

Dynamic duo give GB dream start

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Paul Drinkhall and Joanna Parker both won their opening singles matches of the London 2012 Olympic Games as Team GB's table tennis squad got off to the perfect start at the ExCeL Arena.

The pair, who both missed the opening ceremony yesterday evening to concentrate on their performance, were justified in their decision-making as nerves were set aside with confident 4-0 victories to lift British hopes at the Games.

Parker's match against Brazilian Caroline Kumahara was the first match a British player had played in at an Olympic Games since Matthew Syed qualified for Sydney 2000 – 12 years ago.

Kumahara, who celebrated her 17th birthday on Friday, rushed through her preliminary tie against Djibouti's Yasmin Hassan Farah 4-0 (11-0, 11-2, 11-2, 11-4) to quickly set up her tie with British number 1 Parker.

The opening exchanges between the pair were nervy, as could only be expected on such a big occasion and in front of a capacity crowd in East London. But, once they reached 7-7 it was the world number 119, Parker, that strode forward with four successive points to calm her nerves and give both herself, and the crowd, a massive boost with a 1-0 lead.

The second game was even better for Parker as she raced both 5-0 and 9-2 ahead before sealing the game 11-5 to give herself some breathing space against her South American opponent.

The third game would prove to be the most pivotal and dramatic. An early net from Kumahara gave her a 2-0 lead before a Parker smash reduced the deficit but more good work from the Brazilian gave her a 4-1 cushion.

Parker fought back to lead 5-4 but Kumahara took five successive points as her attacks were well directed at the body and forced a change of momentum in the match – the first doubts began to creep in for the British hopeful. However, an immaculate comeback began with Parker showing all the British spirit we have come to expect from these Games and her forehand smash for 8-9 was full of bravery.

This forced her young opponent into a timeout, which would prove unsuccessful as three more consecutive points, culminating in a run of six in a row for Parker, meant that all doubt was expunged and she felt comfortable at 3-0 ahead.

The fourth game was almost a procession home as Parker led 3-0, 7-2 and finally 10-4 to set up six match points. When a net helped Kumahara to save the first, there was a groan from the partisan crowd, but they were revelling in delight on the next point as another brilliant cross-table forehand smash gave Parker the win, and a rapturous round of applause from all those in attendance.

Parker said: "It couldn't have been better. I was quite nervous in the beginning but I got off to good start. I wasn't expecting it (that much support). You don't usually get that many people for table tennis. I'm speechless at the response. I've never played in this type of atmosphere before. You feel like you are doing it for them as well."

She added: "I think I handled this one quite well. Now I've got to do it again tomorrow morning. The first match is about finding your feet. I'm on good form. I will stay focused on the right things. Now I play a girl I've never played before, and she's a very good player. With the crowd like this, anything can happen I guess."

Her next test in the second round will be Germany's Kristin Silbereisen, ranked 47 in the world. The pressure will be off the English girl for that game as the underdog but can she pull off the big shock we all hope for?

Drinkhall will be hoping the same after he reached round two with a hard-fought 4-0 win over Moroccan Open

finalist Ibrahim Al-Hasan from Kuwait.

He will face Yang Zi, the world number 54 from Singapore, who he faced in a pre-Olympic friendly. This was after winning a series of crucial points against the dogged Al-Hasan who eventually fell to Drinkhall's superior power.

Nerves played out the first game as both players used their forehands predominantly to minimise mistakes. The British number 1 saw a 6-3 lead disappear as the Kuwaiti number 1 showed how he was able to soak up the pressure and the power of the dominant Englishman's forehand.

Eventually from 9-8 down, Drinkhall sealed the crucial last three points to take an opening game 11-9 and calm his nerves. The second game started poorly with a 3-0 deficit for the 22-year-old from Loftus, but he found some rhythm to take a 10-8 lead.

For the only time in the match, Al-Hasan forfeited his blocking technique to provide a powerful counter-attack on two consecutive points to allow him to level at 10-10. However, Drinkhall forced him into a mistake on deuce before making Al-Hasan hit long on game point to open up a 2-0 lead.

If he thought he could rest then, he was proven wrong as the consistent Kuwaiti kept himself in the match with a 5-3 lead in the third game. Drinkhall's fight-back to 6-6 was halted when Al-Hasan received a massive fortunate edge for 6-7, but when Drinkhall produced an array of forehand and backhand power drives for 9-7 he showed his top gear for the first time in the match.

As with the previous two games, Al-Hasan kept it tight, but once more at game point, the Brit forced him to fire a backhand long and, in doing so, establish a commanding 3-0 lead.

Al-Hasan's resistance was finally broken and, with Drinkhall finding top gear, he raced through the fourth game 11-4, sealing it with a power forehand down the line to join his partner in the second round after a comprehensive 4-0 win.

Drinkhall said: "The support is amazing. I watched some videos [of Al-Hasan] and studied his style. He beat Jean-Michel Saive recently, who is a great player so I knew it wouldn't be easy. There were three deuce games as well so it was close. But I didn't want to let him get a game. I knew if it went to 1-1 or something, I might get nervous or he could relax, so I didn't want to let him in."

He added: "I'm feeling good. He'll be nervous, we (the Great Britain team) played some warm-up games against Singapore a few weeks ago. I didn't play him but I did play his teammates who are ranked higher than me, so he'll be nervous."

To have this kind of support for table tennis is amazing. We don't really get crowds like this. I wasn't sure how it (the support) was going to affect me as I've never experienced it before, but it really spurred me on. It's fantastic and I can't wait until tomorrow."

Results:

Women's singles first round:

Joanna Parker (GBR, 119) bt Caroline Kumahara (BRA, 192) 4-0 (11-7, 11-5, 11-9, 11-5)

Men's singles first round:

Paul Drinkhall (GBR, 107) bt Ibrahim Al-Hasan (KUW, 228) 4-0 (11-9, 12-10, 11-9, 11-4)

Fixtures:

Women's second round:

Joanna Parker (GBR, 119) vs Kristin Silbereisen (GER, 47)

Men's second round:

Paul Drinkhall (GBR, 107) vs Yang Zi (SIN, 54)

By Russell Moore

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