

A Close Fight In Luxembourg

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The main stages of the European Olympic Qualification tournament were tough no matter who you were, with a wealth of top international players scattered across the groups competing for 11 male and 11 female Olympic spots.

Joanna Parker (136) was first to take to the court in quarter-finals of Group R, against Renata Strbikova (CZE, 84). The Czech proving to be too strong for the English defender in the end, defeating Parker 4-0.

Renata Strbikova (CZE) bt. Joanna Parker 11-4, 11-4, 11-6, 11-9

Parker does how ever live to fight another day, with spaces still up for grabs tomorrow.

Over to the men and we had two players still in contention, with Andrew Baggaley narrowly missing qualification the previous day.

Pitchford once again ignored the formbook to take out a higher ranked player, something he has become well known for this season. Ranked 63 places higher than Pitchford, Carlos Machado was not going to leave without a fight. After a close first end, Pitchford stepped up a gear to turn 1-0 down to a 4-1 victory and take a place in the semi-final.

Liam Pitchford (147) bt. Carlos Machado (ESP, 84) 8-11, 11-6, 11-4, 12-10, 11-8

With a recent surge back up the international rankings to 106th, Paul Drinkhall entered the tournament riding on the crest of a wave.

With only an 8 place ranking difference between Drinkhall and his Ukranian opponent Zhmudenko, it was hard to call where this quarter-final game would end up. In what has to be one of the closest matches of the tournament so far, which saw the fourth game going to 19-17, it was the Team GB Olympic hopeful that prevailed, securing a 4-3 victory with a triumphant 11-5 last end.

Paul Drinkhall (106) bt. Yaroslav Zhmudenko (UKR, 98) 12-10, 11-5, 11-13, 17-19, 11-6, 9-11, 11-5

Into the semi-finals and the task at hand got ever tougher, with the ranking gap increasing to 110 and 77 respectively for Pitchford and Drinkhall. Unfortunately the gaps proved to be too big, with Pitchford being the closest to securing a finals place by taking 2 ends from Freitas (POR, 37), whilst Drinkahll was knocked out by the Austrian Gardos (29) in a game that was closer than the 4-0 score line would lead you to believe.

Marcos Freitas (Por, 37) bt. Liam Pitchford 11-3, 9-11, 5-11, 11-8, 11-8, 11-6

Robert Gardos (AUT, 29) bt. Paul Drinkhall 11-5, 11-9, 11-8, 11-9

Gardos and Freitas went onto claim their places at the Olympics along with German Bastian Steger and Freitas' Portuguese teammate Joao Monteiro. In the women's groups the qualifiers were Irene Ivancan (GER), Natalia Partyka (POL), Xian Yi Fang (FRA) and Mie Skov (DEN).

Along with Parker, both Pitchford and Drinkhall are still in with a chance to qualify, with 7 male and female places still up for grabs. On Saturday Parker will begin with a match against Yuan Tian (CRO, 139) who beat Kelly Sibley in the preliminary stages.

Pitchford, meanwhile will play Daniel Kosiba (HUN, 212) while Drinkhall faces Bora Vang (TUR, 117).

09:45 Joanna Parker vs Yuan Tuan (CRO, 139)

10:30 Liam Pitchford vs Daniel Kosiba (HUN, 212)

11:15 Paul Drinkhall vs Bora Vang (TUR, 117)

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