Jeremy Wilson talks: Europe

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Europe's best hopes: Dmitrij Ovtcharov, Timo Boll and Vladimir Samsonov

Asia might have dominated the Olympics in table tennis since 1988, yet it can still be convincingly argued that the greatest individual player has been European.

Jan-Ove Waldner, the Swedish legend, is the only European gold medallist in Olympic history and, with no other men's player having won more than one singles' title, his overall record is probably the best.

Waldner reached his peak in Barcelona in 1992 when he was utterly dominant in winning the title while barely even dropping a leg throughout the tournament and then crushing France's Jean-Philippe Gatien 3-0 in the final. He then also reached the final in Sydney in 2000, only to be defeated by Kong Linghui. Yet perhaps his most stirring performance came in 2004 in Athens when, as he approached his 39th birthday, he beat Timo Boll to reach the semi-finals of the singles in front of the King of Sweden.

To understand Waldner's appeal, it is perhaps enough to simply know that he was better known in China during the 1990s than Bill Clinton, then the United States president.

Aside from Waldner, the only men's singles medallists from Europe have been Erik Lindh, who won bronze in 1988, Gatien in 1992 and Jorg Rosskopf who won bronze in 1996.

It is the European men who, once again, have the best chance of winning medals, especially the Germany team who lost in the final to China in Beijing in 2008. In the World Championships this year, three Germans reached the last 16 (Timo Boll, Dimitrij Ovtcharov and Bastain Steger), as well as Vladimir Samsonov.

However, only Boll survived this round, beating his countryman Ovtcharov.

Six of the eight quarter-finalists were Chinese, with Boll striking the one major blow for European table tennis in the quarter-finals by beating Chen Qi by four games to one.

Boll was then beaten 4-1 in the semi-final by Zhang Jike, the eventual winner.

In the women's singles, every remaining European player was wiped out in the round of 16.

The world rankings suggest that Boll and Samsonov, who are rated second and sixth respectively, will again provide the major European challenge in London.

Samsonov has twice reached the Olympic quarter-final and is a three-times European champion, while Boll has won the European Championships four times.

Ovtcharov and Steger are also in the world's 20. Other Europeans who will be worth following next year are the charismatic former European champion Jean-Michel Saive and Jorgen Persson, who incredibly remains the number one player in Sweden at the age of 45. Persson, who is still ranked 34th in the world, was the winner of the World Championship way back in 1991. Amazingly, Saive, Persson and Zoran Primorac will be competing in their seventh consecutive Olympics.

Primorac won a silver medal in the men's doubles at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. Realistically, the best chance of a European medal – and perhaps even a gold – will be the Germans in the men's team event.

In the women's events, Germany (Wu Jiaduo), Spain (Yanfei Shen) and Holland (Li Jiao) each have a player ranked in the top 20 in the world. Jiaduo, Shen and Jiao were all born in China but have moved to Europe and based themselves in countries where their chances of getting an Olympic place are that much higher. However the size of the task that awaits the European women is underlined by two facts. No European woman has won a

medal of any sort in the Olympics at table tennis and you also have to go back to 1955 for the last women's World Champion from Europe.

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