

Drinkhall wins fourth singles title

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Paul Drinkhall beat Liam Pitchford 4-1 to successfully defend his title and earn his fourth men's singles crown at the English National Table Tennis Championships at Ponds Forge, Sheffield.

Both players came in to the match without a title to their name in this year's competition, something that for the last two years they have both achieved so the pressure was high.

The early exchanges showed the tension and were full of mistakes as both players edged nervously and tentatively into position. When Drinkhall smashed a forehand home for 3-3 the play began to open up with Pitchford in particular finding good early rhythm while Drinkhall struggled with the net.

From 3-3 Pitchford won four straight points only to see Drinkhall retaliate with two of his own. However, the English number one took control in the rest of the first game as Drinkhall's overshot forehand saw the first game go to the Derbyshire player 11-7.

The second game started with an excellent procession of Drinkhall's forehand against Pitchford's backhand – both players possessing the strongest respective shot in the English game at present. It was Drinkhall who worked his forehand to the advantage as he shot 5-2 ahead with an almighty cross-table drive.

Drinkhall then turned up another gear to fire a huge backhand down the line – Pitchford's speciality, to lead 7-3. The Rotherham man's fighting spirit saw him seal the game 11-4 and level the match – whilst in the same action, sending a message out to the English number one.

The third game turned out to be another tight affair like the beginning of the match with both players knowing how important a lead might be. With Pitchford's backhand not pushing Drinkhall far enough back, the 22-year-old was able to attack with his own brand of powerful forehands that are unequalled in English table tennis.

This allowed Drinkhall to break free from 8-6 to take the game 11-6 by forcing Pitchford to search for points, and therefore, create mistakes.

This continued at the start of the fourth game with Pitchford forced to call a time-out at 4-0 down. The next point saw the youngster hit long, this caused him to turn to the heavens with a rueful smile and conduct a quick chat with himself in order to find some composure.

It worked. The English number one claimed the next three points to drag himself back into contention. However, after that Pitchford failed to find his form, instead frequently finding the net as Drinkhall raced into a 3-1 lead with a comfortable 11-3 game.

In the fourth it was Drinkhall once more who gave Pitchford no time to settle as his barrage of forehand bombs continued to edge himself closer and closer to the title. At 7-1 up his forehands were so powerful and so consistent it was tough for Pitchford to get back into rallies and when an awkward spin gave Drinkhall an 8-2 lead you sensed that the game was over.

Drinkhall duly applied the finish with Pitchford going long on match-point to give the English number two his fourth men's singles title and enable him to successfully defend his title from 2011. Pitchford again must go home without the men's singles title and this year in particular, he must return home completely empty-handed.

Drinkhall bt Pitchford 4-1 (7-11, 11-4, 11-6, 11-3, 11-3)

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