

# Teens ready to set the Worlds alight

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England's teenage duo of Liam Pitchford and Sam Walker are ready to set the World Championships alight after setting the benchmark for English table tennis this season.

English no. 1 Pitchford helped his side TTF Liebherr Ochsenhausen to reach the final of the Bundesliga play-offs, while Walker helped to guide England's men's team to a bronze medal at the Commonwealth Championships in India in a busy week just before the tournament begins in Paris (13-20<sup>th</sup> May).

For the 19-year-old, the year has been shaped by an incredible breakthrough season in the Bundesliga, where he has beaten world class players such as Koki Niwa (JPN, 22), Patrick Baum (GER, 29) and Christian Suss (GER, 40).

He said: "It's been a great year for the club so far, we are unbeaten during the second half of the year. It's been brilliant being able to play, train and be around Ryu Seungmin (KOR, 20), he's not only an amazing player but also a great guy!

"I think that it's been a major step for me in these last few months that I have been able to consistently perform well, I won my last three matches in the Bundesliga season and I will go to the Worlds confident that I can continue my form."

At the previous individual championships in Rotterdam 2011 Pitchford was beaten by Koki Niwa, whom the Englishman has since beaten in the domestic campaign this year. With the youngster's fresh belief, it seems a possibility that he can repeat the dosage next week.

He explained: "Koki has obviously not performed well in the German league this year so I think it would be a tighter game if we were to play in Paris but I believe I have made a lot of progress since Rotterdam.

"I hope that I can play well enough to string some performances together and then we will see where that takes me. I hope to go further that last time (last 128) as my first goal.

"After the Worlds I hope I can break into the world top 100 by at least the end of the year."

For Walker it's been a baptism of fire into the senior England squad after impressive domestic and international performances in the winter earned him his call-up.

After winning the Under-21 title and reaching the Men's Singles semi-final at the National Championships in March, he went onto win the Malta Junior Open in Cottonera, in the process moving himself up to third in the Global Junior Circuit rankings.

Finally he got his chance with the seniors where he has travelled to the Commonwealth Championships in India and has since won a team bronze medal on his debut.

The Commonwealths finish in New Delhi on Friday before the squad rush back to Paris for the Worlds, but Walker explained why this wouldn't affect him.

He said: "I don't see it as an excuse to not be fully prepared. As a professional player you have to deal with these sorts of things and I still think I will be fully prepared for the tournament.

It's a great opportunity and experience for me. I want to make the first round of the main draw and anything further would be nice."

It's not the first time the 17-year-old has been in the limelight this month as he recently appeared on the football chat show, Soccer AM, in which he challenged former Bolton Manager Owen Coyle to a match on the table.

Walker beamed: "That was really cool, the show is awesome! I haven't actually seen it yet so I don't know how I looked, but I didn't feel that nervous as all the crew there were so relaxed and made me feel welcome.

"It was a great experience and I'd love to do it again sometime!"

#### **England squads for World Table Tennis Championships (Paris, France 13-20th May 2012)**

**Men:** Paul Drinkhall, Liam Pitchford and Sam Walker

**Women:** Joanna Parker, Kelly Sibley and Karina Le Fevre

**Coaches:** Jia Yi Liu, Alan Cooke and Nick Jarvis

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