last two days and Baus completed a 3-0 win 11-7 in the third.

To his credit Hunter-Spivey refused to make any excuses. "I don't think it was a match too far today," he said. "I felt going in that I could win the match.

"My level is higher than it has ever been and it's uncharted territory for me here but Baus played unreal. He's one of the best players in the world and I can look back and say I'm one of the best players in the world now and that is such a strange feeling.

"Yesterday was a big win but I had a big win in the group then another win so I definitely have it in the locker to do that. I just think we didn't quite get it right on the day but he was better than me.



Jack Hunter-Spivey (photo by imagecomms)

"It hasn't really sunk in (that I've won a Paralympic medal). I think when I get the medal round my neck on the podium it will sink in. The support I have received back home is absolutely incredible; my phone has been going off and it felt like I had 10,000 people behind me watching at home. Once I get the medal and get home I can celebrate and feel good. At the moment it doesn't feel real but once I get the medal round my neck it will be perfect.

"This gives me all the motivation. I've worked 16 years now to try and get to this point and I thought it was never going to happen. I was 'Mr Quarter Final' – I've lost in every major quarter final and now I've won one and got a medal and beat my absolute idol who is one of the best players in the world to do it.

"No-one can say I was given a medal. I've beaten the world number two and three on the way so yes it motivates me completely because I'm only 26. I've got a whole load of work in front of me but if I carry on like I am doing I can definitely dominate."

Men's class 6



Paul Karabardak in action in his semi-final (ITTF photo)

After such an emotional and physically demanding win yesterday it was perhaps inevitable that Karabardak would struggle to reproduce the same form today and he could never get in a blow in his semi-final against Ian Seidenfeld. The 20-year-old PanAmerican champion is the son of Mitchell Seidenfeld, men's class 8 Paralympic champion in 1992, and he was in impressive form today to take the match 3-0 (11-6 11-2 11-6).

"It was really difficult because I was tired today," admitted Karabardak, "but if you put that aside Ian played superbly and he deserved to win. Even if I was at my best and even if I was fresh I think I would have struggled to live with him the way he was playing today.

"He puts a lot of spin on the ball and he is very quick. He moves the ball from side to side which is hard when you struggle reacting like I do so it was the perfect tactic he played against me. I tried really hard to do different things but none of it worked."

Although disappointed to lose today the 35-year-old Welshman now has a Paralympic medal to add to his collection of world and European.

"It is fantastic to have got that bronze medal," he said, "and it means everything to me. I thought it was slipping away so it is a dream for me because I have won a lot in my career and I've had some good wins and I've won World and European medals but it wouldn't have been the career I would have wanted without a Paralympic medal and now I've got one so I think it completes my career. Not that I'm saying it is over yet because I've still got a lot to give the sport and a lot more things to win."

Karabardak has the chance to add a second Paralympic medal as he will be reunited with his great friend Bayley in the men's 6-7 team event. The pair were regular team partners when Karabardak was a class 7 and won medals at world and European Championships.

"It's going to be amazing," he said. "For me Will is the greatest player I've ever seen pick up a bat and we're such good friends and we work really well together. Our doubles in training has gone about as good as it could have so I'm really excited to team up with Will again and try to do the business in team and get another medal."



Aaron McKibbin (ITTF photo)

McKibbin made a great start against the world No 1 Viktor Didukh, taking the first set 11-8, but the four-time European champion from Ukraine hit back to take the second 11-8 and the third 11-5. McKibbin kept fighting and led 10-4 in the fourth but could not close out the set to level the match, Didukh coming back to take it 13-11 and the match 3-1.

"I think that is the best I've played this tournament," said McKibbin. "My first three matches I won two and lost one but I didn't feel that I played well in any of them. The coaches kept telling me I was performing well but I just didn't feel it was there.

"In that game I felt my level was there; I felt on top of him and comfortable in the situation. I felt I was serving really well and I could sense he was nervous. But when it got past the first two or three shots which is usually where I feel stronger, that is where he was stronger than me today.

"It was obviously devastating to be 10-4 up and not finish that set but I don't feel I played nervous. I just think I made a few mistakes and as it got tighter towards the end maybe I tightened up a little bit. I've got to be proud of the performance but I really believed that I could take him today."

Shilton took on the London and Rio Paralympic champion from China Zhao Shuai and pushed the world No 2 all the way despite a 3-0 loss, saving four match points before going down 14-12 in the third. The 22-year-old from Stonehouse in Gloucestershire has shown his huge potential in his first Paralympics but was bitterly disappointed to miss out on a medal.

"Obviously it is difficult right now as emotions are high," he said. "I feel the level that I played in the match was high and I had chances in the first and the third to win the sets so probably in a few hours I'll be a bit happier with my performance but right now I'm devastated."



Billy Shilton (ITTF photo)

In addition to a lack of competition Wilson's preparation for these Games has been hampered by a knee injury and the 26-year-old world and Commonwealth champion could not find his true level today against the world No 4, Maksym Nikolenko.

The Paralympic, world and European team gold medallist from Ukraine took the first game 11-9 and although Wilson came back to take the second 11-9 Nikolenko edged a tense third game 15-13 and went on to take the fourth 11-7 and the match 3-1.

"Sometimes it goes your way and sometimes it doesn't," said a philosophical Wilson, "and today it didn't go my way. I didn't really play how I wanted to but he played well and did what he needed to do to get the win. I'd have loved a singles medal but it is not always there for you.

"I'm just proud of myself for getting out here and proud of myself for how far I've come to get to where I am now, not just as a player but as a person. I've really tried to develop myself over the last couple of years and I'm enjoying what I do much more now and for me that is the most important thing.

"If I'm enjoying it I'm playing better and today just wasn't my day. I've got no excuses – everyone's preparation has been hampered. Obviously, I'd loved to have had a better preparation and to not get the injury but I've played well in other matches here and that is just how it goes when you are not playing consistent matches.

"Sometimes you'll play well and sometimes you won't and today I just really struggled to stay in it and stay in the moment and that was my downfall, really."

McKibbin, Shilton and Wilson will now turn their attention to the men's class 8 team event that starts on August 31.

"We've got a fantastic opportunity in the team event," said McKibbin. "I'm glad we've got a couple of days off so we can get over this one first and regroup but we'll be ready for the team event. We can compete with the best, as we've shown."

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