

England's men top Group H at WTTTC

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Andrew Baggaley scored a crucial win over Egyptian no 1 Ahmed Ali Saleh

By Russell Moore

England's men virtually sealed their top place in Group H with a terrific 3-1 victory over a tough Egypt side.

England will now be seeded for the knock-out stages alongside Brazil, Romania and Ukraine. Two of these sides will now be favourites for promotion to the Championship Division although there are still 12 teams in contention.

England's match started in a tense fashion with the Egyptian side unhappy that the umpire kept faulting Omar Assar for his serves. With tensions so high it was important his opponent, youngster Liam Pitchford, stayed in control, which he did – taking a crucial opening game 13-11.

More close fought games were to follow but fortunately both resulting in Pitchford wins, ensuring England took a 1-0 lead after the opening fixture. Assar's anger at the umpire's decisions saw him refuse to shake hands with Pitchford after the match.

The drama had only just begun though as next up was Paul Drinkhall against Lasin El-Sayed. The National Champion took the lead twice in the match to lead 2-1 but was forced into a decider when El-Sayed won the fourth game 11-6.

El-Sayed then led the fifth from start to finish but with never more than a couple of points in it at any stage. Unfortunately for England, he held his nerve and won 11-9 to level the scores for the Egyptians and raise the pressure once more.

That brought the arrival of the crucial third match. Each player knew they would only have one game to play but how often does it prove important? It saw Andrew Baggaley play Ahmed Ali Saleh. Both players were the highest ranked players in their country so determination was key.

Baggaley, it proved, had it in abundance.

The Milton Keynes star fought his way to a dramatic and tight first game 12-10 which set the tone for his passionate performance. With pure grit he continued to keep himself ahead of the Egyptian number 1 as Baggaley went 2-0 ahead with an 11-8 second game.

His victory was sealed in straight games with another 11-8 win, leaving it to his team-mates to secure the one more win required for victory, and a top seeding in the knock-out rounds.

Next up was Drinkhall against Assar – a repeat of the exhibition match they played at the ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals – one which Assar won.

Assar's powerful presence at the table (dwarfing even Drinkhall) led him to take the first game. However, despite Assar's size, Drinkhall replied in kind with his barrage of forehands that saw him so impressively win the English

title earlier in the month. This eventually led him to turn the match around and push 2-1 ahead.

But, back came Assar once more to level the match 2-2 with a pulsating 13-11 game, leaving everything on the fifth game. This time Drinkhall made no mistakes and avenged his defeat at ExCeL by winning the final game 11-6 and giving England the 3-1 win.



Paul Drinkhall sealing the win vs Omar Assar (Picture courtesy of Tristran Swan)

Tomorrow they will play Australia, who have also qualified in the top three, but who should not be too troublesome for our team. Australia have relied heavily on their star William Henzell who has only lost once so far.

The England women's team meanwhile will have to play off for the places 37-48 after defeat to Italy consigned them to the bottom half of Group E.

After defeat to India yesterday, the women needed to win both their last two matches but they were disadvantaged before the fixture with Kelly Sibley requiring physio and acupuncture on an injury to her hip.

This eventually cost her the first match against Lisa Ridolfi. Sibley went behind but led 2-1 after 11-2 and 11-4 game wins. However, in two close games in the fourth and fifth respectively, the injury took its toll as her loss of rhythm led her to fall to defeat.

Next up was Joanna Parker who played world number 98 Tan Wenling. It went to ranking with Parker narrowly losing a tight first game 11-9 before being steamrolled in the second 11-3. The third game saw Parker push Wenling close once more but the Italian just had too much in the end to take it 16-14.

The final match (as it proved) saw Jessica Dawson make her WTTTC debut in her 3-1 loss to Debora Vivarelli. Despite being blown away 11-2 in the first, she composed herself well to win the second 11-4. However, two more narrow defeats left England rueing from a 3-0 defeat.

They will now face Israel in the final group match before embarking on a campaign to keep themselves in Division Two in the knock-out stages.

Men

England 3-1 Egypt

L Pitchford bt Omar Assar (145) 3-0 (13-11, 11-9, 11-9)

Lashin El-Sayed (137) bt P Drinkhall 3-2 (8-11, 11-6, 7-11, 11-6, 11-9)

A Baggaley bt Ahmed Ali Saleh (121) 3-0 (12-10, 11-8, 11-8)

P Drinkhall bt Omar Assar 3-2 (9-11, 11-6, 11-4, 11-13, 11-6)

Women

England 0-3 Italy

Lisa Ridolfi (484) bt K Sibley 3-2 (11-8, 2-11, 4-11, 14-12, 12-10)

Tan Wenling (98) bt J Parker 3-0 (11-9, 11-3, 16-14)

Debora Vivarelli (348) bt J Dawson 3-1 (11-2, 4-11, 11-8, 11-9)



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