

Brave Bayley earns silver at ExCeL

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A true heart-on-the-sleeve performance from Will Bayley was not enough to secure Great Britain's first-ever Paralympic gold medal as the 24-year-old picked up a silver medal in the Men's Class 7 final.

Bayley was facing the Beijing 2008 reigning Paralympic Champion Jochen Wollmert from Germany who was experienced beyond Bayley's tender years. The German's nous and touch play in crucial points would prove decisive as the game wore on.

Home hero Bayley had previously said of his opponent: "We're big rivals. We don't talk much. We're not close friends. I'd love to beat him in London." But come his defeat in the end, the pair had seemingly made amends after they bonded over each others struggles during the dramatic passage of play.

The German player started much quicker than the Englishman as he settled into the ferocious atmosphere inside ExCeL with both German and English fans soaking up the Paralympic buzz. However, it was the visiting fans from central Europe who had more to cheer about in the early stages as Wollmert took control of the first game.

In truth, Bayley struggled early on with Wollmert's heavy backhand spin and delicate touch play around the table and, despite his best efforts, trailed throughout those opening stages to eventually lose the first game 11-8.

The fightback came from the Brit in the second game as, spurred on by the energetic crowd, he took an early 5-3 lead.

There was big drama at 5-4 though when confusion arose over a potential edge for Wollmert. The umpires originally gave the German the point for 5-5 but, after much discussion, the point was awarded to the English number 1 for a 6-4 lead.

He never looked back from there in the second game as point after point the gallant young Brit bellowed huge cheers and threw massive pumps of his fist as he opened up a commanding 8-4 lead.

He sealed the game 11-4 and nearly exploded in celebration, equally almost taking the ExCeL roof off at the same time with the crowd responding in perfect symphony as a cacophony of noise jolted the arena.

It was all to play for at 1-1 and the experienced German knew this too well. Keeping his head cool and his brow focused, he chipped out a 6-4 lead from 4-4 with the help of a fortunate net cord.

After a second net cord at 9-5 gifted the German another point, you could sense the luck was against the Sheffield-based youngster. True to form the third game went the way of Wollmert 11-5 and it left Bayley with no margin for error.

Unfortunately, despite a number of excellent rallies, Wollmert maintained his subtle defensive touch and heavy attacking backhand topspin to seal the match, and the gold medal, with an 11-4 fourth game.

A devastated Bayley was left lain on the ground with his bat over his face while Wollmert celebrated his win. Eventually he was picked up and embraced by coach Gorazd Vecko, still trying to hold back the tears, before a very sportsmanlike Wollmert also held Bayley and presented him to the crowd – holding hands together.

Although it's only a silver medal for Bayley, that one moment displayed exactly what the Paralympics are about with grace, passion, togetherness and a love for sport that helps these athletes overcome the obstacles they have faced in their life. As the crowd cheered in unison, truly everyone in the arena was a winner this afternoon.

For the 24-year-old there will be many more opportunities to build on this result, and doubtless more

Paralympic Games too, while he will also aim for another gold in the team event next week.

Now the focus switches to Monday morning as Sara Head, Ross Wilson and Paul Davies will all hope to add to that medal that Bayley picked up when they face make-or-break bronze medal matches.

Men's Class 7 Result:

Jochen Wollmert (GER) bt Will Bayley 3-1 (11-8, 4-11, 11-5, 11-4)

By Russell Moore

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