

Olympic Squad Selected

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Partners Paul Drinkhall and Joanna Parker will represent Team GB in the table tennis singles at the 2012 London Olympic Games after the British Olympic Association and British Table Tennis Federation released their selection this morning.

Joining Drinkhall and Parker at ExCeL from July 28th – August 8th will be Andrew Baggaley, Liam Pitchford, Kelly Sibley and Na Liu who all survived the final cut to take their place at the 30th Olympiad when it hits our shores this summer.

Four-time National Champion Drinkhall, from Middlesbrough, narrowly missed out on automatic qualification for 2012 at both the European Olympic Qualifiers in Luxembourg and the World Olympic Qualifiers in Qatar. However, he has been given the all-important singles place ahead of his team-mates Baggaley and Pitchford.

The 22-year-old said: "It's a great achievement to be selected by the Great Britain team. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity to play in a home games. I can only guess how it will feel but it's a fantastic opportunity nonetheless. I started playing better in the last six to eight months, including winning the Nationals again, so I'm really excited.

I was slightly disappointed not to qualify by right but it wasn't meant to be. I'll keep working hard between now and the Games and since I got the wildcard I want to keep improving and prove I'm good enough to merit my place."

His partner Joanna Parker, from Chertsey in Surrey, will also take her place in the singles competition after her selection by the BTTF. Clearly delighted at finally hearing the selection she beamed: "In the last few months it has really intensified. We've known for four years now that it's coming so we've been battling. It's a relief to finally be picked and it's so exciting because it's real now and we're almost there. Everyone can only imagine what the Games will be like.

We will prepare the best we can and make the most of the opportunity – this is every athlete's dream."

Drinkhall and Parker's team-mates in London were also understandably excited about the prospect of representing Team GB in the summer after a long period of anxious anticipation.

Andrew Baggaley, the three-times National Champion from Buckinghamshire, said: "I'm very pleased to be playing in the Olympics, it's a massive honour – I'm over the moon. It's a really exciting time and a great one to be an athlete. It could've been at a time when I was too old or too young but the timing has been incredible as I'm at my peak now at 29 and my best years are yet to come.

Every match is a glory match for us and if we play to the best of our ability and all of us click on the day we can beat anybody."

Eighteen-year-old Liam Pitchford also hopes this chance will provide the team with an opportunity to showcase English table tennis: "I'm on top of the world. It's a fantastic opportunity to play in a home Games at only 18-years-old. Hopefully we can showcase English table tennis and where it's at.

We've had promising results in the last year or two so hopefully everyone's going to be on top form."

For Kelly Sibley, the English number 1 from Leamington Spa, being selected was a relief after battling a hip injury for the last few weeks.

She explained: "I'm really, really pleased. When I was waiting for the decision it was a long day – my phone kept

on going but it wasn't the selectors! Once I received the message I was really pleased. Every sports person will tell you it's their dream to play in a home Olympic Games and as a GB athlete you couldn't write it any better.

It's a fantastic opportunity to share this moment with all of your friends and family. With the extra support we'll get from the home crowd it will gee us up and intimidate our opponents – no-one is telling us we can't do it at the Olympic Games.

It's [the injury] not been great timing and I had to pull out of Qatar which was disappointing. But I've seen massive improvement in the last two weeks. I'll start full training on Tuesday. I've been doing really hard runs and bike sessions and I think I'll be fully fit, if not stronger, when the Games begin."

Finally for Northern Irish girl Na Liu, the only non-English representative in the squad, it's the realisation of a long-term ambition. She said: "It's brilliant, I'm really happy, my dream has come true. Since I was picked in the long list I knew I had a chance to represent Great Britain in 2012."

The players will now spend the next month in China at an intensive training camp designed to hone their skills ahead of the biggest event this summer. The camp in China will also include competing at the China Open (23-27th May) – one of the toughest competitions in the world.

Head coaches Jia Yi Liu and Alan Cooke are looking forward to beginning the final preparations after such a long selection process that began several years ago.

Men's Head Coach Liu said: "This [training camp in China] is good for their concentration, I think it this is good for the players. Everybody will want to take their chance because it is not easy in the Olympic Games. They will want to show people that they can do well."

Meanwhile Cooke, the current Women's Head Coach, explained: "I'm glad we are at the stage we are at now. The players can now really focus on these last couple of months after working so hard over the last three to four years so it's great to be in the last step.

They'll get some momentum from their selection and I'm sure they'll be excited when they get to London – the fever is building."

By Russell Moore

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