

England's youth ready to take on Europe

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As the England cricketers begin their battle for an Ashes accomplishment, so the English table tennis youngsters start their journey towards potential medal success at the 56th European Youth Championships (Ostrava, Czech Republic 12-21st July 2013).

While there won't be any Australians to face in the heart of Eastern Europe, the cream of the crop of European talent awaits an eager English junior and cadet squad that flies out in search of building upon Tin-Tin Ho's Cadet Singles bronze medal from Schwechat, Austria last year.



One of those leading the chase will be the in-form Sam Walker, who has experienced unrivalled success this season in his breakthrough into the senior England side. Not only has the 18-year-old excelled domestically by becoming the National Junior Champion, Junior Masters Champion and National Under-21 Champion, but he has also performed on the international scene with two Commonwealth Championships medals in India and a first International Open win in Malta.

However, one memory still grinds on the Worksop junior's mind as he remembers his defeat at the European Youth Championships last year:

"I was gutted in that match really because it was against a player from Portugal, Diogo Chen, who was, at that time ranked above me and I was 3-1 up and had a good chance of winning it. Unfortunately in the last set I lost deuce in the seventh and I was gutted because he got a bit of luck in the end. Hopefully this year I can improve on that and go for the medals."

Since then though the English Junior No. 1 has gone from strength to strength in a season which included a career-best win over India's Sharath Kamal Achanta (WR 69) on his 18th birthday. He can even pinpoint the moment when his confidence blossomed for the first time.

He said: "I think the first tournament this season, which was the Serbian Open, was the first international tournament that I had got to the final of. It was the first time I had won a singles medal in an international open and it really gave me the confidence to go on."

Finding confidence is one issue to deal with, but dealing with expectations is another. For 14-year-old Tin-Tin Ho, managing the pressures put upon her by her peers is a challenge that has become increasingly prominent as the first-ever English European Cadet Girls No. 1 ranked player looks to build upon her semi-final finish in 2012.



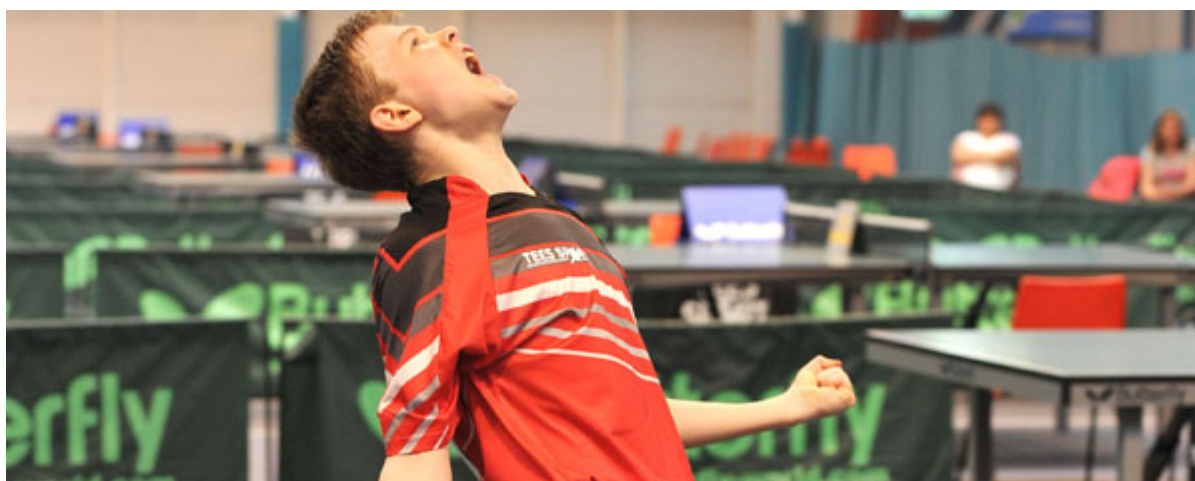
She said: "I'm trying my best not to put much pressure on myself and try not to think too much about the result. I have tried not to think about 'leading the team', just trying my best to do well, although at times I have felt some pressure.

"I have worked on trying to find my feeling first at the beginning of the match, not trying to rush and hit the ball really hard, so hopefully I won't miss as many unforced errors."

Starting slowly was an issue last year for the Paddington-born star as she fell 2-0 behind in both her quarter-final and semi-final matches in Austria. However, this time, with reigning Champion Alena Lemmer out of the age group, the teenager can focus on her other European teammates.

She explained: "Sometimes it's easier because I know how they play, what they like and what they don't like, however, they also know how I play and my strengths and weaknesses."

For some players, like 13-year-old Tom Jarvis from Skegness, familiarity won't be a problem on the circuit as he attends his maiden EYC with high hopes of causing a few shocks, "I am very excited to be representing my country in such a major table tennis tournament. I am hopeful that I will play my absolute best," said Jarvis. "Playing international table tennis for the first time was quite an eye opener in terms of the standard of the international players. It made me realize that I have a lot of hard work to do and I have been training even harder."



The National Under-14 Champion has reason to be optimistic in his debut appearance though as he performed above expectations in Malta by reaching the final of the Cadet Boys Singles, in the process beating Cadet world no. 32 Aliaksandr Khanin (BLR). He believes this is great preparation for this season's European showpiece.

He said: "I have played in several international tournaments this season and this has prepared me well for the EYC. I am aware of the level of the European players and I have gained some ranking points from some good unexpected wins.

“The main difference playing abroad is that the players are all of a very high standard. The tournaments are very intensive – usually lasting three to four days and the playing conditions in the sports halls are excellent.”

Luckily for Jarvis he will have the perfect role model to look up to in Walker as the Nottinghamshire boy hopes to round off his junior career with an appearance at the World Junior Championships in Morocco at the end of the year – an added bonus for a positive performance in Ostrava next week.

He explained: “I played one Junior World Championships before when I was actually still a cadet, I went there as part of the team as a reserve. Gavin Evans was injured so I got a call-up and that was a great experience for me.”

“Since then I’ve not been able to qualify for one so I’ve always been wanting to go to another. It’ll be a good opportunity for me to do well and I hope that I will qualify for it. It will round off both a good season and a good junior career.”

Full reports on the action from the 56th European Youth Championships will be available on the ETTA website with the up-to-date news and results on twitter with [@ETTATableTennis](#) – alternatively you can follow the tournament’s progression on the [official website](#) or by watching the [live streams on table 1 with Laola.tv](#)

56th European Youth Championships (12–21st July 2013) Ostrava, Czech Republic

Full England Squad:

Junior Boys Team: Sam Walker, George Downing, Helshan Weerasinghe and Igor Morais

Junior Girls Team: Tin-Tin Ho, Maria Tsaptsinos, Lois Peake and Emily Bolton (Tin-Tin and Emily will play in the cadet individual events)

Cadet Girls Team: Letitia McMullan and Denise Payet

Cadet Boys Team: Tom Jarvis, Luke Savill and Marcus Giles.

Coaches: Nick Jarvis, Jia Yi Liu, Alan Cooke, Stephen Gertsen and Craig Bryant

By Russell Moore

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