

Golden finish for GB at Euro Champs

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GOLDEN FINISH FOR GB AT THE EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

Newly crowned European champion Rob Davies won his second gold medal at the 2013 European Para Table Tennis Championships in Italy today when he and fellow Welshman Paul Davies took the men's class 1 team event. On the final day of the championships there was also a second medal for Rotherham based Will Bayley, as he and Swansea's Paul Karabardak took a bronze in the men's class 7 team, and for Sara Head, from Beddau, who picked up a bronze medal in the women's class 3 team event with her London 2012 partner Jane Campbell.

Rob Davies and Paul Davies took on the unbeaten German team in their third match of the men's class 1 team event and Paul Davies, silver medalist in the singles, gave the pair the perfect start by beating the Paralympic and World champion Holger Nikelis 3-0. Rob Davies, the former rugby player from Brecon, then lost only 10 points in beating the German number two Marcus Sieger 3-0 but the doubles was a much closer affair, which Nikelis and Sieger won 3-2 with some great tactical play. Rob Davies then faced Nikelis in a replay of their singles semi-final and although Nikelis pushed him hard, taking the third game 11-8, Davies came back strongly to take the fourth 11-2, the match 3-1 and clinch the tie 3-1.

That proved to be the crucial tie as the final match against an Italian team without their top ranked player Andrea Borgato resulted in a comfortable 3-0 win for the GB pair and they clinched the gold and the European title.

"I'm absolutely delighted," said Paul Davies, the pride of North Cornelly. "I didn't think there was any doubt of it in the last game against Italy but the German match was key and to defeat the Paralympic champion from London in three straight sets was great. They say you get a purple patch and that was definitely it for me. Even if Borgato had been playing I don't think it would have changed the result against Italy because we were both firing. So it was nice to beat them but in the form Rob and me were on no-one in that hall could touch us today. To come out here and get a silver in the singles and gold in the team event and to be able to call myself European champion – it doesn't get better than that. Fantastic."

For Rob Davies, who also won the award for the best male wheelchair player at the championships, it was due reward for months of hard training. "To have another gold medal is just incredible for me so I'm well happy," he said. "It's been a good tournament. The disappointment of London was hard for me so to come back and do what I have done is great. I was tired after losing the doubles against Germany so it was tough to pick myself up to play Holger. Luckily I did and beat him 3-1 so I was really chuffed as to get two over him in one competition is brilliant. I'll go back now and work even harder for the World Championships next year. It was nice to win with Paul and to win every match – I'm really happy and glad we've got the gold."

Will Bayley and Paul Karabardak faced the hugely experienced Paralympic and World team silver medalists from Spain in the semi-final of the men's class 7 team event. Karabardak came very close to giving the GB pair the perfect start, fighting back from 2-0 down against the class 6 world number one and Paralympic silver medalist Alvaro Valera to level the match at 2-2. Playing superbly he moved to 9-6 in the final game but could not close out the match and went down 11-9 in the fifth.

Bayley, the world number two from Tunbridge Wells, has struggled for consistency in the team competition here but never knows when he is beaten and against Jordi Morales, after losing the first game, he fought back from 7-2 down to take the second 12-10. He then lost the third but came back to win the match 3-2 and level the tie at 1-1. In a very tight doubles match Bayley and Karabardak were 2-0 and 8-5 up against Valera and Morales but the Spanish pair used all their experience to win some great rallies and come back and take the match 3-2.

In the fourth match Bayley took on Valera, who is a former class 8 world champion and a very skilful player. Bayley played a great match, changing tactics after losing the first game and taking the pace off the ball, targeting Valera's weaker forehand. Having won a tight second game 13-11 he won the next two 11-4 and 11-6 to take the match 3-1 and level the tie at 2-2. Karabardak got off to a great start in the deciding tie but Morales, world number 4 and a former Paralympic singles bronze medalist, came back strongly and clinched the match 11-8 in the fifth game to win the tie for Spain and take them into the final.

Afterwards Karabardak was disappointed but the Swansea player was able to take plenty of positives from his performance. "I played really well against Valera," he said, "but unfortunately he just managed to nick it at the end. I played well against Morales as well but at the crucial times I just didn't have the steel and the know-how that he had, which meant that he took the match. European championship medals aren't easy to get so it's nice to get another one and that's something to be pleased about and take away as a positive. I trained hard and played well so it has been quite a good competition for me."

Bayley was also able to reflect positively on two great singles wins. "Valera is one of those players I don't like playing," he admitted. "He is really awkward and he's smart as well but Paul gave me confidence the way he played against him and I thought if I played tactically the same way I would give myself a chance. Morales is also a difficult player – he is world no 4 and another awkward style for me. The doubles was massive but even when we lost the doubles I still thought we could win as I know Paul can beat anyone on his day. I'm pleased to win both my singles as I've never won two singles against Spain so that's a positive and I'm proud of Paul as he played good against France yesterday so we definitely deserved a medal."

Defending champions in the women's class 3 team event Sara Head and Jane Campbell began the day with a must-win match against Turkey and although Campbell fought back from 2-0 down against the Turkish number one Nergiz Altintas she lost a tight final game 11-9. Head then levelled the match with a 3-1 win against Hatice Duman, coming back from 10-8 down in both the first and fourth games. The GB pair combined to win the doubles convincingly 3-0 but when Head lost another tight match to Altintas 3-2 it was down to the last match, in which Campbell beat Duman 3-0 to clinch the tie 3-2.

They needed to win their final match to have a chance of winning the gold but the Croatian pair of Andela Muzinic and Helena Dretar Karic proved too strong and although Head and Campbell rallied well in the doubles they lost the match and the tie 3-0 and had to be content with bronze.

"It was hard getting up so early this morning knowing we had a long day ahead of us," admitted Head. "We put everything into our match against Turkey and I think we used up all our energy before we even got to the final match. We tried everything against Croatia but they deserve the gold medal – they played brilliantly. We threw everything at them and it just kept coming back. So we have to say well done to them. It's another major medal which is brilliant and every medal counts. It was such a strong field and so we wanted to medal and for me to get a second medal is fantastic."

Campbell was honest in her assessment of the matches today. "It was really good to beat Turkey," she said, "and I was glad to have won that final singles match. We always knew that Croatia would be the toughest match and we didn't play well enough to beat them today – I think we put too much pressure on ourselves by losing to Italy yesterday and we put too much pressure on winning each individual match. I'm proud to get another championship medal and there are lots of things I can work on for next year which is good."

Gorazd Vecko, GB Performance Director, was delighted with the overall performance of the team at these championships. "It has been a really good event and we have definitely taken a step forward since London last year," he said. "In the majority of our events the top players are from Europe so it was a very strong competition and to win eight medals, including two golds, is a very encouraging sign for the future."

Written by Francesca Bullock (October 5, 2013)

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