

GB suffer double team heartache

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Team GB's men's and women's teams both lost their round of 16 fixture in the Olympic Games on Friday as they were unable to overturn their considerable ranking differential against their respective opponents.

While both lost 3-0, the men to Portugal and the women to DPR Korea, they will all take great experience from playing in this Olympic Games.

The men, in particular, can feel unlucky that their performances did not merit greater results. In all three fixtures they matched their illustrious opponents blow-for-blow but fell just short each time to inflict a painful defeat.

First up was singles hero Paul Drinkhall (WR 107) who faced Portugal's Marcos Freitas (31). Drinkhall was firing big from the off and, were it not for the trouble he faced in receiving Freitas' serve, he would have marched ahead in the first game.

As it was he had a game point at 10-9 only to see his shot hit the side of the table rather than the edge. Ultimately, it didn't matter as the English number 2 (following Liam Pitchford's leap in the last month) saved two game points before taking a third of his own to lead 1-0 with a 15-13 game.

Unfortunately, the momentum shifted from there with Freitas showing all of his class to take the next two games 11-6 and 11-7.

At 7-3 down in the fourth, Drinkhall looked a beaten man, but somehow he raised his game to win the next three points to force the Portuguese coach to take a timeout. It worked as Freitas sealed the game 11-8 and the match to give Portugal a 1-0 lead.

Nineteen-year-old Liam Pitchford (143) was up next against Joao Monteiro (39). Although Monteiro had already played at the Games in the singles event, it was Pitchford who settled quicker to show both outstanding attack and defence in taking a 10-6 lead.

He eventually took the first game 11-9 but, like the first match, saw his Portuguese opponent fight back to take the next two 11-5 and 11-7. The key being Monteiro freeing his powerful forehand attack while Pitchford failed to get his prodigious backhand firing.

Pitchford did find some momentum in the fourth game but, just as Freitas had done earlier, Monteiro showed some unbelievable form to keep the youngster at bay. The highlights reel would have been overflowing with long, attacking rallies as Monteiro held out for a 3-1 win with an 11-8 game.

This meant the GB doubles pair of Pitchford and Andrew Baggaley had to beat Monteiro and Tiago Apolonia (34).

It started well for Baggaley, whose first shot at an Olympic Games was a rasping cross-table forehand that was met with no reply. However, that was as good as it got for GB in the first game as the Portuguese pair took it 11-5.

When Monteiro and Apolonia cruised 6-0 ahead in the second game it looked embarrassing but after some chants of 'GB, GB' from the crowd, Baggaley and Pitchford recovered to a respectable 11-7 loss.

They continued this momentum into the third game with Pitchford starting to unleash some of his infamous rapid backhands – how he must have wished he'd found them earlier in his singles match.

In the end the GB efforts were fruitless as the Portuguese stepped up a gear again to claim the game 11-9 and the match 3-0. While the game scores look one-sided, the Portuguese players (all in the world's top 40) were pushed all the way by a GB team who played like top 50 players themselves.

The GB women had a similar match-up against DPR Korea, who might be considered as dark horses for a bronze medal at the Olympic Games.

Joanna Parker succumbed to the expedite rule in her match with Ri Myong Sun (34), a fellow defender, as she was beaten 3-1 in the opening fixture.

After the two players had traded 11-8 games, Parker seemed to have the upper hand as her additional mental strength against her 20-year-old opponent looked to have her on course for a big upset.

However, in the third game at 5-3 down the DPR Korea coach called timeout – that's when the match changed. She was clearly told to play for expedite, which meant her attacking skills would be tested against Parker's attacking prowess – a battle the Korean was sure to win.

At 7-7 in that game, the 10 minute mark was reached, and therefore a maximum of 13 returns could be made in any rally. This forced both players to attack – something Parker was less comfortable with.

The whole momentum shifted into Sun's favour and she quickly moved to take game three 11-8. More was to follow in the fourth game (still ruled by expedite) as Sun sealed the match 3-1 with an 11-4 game.

Next up was Liu Na (153) against Kim Jong (53), which was a very different match. Attack versus attack throughout, it was really only Kim Jong's superior serve and return game that made the difference.

Liu struggled to read Kim Jong's serves and fell to an 11-8 first game. You could tell that during rallies Liu was just as good as her higher-ranked opponent, but it was around the serve points that proved costly as a second game was also lost 11-9.

The final game also went 11-7 as DPR Korea went 2-0 ahead before the doubles match.

The doubles saw Kelly Sibley (177), back from her hip injury, make her Olympic debut alongside Parker, while Ri Mi Gyong (63) partnered Kim Jong.

In truth, the left-hand, right-hand combination of DPR Korea was always likely to work better than the defensive/offensive combo of Parker and Sibley.

As it turned out, the match was very one-sided with the Korean pair marching the team home to a 3-0 success with a 3-0 (11-2, 11-7, 11-3) victory.

While the GB players will be disappointed with defeat, the majority of the team can look forward to improving their world ranking ahead of Rio 2016 and hopefully qualifying for the Games in South America.

The signs, in particular from the men's team, is that they deserve to be there and if they can improve their consistency of performance to match their impressive attacking talents, then there's no reason why we shouldn't have a squad of top 100 players in the world in four years time.

Team Results:

Portugal 3-0 Team GB

Marcos Freitas (31) bt Paul Drinkhall (107) 3-1 (13-15, 11-6, 11-7, 11-8)

Joao Monteiro (39) bt Liam Pitchford (143) 3-1 (9-11, 11-5, 11-7, 11-8)

Monteiro (39)/Apolonia (34) bt Pitchford (143)/Baggaley (133) 3-0 (11-5, 11-7, 11-9)

DPR Korea 3-0 Team GB

Ri Myong Sun (34) bt Joanna Parker (119) 3-1 (11-8, 8-11, 11-8, 11-4)

Kim Jong (53) bt Liu Na (153) 3-0 (11-8, 11-9, 11-7)

Jong (53)/Gyong (63) bt Parker (119)/Sibley (177) 3-0 (11-2, 11-7, 11-3)

By Russell Moore

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