

Table tennis at the Olympic Games

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China Mens Team L-R: Zhang Jike, Ma Lin, Xu Xin & Wang Hao

By Jeremy Wilson

Table tennis first entered the Olympic Games in 1988 but, such is its popularity across Asia, it has grown to the extent that it is the fifth most watched sport according to global television audiences.

In the first five Olympic games between 1988 and 2004, the table tennis events comprised of only men's and women's singles and doubles.

That changed in Beijing, with a team event replacing the doubles. The same format will be in place in London, with the tournament to be held at the ExCeL Exhibition Centre from 28 July until August 8.

There will be 172 athletes (86 men and 86 women) competing across the four events.

The Chinese will again be overwhelming favourites for each of the gold medals, with 2011 world champions Zhang Jike and Ding Ning among the favourites.



Women's World Champion: Ding Ning (CHN)

In the men's event, China's Ma Lin is the defending champion while Wang Hao, the current world number one, will be hoping to improve upon consecutive silver medals in Beijing and Athens. Germany's Timo Boll, who is the world number two, will head the European challenge but also look out for legends Jorgen Persson (Sweden), Jean-Michel Saive (Belgium) and Zoran Primorac (Croatia) who could all achieve the rare feat of competing at a seventh consecutive Olympics.

In the women's event, Gao Jun, who will be representing the USA at the age of 43, is worth following. She won her first World Championship while playing for China in 1991 and was also a silver medallist 20 years' ago at the Barcelona Olympics.

The qualification system will ensure that no single nation can win a clean sweep of the singles medals, as China did in Beijing. The qualification rules state that the top 28 men and top 28 women players in the world rankings will automatically qualify, but there is also the stipulation that one country cannot have more than two entrants in each singles event.

The players who are next highest in the list, proving their country does not already have two participants, will then fill the automatic positions. The remaining places will be allocated at various continental qualifying tournaments (in Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America, Oceania and Europe) that are taking place between June 2011 and April 2012. In May 2012, there is one final qualifying tournament with two places available in each of the men's and women's singles. There is also one invitational place for both the men's and women's singles at the discretion of the game's governing body, the International Table Tennis Federation.

The qualification for the team event will largely depend on the results of the 2012 World Team Championships. There will be 16 teams in both the men's and women's events, including Great Britain.

Indeed, as hosts, Great Britain will qualify at least six players automatically in the Olympics, with three players in each of the team events. One male and one female player are also guaranteed participation in the singles events. A second player could potentially also take part in the singles, subject either to their ranking or performance in one of the qualifying tournaments.



Englands Paul Drinkhall & Liam Pitchford

Paul Drinkhall, a triple European youth champion and Commonwealth Games bronze medallist, is the current British number one, while Kelly Sibley and Joanna Parker are the leading British women's players.

Despite its vast global popularity, it was a long and difficult struggle for table tennis to assume Olympic status. Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the 1931 World Championship in Budapest even record a discussion on how to get table tennis into the Olympics. It was previously felt that table tennis already had well established tournaments, including a World Championship and the English Open, which was once considered the equivalent of Wimbledon.

However, after further lobbying, it was agreed in 1981 to admit table tennis to the Olympic programme for 1988. Since then, it has provided some of the most watched and memorable moments of the entire Olympic Games. Sweden's Jan-Ove Waldner is generally regarded as the greatest player in table tennis history and was the men's champion in 1992 and silver medallist in 2000. He also memorably reached the semi-final at the age of 38 in Athens in 2004.

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The World's top table tennis players will be competing in the ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals at ExCeL, London on 24-27 November 2011.

For tickets and further information visit www.ticketmaster.co.uk or call 0844 844 0444

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