

Exit for Ma Lin in singles

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Ma Lin is the first Chinese player to drop out

OLYMPIC CHAMPION MA LIN EXITS ITTF PRO TOUR FINALS

The shock last night of the last 16 men's singles matches of the ITTF Pro Tour Finals being held at the ExCel Arena, London was the exit of the 2008 Olympic Champion Ma Lin (China) to Gao Ning of Singapore. Ma, 31, a four times winner of the World Cup and three times World Championships singles runner-up and still world ranked no.5, was the fourth seed for this event.

The first major exponent of the penhold backhand loop, his main weapon is ferocious forehand loops from all over the court, set up by vicious serves. His game demands incredible athleticism. By contrast, Gao Ning, 28 and world ranked 18 (highest ranking no.9), is an efficient and sharp two wing shakehands player.

The contrast in style proved to be decisive. Ma is still fantastically fit but now appears struggling to maintain the consistent level of mobility and explosive power that was his hallmark, whereas Gao's speed over the table meant that he had to expend less energy. Ma went into a three games to one lead, but thereafter Gao found his rhythm and became dominant while Ma, although ever dangerous, began to look tired. So it was Gao who ultimately triumphed 10-12, 11-9, 9-11, 5-11, 11-7, 11-7, 11-8 in what he said was his best ever win, while the Olympic Gold medallist Ma may well now be out of London 2012. No wonder he looked so dejected!

Another really close match was Chuang Chih-Yuan's (Taipei) defeat of the sixth seed and world no.7 Jun Mizutani (Japan), 4-11, 11-6, 11-8, 13-15, 11-8, 4-11, 11-8. England's Paul Drinkhall put up a good showing in losing 4-1 to the world no.2, Wang Hao (China), while Europe's only other hope Dimitrij Ovtcharov (Germany) fell by the same margin to the 2004 Olympic Champion Ryu Seung Min (Korea).

Rising China star Xu Xin, world ranked no.8 but the third seed here, destroyed the world's greatest defender Joo Se Hyuk (Korea), the world no. 10, 4-0. Elsewhere it was all China, as the world 1, Ma Long, three times previous world champion Wang Liqin, and current world champion Zhang Jike, all came comfortably through. There will be an intriguing clash between the latter two, Wang Liqin, currently world ranked no.6, and Zhang Jike, world ranked 3 and the second seed, in the quarter-finals.

Ken Muhr

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