

# Superb Drinkhall shocks Yang Zi at Games

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**Posted On:** July 29, 2012



Paul Drinkhall's inspired performance against reigning Commonwealth Games Champion Yang Zi lit up the ExCeL as his Olympic dream continued into the last 32.

Drinkhall showed an immense level of control to nullify the slight-wristed Zi and force him into consistent errors with his forehand from which the British number 1 capitalised upon to cruise home 4-1.

The 22-year-old from Loftus is much more comfortable playing a fast and expansive game with numerous topspin to topspin forehand rallies, but the encounter with the Singaporean was much more restrained and tactile.

It started with the usual Olympic nerves for both players with Zi, in particular struggling to read Drinkhall's early serves while also being unable to connect with his forehands – a theme that ran consistently throughout the match for the misfiring Singaporean.

Although Zi profited from a big net for 7-6 in the first game, the reigning English National Champion took control of the next five points, which began with the first mini-rally of the match that he won with a cross-table forehand, before ending with a gratifying smash down the line for an 11-7 game and nerve-settling 1-0 lead.

From there on belief was never an issue for the pumped Drinkhall whereas the more pragmatic Zi was regularly staring at his bat in disbelief as forehand after forehand went begging.

Never was this more prominent than at 5-5 in the second game where a high lob was smashed well wide by Zi to gift the British man the point. If he benefited from fortune there, then Drinkhall cemented the lead with elegant brilliance on the next point after a positive serve was backed up by a smash follow up for a two point lead at 7-5.

Drinkhall went onto win that game 11-7 and then establish a 4-0 lead in the third game with Zi's forehands troubles once more coming to a head.

The world number 54's touch around the table had apparently deserted him, which allowed Drinkhall, the number 107, to race into a 10-6 lead before Zi could close again to 10-8. However, another simple forehand miss by Zi released the pressure on the Brit and gifted him a 3-0 lead.

Inevitably Zi raised a fightback in the fourth game to take it 11-4 which meant the pressure was back on Drinkhall to step up to the plate once more. You could see how much each point meant when Drinkhall took his first point at 1-2 down and it was met with a roar and a pumped fist.

The four-times National Champion spurred himself on to keep a grasp on Zi's breakaway attempt and it worked successfully as the Singaporean was forced to take a time-out with just a 7-6 lead.

That soon evaporated as a lucky edge gave Drinkhall a n 8-7 advantage before a fortunate net levelled matters for Zi next point. At 9-9 Drinkhall showed the same composure as he did in the previous round against Ibrahim Al-Hasan to make the 'big' points count as a great backhand return of serve, followed by a booming forehand smash down the line gifted him his first match point.

It was the only one he would need too as a trademark powerful forehand cross-table on the next point was not returned from Zi, who was shocked by Drinkhall in one of the biggest performances of the Brit's career.

Drinkhall said: "I kept my game steady. I've played him in the past and probably played a lot better than today and lost. When you play fast and strong against him he's good, that's how he practises every day. I knew I had to mix it up and get in tight and play with heavy spin.

He was nervous. I changed my style of play to my advantage. I played tight and with more spin, changing the speed as much as possible. Playing this way made it hard for him as I could see he was very nervous."

He added: "We played a practice match against Singapore last week in Guildford and I beat GAO Ning there, so he (YANG) knew that I am playing well. With the crowd behind me I think before the game it was probably a distraction for him. This is the best match I have played in my life, not the opponent or the performance, but the occasion was amazing, the crowd was brilliant."

"These are the sort of occasions that home players can really start a run, and hopefully that is what's happening to me. Just look around at the crowds, it doesn't seem like a table tennis hall. It's just amazing being on TV all around the country, all around the world. Twitter is going crazy, it's brilliant to be a part of it. It's massive for me and the rest of table tennis, and hopefully we are putting on a good show."

He will now face Germany's world number 12 Dimitrij Ovtcharov, the winner of the 2012 Europe Top-12 tournament in the last 32 on Monday morning. Ovtcharov has never been beyond the last 16 at an Olympic Games singles tournament but did win silver in Beijing with the German team.

His career was overshadowed by a drugs ban from the German Table Tennis Federation (DTTB) in September 2010, although a month later he was cleared after no evidence of abuse was found. Drinkhall will need a performance to Liam Pitchford's victory over world number 9 (at the time) Vladimir Samsonov.

Drinkhall analysed his chances: "I think I can beat anybody in this tournament, I'm a lot fitter now and have prepared the best I have ever done for any tournament. I'm in much better shape, the crowd, the occasion and the fact that it is his first match, who knows, I believe I can beat him. I'm going to watch a lot of his games on YouTube, I've seen the best players in the world struggle with his serve, they're very tricky.

I've got nothing to lose, nerves will probably stop him serving as freely as he wants anyway, so there won't be as much spin and placement. Again, I'm going to play the same, just try and get out there early and take the first game."

In the women's singles it was dream over for Joanna Parker as she was unable to overcome the considerable odds against world number 47 Kristine Silbereisen.

The German was on top form from the off and proved her confident style of play against defenders. From the first point she delivered numerous powerful forehands to show that she can handle the spin imparted on the ball from Parker.

It was an impressive display from Silbereisen, who predominantly used her forehand attack to pepper Parker, which allowed her to take the first two games 11-6 and 11-7.

Her flawless technique and temperament was symbolic of the German style of play in its uncomplicated manner as she ticked every box during a professional display – she was determined not to be the victim of a 72 world rankings place shock.

The British number 1, however, was not without success as she claimed the third game 11-7 to give herself some hope in the match. Parker was doing her utmost to change the flow of the game with uncharacteristic forehand attacks and even the occasional topspin to topspin rally but her German opponent was too clever to be defeated.

Silbereisen cruised the last two games 11-2 and 11-4 to secure her passage to the next round and leave Parker to concentrate on the team event next week where the British girls face the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Parker said: "It was a tough one. I've seen her play defenders before and her first attack is so strong. She's a good player and very good against defence, I had to try and play my game and cause her problems."

I've never experienced anything like that. The crowd were brilliant today, it is so much help having them behind you. I guess I learnt from having to deal with the whole hall watching you. I was a lot more prepared for it today, so in the future nothing is gonna match that or phase me."

**Results:****Women's singles second round:**

Kristine Silbereisen (GER, 47) bt Joanna Parker (GBR, 119) 4-1 (11-6, 11-7, 7-11, 11-2, 11-4)

**Men's singles second round:**

Paul Drinkhall (GBR, 107) bt Yang Zi (SIN, 54) 4-1 (11-7, 11-7, 11-8, 4-11, 11-9)

**Fixtures:****Men's last 32:**

Paul Drinkhall (GBR, 107) vs Dimitrij Ovtcharov (GER, 12)

By Russell Moore

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