

Liam Pitchford is table tennis Olympic Athlete of the Year

Author: Paul Stimpson

Posted On: December 21, 2011



Liam Pitchford has won the table tennis Olympic Athlete of the Year award for the second successive year.

The award was introduced in 2005 to mark the British Olympic Association's centenary year and the success of London being awarded the 2012 Games. Previous table tennis winners include Paul Drinkhall (twice) and Kelly Sibley in 2009.

After winning in 2010 Pitchford is joined in the 2011 awards by athletes such as Keri-Anne Payne (Aquatics), Mo Farah (Athletics) and Andy Murray (Tennis).

Pitchford's award success is no surprise this year after his astonishing progress over the last 12 months.

The 18-year-old's progress came in tandem with his training at German Bundesliga side TTF Liebherr Ochsenhausen – a European Champions League team including Portugal's Tiago Apolonia where Pitchford now applies his trade.

Pitchford acknowledges this has helped him greatly over the last year. He said: "I have been getting more different practice out in Germany. Next year I'm hoping to play quite a few league matches – I'll probably be away quite a lot."

He added: "Hopefully I'll get a bit more experience. Obviously playing better players helps but sometimes you need to play against a lower standard of player so you know you can play well against them."

His 2011 began with his world ranking at 269 but he began well at the English Open in January where he signaled his intent with a 4-3 victory over Austrian Stephen Fegerl after trailing 2-0 at one stage.

Things got better in March for the star from Derbyshire when he became the Under-21s National Champion after beating Drinkhall 3-1 in the final in Sheffield. During the tournament he also reached the doubles final with Drinkhall and the semi-final of the mens' singles.

He showed this form again in July when he helped the Junior Boys team to the semi-finals of the European Youth Championships in Russia before they lost to the host nation, while he also reached the quarter-finals of the singles event.

However, despite all this he was still ranked 275 in the world and second in England in the August rankings – and then one tournament changed everything.

In October he hit the headlines with victories over Vladimir Samsonov (9), Alexey Smirnov (20) and Dmitriy Prokopov (51) among other scalps, which catapulted the teenager into the limelight at the European Championships in Poland.

Pitchford said his victory over Samsonov didn't feel any different or special despite the incredible result: "To be honest I didn't feel that I was playing that well. It was my first game of the tournament and I didn't feel amazing."

However, he knows this experience can help him next year with the added confidence he has grown. He said: "I'm hoping to do as well as I can in all the tournaments I can play in and hopefully qualify for the Olympics. I have proved I can beat the top 20 players if I play well so I don't see why not."

He followed his success in Poland with more in Bahrain when he reached the quarter-finals of the World Junior

Championships. He beat Chinese player Jiaji Wu 4-2 en-route while also reaching the quarter-finals of the mixed doubles with his partner Petrisa Solja.

His run of excellent results propelled him up 104 places in the world to 171st in the December rankings as well as becoming the new English number one and the world number 14 Under-18 player.

What lies ahead for the youngster in 2012 is anyone's guess but, we can expect more fireworks from this prestigious talent in the coming year and perhaps a shock or two if he is selected for the Olympic Games in the summer.

To see the full list of BOA Athlete of the Year winners [click here](#).

By Russell Moore

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