

Drinkhall's Olympic run ended by Ovtcharov

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Paul Drinkhall's gallant run at the London 2012 Olympic Games came to an end in the last 32 against the formidable world number 12 Dimitrij Ovtcharov.

The German, who is the eighth seed for the Olympic Games, was in no mood to give up his dream of a singles medal as he wore the host hero down with a series of powerful backhands and mesmerising serves.

The odds were always against the top ranked Briton, who was still 95 places below his opponent in the world rankings. After upsetting the odds against Singapore's Yang Zi (54) in the previous round, Ovtcharov was not to be denied his last 16 place.

The German started well from the off, acknowledging a steady start was crucial against Drinkhall, as he wanted to avoid giving the Brit any encouragement or confidence that the partisan crowd could pick up on.

Drinkhall's big forehand down the line gave him a 4-3 lead in the first game, but Ovtcharov steadied himself and relied on his rapid backhands and repertoire of serves to race into a 10-4 lead.

Interestingly, from there the four-times English National Champion mounted a comeback and forced the German into a time-out at 10-8, which was surprisingly early in the encounter. It worked as Ovtcharov won the next point but clearly coach Jorg Rosskopf had his feathers ruffled by the plucky Englishman.

With a 1-0 lead Ovtcharov could relax and try to play his natural game. He wasn't allowed this luxury at the start of the second game though as an edge and a poor forehand miss from the world number 12 gave Drinkhall a 4-3 lead.

Two trademark Drinkhall forehands kept the Brit in touch at 5-5 but Ovtcharov found his rhythm from there on in to net the next six points and claim a 2-0 lead with an 11-5 game.

It wasn't without its controversy though as on 7-5 Drinkhall paused, claiming a let call from the official, who denied moving his arms in gesture. After a few moments of debate, Ovtcharov was still granted the point, which perturbed the man from Loftus as his concentration faltered.

At 7-4 down in the third game, with Ovtcharov's backhands and serves taking their toll, Drinkhall called his time-out in the hope of a change in fortunes. It worked as he clawed back to 8-8 – with the help of a double-bounce net, before a brilliant pile drive cross-table forehand smash return from the German's next serve flew past the favourite and gave Drinkhall a 9-8 lead.

He was unable to seal the game though and, in fact, served off on game point to gift Ovtcharov a 3-0 lead and effectively the match.

With minimal fuss, Ovtcharov raced into a 6-2 lead in the fourth game where Drinkhall looked beaten for the first time and, sure enough, the match followed soon after with an 11-4 game after Drinkhall's final backhand went long.

Quite rightly, the Brit received a warm round of applause from the capacity crowd, who respected his overall run which included three excellent performances where he wore his heart on his sleeve.

Drinkhall said: "He wouldn't let me into the game. I missed an easy ball at 9-9 in the third game. If I'd have got that, who knows? He is difficult to play against. He has a unique style, lots of spinny serves. I know he practises his serves for hours every day, there's no other palyer in the world with a serve like that."

He added: "I think I have proved here that I can compete with the best. Since Christmas, I have pushed myself

really hard. I've been training hard and lost a lot of weight. The crowd were definitely helping me. If I'd have taken the third game I'm sure they would have gone crazy."

Drinkhall will now look forward to Friday's match with Portugal when he takes his place alongside Liam Pitchford and Andrew Baggaley for Team GB.

Portugal's own fortunes so far haven't been brilliant as Joao Monteiro suffered a shock defeat to Australia's William Henzell while Marcos Freitas was beaten 4-0 in the last 32 by Korea's Oh Sang Eun.

Their final team member is Tiago Apolonia, who is Pitchford's TTF Liebherr Ochsenhausen team-mate. The match begins at 19:00 after the Team GB girls of Joanna Parker, Kelly Sibley and Na Liu have played DPR Korea at 10:00.

Result:

Men's singles round of 32:

Dimitrij Ovtcharov (GER, 12) bt Paul Drinkhall (GBR, 107) 4-0 (11-8, 11-5, 11-9, 11-4)

By Russell Moore

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