

Walker ready to fight for Games place

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Walker is already a regular international for England's juniors

Sam Walker has set his sights on 2014 to be his breakthrough year as he begins his battle to represent England at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

Walker, the Junior Boys No. 1, has spent the last two years at the top of the youth rankings, but, not content with being the best junior in the country, he also wants to be the best senior player too.

"Of course it's one of my long-term aims because I am a professional player and the Commonwealths have to be a target," said Walker, "I can't know for sure how long it will take but I believe that if I keep working hard in Germany with the practice group I am currently in, it could be done in the next 3-5 years."

This gives the Worksop-born player just enough time to earn his place in the England team ahead of the Commonwealth Games that land in Glasgow in the summer of 2014.

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His chances of making the squad were boosted last month when he retained his National Junior Boys Singles title with a display of power against third seed Helshan Weerasinghe in the final in Hatfield.

Despite losing the first two games, the defending Champion roared back to storm the final three 11-5, 11-2, 11-4, showing the kind of form he'll need to join the likes of previous Commonwealth Games medalists Paul Drinkhall, Liam Pitchford and Andrew Baggaley in the current squad.

He said: "If I made the team my aim would be do myself and my country proud and to win as many matches and hopefully medals as possible. I think the team is definitely good enough to win a medal, last time they got silver, this time I think the team has the potential to get gold."

Walker added: "Not every country plays in the Commonwealth Games and it's a great opportunity for English sport and especially table tennis to win medals and achieve success at a high level."

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Table tennis is still riding on the high of the 2012 Olympic Games with both men's and women's teams representing Team GB at ExCeL in London's Royal Docklands.

While Walker had to watch from the sidelines last summer, he hopes to experience a similar buzz at Glasgow

2014 where the athletes can expect more capacity crowds and electric atmospheres from our nearest neighbours.

He said: "It would great to play in front of such a crowd. Admittedly it would be a new experience and probably I would be a little nervous, but that's expected. I would relish every moment because it's not every day that you get to play in front of a crowd like that."

The path to the table tennis elite has not been easy for Walker who has had to leave home to train full-time in Germany since the age of 15.

"I showed that I can beat the best in Europe and I'm closer to beating the best in the World."

But, despite his personal sacrifices, the benefits are starting to pay off.

A recent run at the Hungarian Junior Open saw him reach the last 16 – only to be beaten by the tournament's eventual winner Lee Chia-Sheng (TPE). His newfound mental toughness in Germany could be the edge Walker needs to reach the next stage.

He said: "Moving away from family and friends was hard at first but to me nothing I have done is a sacrifice because I enjoy everything to do with table tennis and playing full-time is what I have wanted to do for a long time.

"It did because I want to be a world class player and so I have to be beating the best international players as well as the best national players. I think that in Hungary I showed that I can beat the best in Europe and I'm closer to beating the best in the world."

By Russell Moore

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