

Daunting prospects for England pair

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Against the odds: Paul Drinkhall

ENGLAND PLAYERS FACE DAUNTING SINGLES PROSPECTS @ ITTF PRO TOUR FINALS

As host nation nominees England international Paul Drinkhall (Cleveland) and Joanna Parker (Surrey) make their first singles appearances later this evening in the mens' and womens' last 16 at the ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals at the ExCel Arena, London, and both face daunting prospects.

First on at 7pm will be Paul Drinkhall, himself a former European Youth Champion and top world ranked junior with excellent touch and flair, but he meets the 2010 World Singles Champion, Wang Hao, 27 from China, who is the best exponent of the new penhold style backhand loop, combined with a ferocious forehand topspin loop and nasty serves. Wang, currently world ranked no.2, has won numerous singles (he was the World Cup winner in 2007, 2008 and 2010), doubles and team event titles for China, and he was the 2004 and 2008 Olympic men's singles silver medallist.

Then at 8pm, Joanna Parker will be pitting her renowned defensive skills against the relentless two wing, left-handed, shake-hands topspin attack of the World women's singles champion and no.1, Ding Ning (also of China). Ding, still only 21, is also the current Women's World Cup singles champion.

Earlier today, England's Darius Knight lost all his three group matches in the under 21 men's singles event, but he showed flashes of brilliance in his last singles match against the new Korean star, Kim Min Seok, world ranked no.28, winning the third game and going to deuce in the fifth before falling 2-11, 4-11, 11-7, 5-11, 10-12.

As Darius pointed out, although only invited to take part as first reserve yesterday, "I earned my place to be here, I was the only English player to qualify. All my opponents were ranked higher than me, and I would have been very happy to have won a match. But it is my fault for not being better prepared, and I do not get enough opportunities to train with players at this level. When I am playing and moving well and quicker, my backhand return of serve is better, but I need to work more to improve my backhand both on returning serve and to make it more solid in the rally. I am still confident of being selected for Britain in the London Olympics."

Ken Muhr

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