

Pitchford beats Smirnov (20)

Author: Paul Stimpson

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England's on-fire 18 year old Liam Pitchford struck another massive blow in the table tennis world with a superb 4-3 victory over world number 20 Alexey Smirnov.

The youngster's scalps keep racking up at the INTERSPORT European Championship in Gdnask-Sopot, Poland with his fourth victory over a top 100 ranked player.

He followed up his victories over Vladimir Samsonov (9) , Tomas Konecny (96) and Dmitrij Prokopcov (51) with another excellent performance to give his world ranking points a sensational boost ahead of the next release.

It is strange to talk about a victory over the Russian number one as his 'second-best career win' but that is the form that Liam is in.

The match with Smirnov was tight throughout and despite Liam's lowly ranking of (269) in the world he never let the Russian get up any head of steam.

In fact, in the first game, Pitchford had spurned a couple of game points to allow Smirnov to sneak home a tight 14-12 lead which, at the time, seemed important.

However, Pitchford ensured he forced his way back into the match by picking up the second game 11-9 and levelling the score 1-1. You might have thought that normal service was resumed when Smirnov coasted the third game 11-6 but, as with so often in this tournament, the England number two fired back and shocked the European number five with a brutal fourth game display that he raced through to win 11-5.

If that wasn't enough then Pitchford destroyed the Russian once more with a crushing performance to take the fifth game 11-4 and lead the match as a whole 3-2.

As he closed in on victory in the sixth game disaster struck when he missed a match point opportunity and gave Smirnov a way back in to level up 3-3 with a 12-10 game.

The tension was palpable but the youngster, who is due to play in the World Juniors next month, defied his age and lack of experience by leading the Russian throughout to reach a 10-8 lead and two more match points. However, the Russian star fought back and levelled at 10-10 which left everything to play for in a matter of points.

In the end Pitchford held his nerve and took the match 4-3 to complete an unbelievable victory.

With the Olympics in London this year coming up he is certainly sending message after message out to the selectors.

Pitchford (269) v Smirnov (RUS) (20) 4-3 (12-14, 11-9, 6-11, 11-5, 11-4, 10-12, 12-10)

By Russell Moore

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