

Double defeat for England in Hull

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England's men and women both suffered 3-1 defeats to Romania on Tuesday night after the visitors dominated proceedings with their quicker and sharper play around the table.

The men will be particularly disappointed at their defeat because they were higher ranked than their opponents.

Liam Pitchford was the first to suffer at the hands of the Romanians after a dramatic five-game thriller which he lost 12-10 in the fifth to Hunor Szocs. After losing the first two games 11-6, the youngster appeared to step up through the gears in an 11-4 third game.

When he levelled at 2-2 with an 11-8 game; sealed by a massive forehand down the line, it seemed as though the momentum was with Pitchford. At 9-7 up in the decider it looked the case but the youngster's serve into the net opened the door for Szocs to save a match point at 10-9 before taking his own at 11-10 with Pitchford's serve return going long.

Next up was Andrew Baggaley against Ovidiu Ionescu to try and level the scores for England. However, that didn't turn out to be the case as Ionescu strolled to a confident 3-0 win putting the hosts firmly in the mire.

Baggaley fell 7-3 down in the first game (which he eventually lost 11-5) and then 8-4 down in the second game too. An amazing topspin to topspin rally next point was expertly won by Baggaley as the momentum shifted for the 29-year-old to close at 7-8 down.

However, Ionescu embarked on his own three point run to take the second game. When another slow start came in the third game (6-1 down) it was comfortable for the Romanian to clinch it, and the match, without wasting time.

This meant Danny Reed had to win his match with Adrian Dodean and, after five pulsating games, he did that to keep England in the match.

Despite losing the first game 11-9 – he was 10-5 down at one point, Reed grasped any kind of momentum he could as he battled back against Dodean to lead 2-1 with 11-7 and 11-6 games. But, just when you thought Reed had it in the bag, Dodean came back once more to level the match at 2-2 with an 11-7 game.

Whatever tension there was in the hall was quickly expunged by a confident Reed who strode to a 7-2 lead in the decider. At 9-3 he played the shot of the day with a superb backhand flick around the net from wide on court to all-but seal the victory, which he did on the very next point.



It set up a chance for Pitchford to redeem himself and take the match to a deciding fixture but he was unable to do so as the inspired Ionescu won through 3-1.

Like his first match with Szocs, the 19-year-old fell 2-0 behind to 11-6 and 11-7 games. In the third game he fought back to a 9-6 lead only to be pegged back to 10-10. A huge attack and powerful forehand next point did at least ensure he got the game point that he took for 12-10.

When he found himself 9-6 up again in game four it looked like he had turned the corner but Ionescu pulled one last effort out of his sleeve and won five consecutive points to claim both the match and the team win for Romania.

The English women had earlier lost their encounter with the Romanians 3-1 but not before Kelly Sibley hinted that she was back on top form with superb performances against both Bernadette Szocs and Elizabeta Samara.

Sibley opened the fixture for England against Junior European Champion Szocs and duly started off at her natural explosive best to make a mini-break in the first game for a 5-2 lead. Although Szocs wiped this out at 5-5, Sibley pulled away again from 7-6 to 10-6 to seal the first game 11-7.

The second game was much tighter throughout right up until 9-9 where Szocs made the important move with the English girl from Leamington Spa going long twice to allow her Romanian opponent to level the scores at 1-1.

The same happened in the third game where Sibley and Szocs were level throughout to 9-9 again but this time the English number 2 forced Szocs into the net and then long to take a 2-1 lead with an 11-9 game.

The fourth game again headed the same way at 7-7 but Szocs took control to move 10-7 ahead. However, Sibley saved all three game points, and then a fourth at 10-11 before securing an amazing victory over the world no. 80 as Szocs netted for a 13-11 game.

Next up was Tin-Tin Ho, the 14-year-old on her Senior European debut who had to face world no. 38 Elizabeta Samara in her first match – a real baptism of fire.

Tin-Tin, ranked 400 places behind Samara, showed her nerves on the first point as she served into the net and those nerves continued as she trailed 7-2. Eventually the youngster found some form to retain respectability in an 11-6 first game loss.

Although the next two games also went to Samara with aplomb, Tin-Tin was matching the Romanian during a lot of the strokeplay. The issue was in Samara's serves who used a level of spin that the youngster wasn't used to. It levelled the scores at 1-1 with Tin-Tin's defeat but surely it's just another marker for the future of the cadet.

That meant Joanna Parker faced Daniela Dodean – again the Romanian player ranked well above her English counterpart but it was a real testament to the training that Parker has put into her attacking play as it became evident throughout the match.

Parker did lose 3-0 (expected against a player of such high standing) but Parker almost clinched the first game after a brave double backhand attack closed the gap on Dodean to 9-10.

Although Dodean secured that game, and made a march of six consecutive points from 6-5 down to win game two 11-6, Parker's new attacking talents were set to the fore in the third game.

Forced to take timeout at 5-1 down, Parker then won an excellent defensive point, before winning consecutive points with her brand new attacking style to close the gap to 4-5. Although the class of Dodean told out in the end, Parker has begun the process of adding a new string to her bow as she hones in on that world top 100.

At 2-1 down to Romania it brought Kelly Sibley back to the table to face Elizabeta Samara and once again Sibley showed her mettle.

An injury-free Sibley is a joy to watch and she seemed in total comfort in Hull despite trailing 8-5 in the first game to her illustrious opponent. She forced her way back to 9-9 and then won it incredibly to lead 1-0 (11-9).

Giving the Romanian no rest the English girl battled to 7-7 in the second game too. The next point was the rally of the match with deep and powerful top and side-spins from both players, however, Samara took it. At 10-8 to the Romanian it looked over but a red card was awarded for Dodean 'instructing' from the sidelines.

Sibley then levelled at 10-10 and saved a third game point with a brilliant cross-table backhand at 10-11 but she succumbed to the world no. 38's pressure to eventually lose it 13-11.

The final two games also went the way of the Romanian but a lot can be taken from the matches that the girls played as their battle in the Championship Division wages on.

Results:

Men:

Romania 3-1 England

Hunor Szocs (241) bt Liam Pitchford (145) 3-2 (11-6, 11-6, 4-11, 8-11, 12-10)

Ovidiu Ionescu (172) bt Andrew Baggaley (130) 3-0 (11-5, 11-7, 11-6)
Daniel Reed (231) bt Adrian Dodean (283) 3-2 (9-11, 11-7, 11-6, 7-11, 11-3)
Ovidiu Ionescu (172) bt Liam Pitchford (145) 3-1 (11-6, 11-7, 10-12, 11-9)

Women:

Romania 3-1 England

Kelly Sibley (181) bt Bernadette Szocs (80) 3-1 (11-7, 9-11, 11-9, 13-11)
Elizabeta Samara (38) bt Tin-Tin Ho (431) 3-0 (11-6, 11-4, 11-4)
Daniela Dodean (39) bt Joanna Parker (114) 3-0 (11-9, 11-6, 11-7)
Elizabeta Samara (38) bt Kelly Sibley (181) 3-1 (9-11, 13-11, 11-5, 11-6)

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