



Daybell focused on Birmingham as he returns to table

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Doctor and two-time Paralympian Kim Daybell, who put his table tennis career on hold to work on the NHS frontline during the Covid-19 pandemic, returns to competitive action in the French Para Open next week with renewed purpose after his bid to compete in Tokyo ended in disappointment this summer.

The 29-year-old class 10 player from Sheffield had reached a career high of world No 5 in March 2019 and was due to start training full time for Tokyo when the pandemic hit. Instead, he chose to put his duty as a doctor before his personal sporting ambitions and returned to the Whittington Hospital in North London where he worked on Covid wards as a medical senior house officer.

As the only Paralympian in the world working as a doctor on the frontline he became an inspirational ambassador for Paralympic sport in the fight against the coronavirus. He was selected by Olympic and Paralympic worldwide partner P&G to feature in a new digital video series 'The Measure of Greatness', interviewed by media around the world and recognised by the Sports Journalists Association with the prestigious National Lottery Spirit of Sport award at the 71st SJA British Sports Awards in 2020.

With only a few weeks' preparation he reached the quarter-finals of the World Qualification Tournament in June but having missed out on automatic qualification his dream of competing in his third Paralympic Games was dashed when he was denied a wildcard to compete in Tokyo, something that he admits he found devastating after having contributed so much during the pandemic.

"Looking back on it now it is easier to see how I felt at the time," said Daybell. "When you are dealing with it, it is very intense and difficult, and it was a really hard period after everything else I had gone through. I was very down about it and felt as low as I have ever done in my sporting career. When you have given a lot of yourself to a cause and it hasn't worked out – and I had to sacrifice on a personal level going to Tokyo – I found that really hard.

"I'm starting to see things a bit more objectively now and understand why the decisions were made although I still can't say I agree with them. If I am being honest, I think Paralympic table tennis let me down and I think I was overlooked and didn't necessarily get the appreciation from them that I might have expected. But equally that is sport and you can't hold on to things forever; it is time to move on and push forward."

Although it was a while before Daybell felt mentally ready to pick up a bat again, he returned to the training hall a few weeks ago and is rediscovering his love for the game.

"Table tennis will always mean a lot to me," he said. "It has been such a big part of my life for so many years and it has given me a lot of real positives and I wouldn't like to let what happened tarnish or dictate my feelings towards it.

"My feelings are probably a bit more cautious now and maybe that is okay and that is how careers go. I've probably been very lucky – athletes suffer disappointments throughout their careers and if this is the only major one that I have had then maybe that is not such a bad thing, so I'm starting to get some perspective on it.

"Sport moves very quickly so it is on to the next thing now and I'd like to end my career on a good note. Wherever that is I'm not sure right now, but it didn't feel like this is the time for it to finish so for now I'll keep going forward."

Daybell is now focused on selection for next year's Commonwealth Games in Birmingham having taken silver for Team England on the Gold Coast in 2018.

"I had such a great experience in Australia," he said, "and playing in the final with Ross (Wilson) was awesome. The Commonwealth Games is a tangible short-term target for me to aim for and something I'll be focusing on in the next few months as selection gets closer.

"I'm working full time at the hospital again, but I get one day off a week to train. I'm trying not to jump in too quickly and just enjoy playing and get that love back of the sport again after a very difficult period. So far it has been going well so we'll see what happens."

Daybell will be one of 13 British athletes competing in the SQY French Para Open in Saint Quentin en Yvelines from November 9-11. The team also includes fellow Performance athletes Fliss Pickard, gold medallist in the Costa Brava Spanish Open last month, and Martin Perry, as well as eight Pathway athletes and self-funded athletes Scott Robertson and Simon Heaps. Four-time Paralympian Robertson is returning to international competition for the first time since London 2012.

The full list of British athletes competing in the French Para Open is:

Andrew Guy, 36 – Bovey Tracey (class 2)
Lee York, 32 – Wakefield (class 4)
Daniel Bullen, 23 – St Neots (class 5)
Simon Heaps, 66 – Milford on Sea (class 5)
Scott Robertson, 45 – Barnsley (class 5)
Martin Perry, 27 – Paisley/Dumbarton (class 6}
Fliss Pickard, 27 – Burnley (class 6)
Theo Bishop, 18 – Bury (class 7)
Alex Bland, 22 – Rotherham (class 7)
Grace Williams, 18 – Wrexham (class 8)
Craig Allen, 27 – Bromsgrove (class 9)
Kim Daybell, 29 – Sheffield/London (class 10)
Shae Thakker, 18 – High Wycombe/Sheffield (class 10)

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