GB strikes gold again in Slovenia

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GB STRIKES GOLD AGAIN IN SLOVENIA

The GB Para Table Tennis Team completed a successful trip to the Slovenian Open with four medals in the team events including gold for Aaron McKibbin in the men's class 8 team and gold for the Welsh duo of Rob Davies and Paul Davies in the men's class 1 team. Will Bayley, with playing partner Paul Karabardak, added a team bronze medal to the singles gold he won earlier in the week in the men's class 7 and Sara Head won a bronze in the women's class 3 team.

With GB playing partner Ross Wilson not competing in Slovenia, McKibbon, world ranked number 15, was teamed with Fabian Rignell of Sweden and in the earlier group stages recorded a superb first win against world number 9 Marc Ledoux, beating the experienced Belgian 3-0.

The 21 year old Sheffield based Londoner was then disappointed with his performance in the semi-finals and showed great character and determination in the final, recording a second consecutive win over Ledoux and teaming up with Rignell to win the doubles before clinching the gold medal with a five set win over the Belgian number two, Mathieu Loicq, ranked five places above McKibbin.

"I felt I had something to prove today," admitted McKibbin, "because in the semi-final I performed really badly and lost to a person who can play but I don't feel I should have lost to. I played exactly the same against Ledoux as I did yesterday and I think I have found a way to beat him now. I always have tight games with Loicq and although I lost the fourth set after having four match points I was quite relaxed as I felt I was playing well."

McKibbin now heads for the German Open at the end of the month with his confidence boosted by a first medal of the season.

"Obviously to win a gold medal is great and it will be nice when Ross is back and we can start doing the team events together again. I need to go away and train extra hard now to prepare for Germany and hopefully do even better there."

Rob Davies had recorded a first win over world number 3 Jean-Francois Ducay of France on his way to a bronze in the singles and he repeated that feat in emphatic fashion in the semi-finals of the team event to earn GB a place in the final against the Austrian/Swiss combination of Andreas Vevera and the Swiss Silvio Keller.

The Cardiff based Welsh duo of Davies and Davies had never beaten their opponents but had the perfect start when Rob Davies beat world number 1 Vevera in five sets and Paul Davies beat Keller in three. Although they lost the doubles Rob Davies secured the gold with a three set victory over Keller.

“I’m well chuffed,” said Rob Davies, “all the training seems to have paid off so I need to keep going now and push myself even more. PD was awesome as well – he worked really hard and pulled me out of some games when I was struggling. I wanted to beat some of the guys above me this year so I need to start doing that consistently and move above them in the rankings.”

“That’s table tennis – you have your ups and downs,” said Paul Davies, who was disappointed with his singles performance earlier in the week. “I think we deserved the gold in the end. Rob has been fantastic and hopefully we can carry it on for the European Championships in September.”

Bayley and Karabardak came up against an experienced Spanish team in inspired form in the semi-finals but as always went down fighting. Despite winning gold in the singles earlier in the week Bayley has not been at his best but was happier with his form in the team event.

“I actually played better in the team event than I did in the singles,” he said. “I felt more confident and was starting to play at my top level so I was quite pleased with that. It’s never easy to come to these tournaments and win.”

Karabardak, 27, from Swansea, had come within one point of defeating Paralympic champion Jochen Wollmert in their group match against Germany and can also take heart from his performance in Slovenia.

“I played some really good players this week and I’ve been within touching distance of beating them,” he said. “If I can train more and get more match sharp then hopefully I can turn those results around ready for the Europeans in September.”

As her great friend and playing partner Jane Campbell was not in Slovenia Sara Head, from Beddau, was teamed with Valerie Gay from France in the class 3 women’s team event, which was played in a round robin format. The pair combined to good effect in the doubles, winning all their matches, and secured hard-fought wins over Turkey and Italy to take the bronze medal.

“It’s been an up and down week for me,” admitted Head, “but there’s been some great performances involved as well. I’m happy that I finished better than I started and won more matches. I have to remember that I can fight and it would be nice to start doing that earlier in my matches.”

GB Performance Director Gorazd Vecko, back in his native Slovenia, was delighted with his young team.

“This was a very tough event with strong competition,” he said, “and we had a lot of good results, especially in the singles events and the singles in the team events, which is really encouraging. Rob Davies beat the Paralympic silver medalist from London twice and the world number 1, Aaron McKibbin beat two top 10 players and won a gold medal in the team and Will Bayley managed really well under pressure to take a well-deserved gold medal in the singles.”

The GB Team will remain in Slovenia next week for a training camp before further events in Slovakia and Germany later this month.

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