

European Qualifiers Day One Report

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So close but yet so far for Kelly Sibley in Luxembourg

Kelly Sibley almost pulled off the shock of the day to beat Swede Matilda Ekholm (50) only to let her nerves get the better of her at the crucial moment on the first day's play at the European Olympic Qualification Tournament.

Ranked a full 118 places lower than Ekholm, Sibley fought extremely well to level at 1-1 after she had been blown away 11-4 in the first game in Luxembourg.

She went behind once more in the third in a tight 12-10 game but showed her fighting spirit and exuberant skill to race back to level at 2-2 with an 11-4 game. This pattern continued in the next two games as Ekholm went ahead before Sibley leveled as the match moved into a decider.

The seventh game proved dramatic and ultimately heart-breaking for the girl from Leamington. She flew out of the blocks to lead 5-0 and that resulted in four match points at 10-6. However, Ekholm's experience shone through as Sibley's nerves frayed with the Swede winning five consecutive points to lead 11-10.

That was not the end of matters though with Sibley taking two more points to earn yet another match point at 12-11 only to see her dream shattered when she eventually went down 14-12.

Sibley can still progress providing she beats Tian Yuan (CRO, 139) tomorrow.

Her team-mate Na Liu must also win tomorrow after losing to world number 77 Natalia Partyka (POL) 4-0. Joanna Parker will play both her group matches tomorrow, again she needs to win one to progress.

Liam Pitchford was also close to pulling off a big shock in Luxembourg as the men's fixtures got underway in Luxembourg.

Pitchford's first match was against the second seed and world number 29, Robert Gardos. The Austrian had recently been on a superb run of form at the World Team Table Tennis Championships beating Chuang Chih-Yuan (11), Simon Gauzy (65) and Chen Chien-An (82) among others to help Austria finish fifth in Dortmund.

Gardos continued this form at the beginning of the first two games; leading the first 5-0 before winning it 11-8 and leading 5-1 in the second before a burst of six consecutive points from the Chesterfield youngster helped him to level at 1-1 with an 11-8 game.

The third game proved crucial to the match as Gardos led 10-8 before Pitchford saved both game points to set up one of his own at 11-10. The 18-year-old forced another at 12-11 but could not convert either as Gardos claimed it 14-12.

England's number 1 fought back once more to level at 2-2 but from then on Gardos' extra experience proved just too much as the Austrian won the last two games to justify his high seeding.

In the Derbyshire youngster's second match he overcame the lower ranked Petko Gabrovski from Bulgaria 4-2. Although he fell 1-0 behind, Pitchford fought back to lead 3-1. He won the third game 11-3 after winning eight consecutive points from 3-3, while in the fourth, he was 6-3 down before winning seven straight points to eventually take it 11-7.

Although Gabrovski pulled one game back in the fifth, Pitchford wrapped up the win in the sixth, meaning he will now face Josef Simoncik (131) for a place in the next round.

Team-mate Paul Drinkhall had no problems in beating lower ranked opponents 4-1 and 4-0 respectively. He

beat Jan Zibrat (SLO, 246) 4-1 in his first match before dispatching Gilles Michely, from host country Luxembourg 4-0 in typically dominant fashion.

He now plays Petr Korbel (CZE, 76) but even if he loses he only has to beat Yannick Vostes (BEL, 215) to qualify.

Andrew Baggaley meanwhile has a tougher game on his hands to qualify. Given a hard group with Jens Lundqvist (SWE, 43) and Quentin Robinot (FRA, 151) he beat Gencay Menge (TUR, 367) 4-2 before facing Lundqvist.

Baggaley led 2-0 at one stage but the world number 43 fought back to win 4-2 and give the Milton Keynes man an all-important match against Robinot tomorrow. Robinot beat both Lundqvist and Menge, despite his lowly ranking, the young Frenchman is very dangerous and Baggaley will have to play out of his skin to advance.

Full results and fixtures are listed below with hyperlinks to videos of the matches in question.

Results

Men

[Paul Drinkhall bt Jan Zibrat \(SLO, 246\) 4-1](#) (11-6, 11-9, 4-11, 11-7, 11-5)

Andrew Baggaley bt Gencay Menge (TUR, 367) 4-2 (11-7, 9-11, 11-5, 8-11, 13-11, 11-9)

[Robert Gardos \(AUT, 29\) bt Liam Pitchford 4-2](#) (11-8, 8-11, 14-12, 8-11, 11-3, 11-7)

Liam Pitchford bt Petko Gabrovski (BUL, 422) 4-2 (6-11, 11-7, 11-3, 11-7, 5-11, 11-6)

[Jens Lundqvist \(SWE, 43\) bt Andrew Baggaley 4-2](#) (8-11, 3-11, 11-4, 11-8, 11-4, 11-6)

Paul Drinkhall bt Gilles Michely (LUX, 461) 4-0 (11-7, 11-5, 11-7, 11-5)

Women

[Matilda Ekholm \(SWE, 50\) bt Kelly Sibley 4-3](#) (11-4, 7-11, 12-10, 4-11, 12-10, 12-14, 14-12)

Natalia Partyka (POL, 77) bt Na Liu 4-0 (11-3, 12-10, 11-8, 11-7)

Fixtures

Men

9:45 Paul Drinkhall vs Petr Korbel (CZE, 76)

12:00 Liam Pitchford vs Josef Simoncik (CZE, 131)

12:00 Andrew Baggaley vs Quentin Robinot (FRA, 151)

14:30 Paul Drinkhall vs Yannick Vostes (BEL, 215)

Women

9:00 Joanna Parker vs Petra Lovas (HUN, 73) (Laola1.tv streamed)

15:15 Kelly Sibley vs Tian Yuan (CRO, 139)

16:00 Joanna Parker vs Asya Kasabova (BUL, 274)

16:00 Liu Na vs Amelie Solja (AUT, 125)

By Russell Moore

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