

GB finish Lignano Master Open with trio of silvers

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The GB Para Table Tennis Team picked up three silver medals in the team events at the Lignano Master Open in Italy, with Paralympic and European silver medalist Will Bayley adding a silver medal to the gold he won in the singles on Thursday alongside Paul Karabardak.

There was also success for both Aaron McKibbin, who took silver in the men's class 8, and a first international medal for 14-year-old Megan Shackleton, who partnered former Commonwealth champion Sue Gilroy and Sweden's Anna-Carin Ahlquist in the women's class 4/5 team event.



In the men's class 6/7, Bayley and Karabardak beat the Spanish/Italian combination of Jordi Morales and Raimondo Alecci to set up a final with the reigning class 7 European champions from Ukraine, world number one Maxym Nikolenko and world number three Mykhaylo Popov. The doubles proved to be the pivotal match as the GB pair held two match points before eventually going down 13-11 in the fifth and went on to lose the tie 3-1.

Although disappointed to miss out on another gold medal, Bayley was delighted with his first international competition of the 2014 season: "I'm really happy," he said. "It's been a long off season and I've trained really hard so to win gold in the singles and beat Popov twice 3-0 is very special."

The 26-year-old from Tunbridge Wells was also full of praise for his playing partner Karabardak.

"I was really proud of Paul. Popov and Nikolenko haven't lost a doubles match for two years and we had match points against them. That's the closest we've come to beating them and hopefully we can beat them at the World Championships in China later this year."

Karabardak also took plenty of positives from the tournament: "I've played well," said the man from Swansea. "I've beaten the players I needed to and given the top four players good games and I can take that into the next competition."

McKibbin, partnered by world number one Emil Andersson from Sweden, also played well at times, notably in beating the Belgian Marc Ledoux 3-0. With 3-0 wins against Belgium and Italy a 3-2 loss to Poland meant that he and Andersson finished with silver rather than gold and although pleased to win a medal, the 22-year-old Sheffield-based Londoner admitted that he had an up-and-down tournament.

"I think I played the best I've ever played against Ledoux to beat him 3-0," he said, "but it was disappointing to finish by playing badly against Poland. It's been a great experience to play with Emil and this tournament has highlighted a lot of things I've got to work on so I'll take the positives from that."

Barnsley's Sue Gilroy came up against her nemesis Borislava Peric-Rankovic from Serbia in the team event, having lost to her in the semi-finals of the singles event. She again came close to beating the world number one in their singles rubber but eventually went down 3-2. With wins against Jordan and Slovenia, the match against Serbia decided the gold medal, with the GB/Swedish combination losing 3-2 to take the silver.

"On the whole I've played well here," said Gilroy. "I've had some really good wins and I just need to start

converting my chances against Peric into wins. But I'm proud of what I've done; I've improved since last year so the hard work is paying off."

Pathway squad player Shackleton, from Todmorden, is one of GB's most promising young players and came to Italy after winning the junior wheelchair title at the National Championships. She was understandably delighted to win her first medal in only her second international and her first factor 40 tournament.

"It's amazing," she said, "I never expected to win a medal so soon. It's been a really good experience and I've learnt a lot about how to improve my game."

GB Performance Director Gorazd Vecko was generally happy with the team's performance in Italy but admitted that further improvement was needed.

"There were some really good performances," he said, "but there were also some that could have been better. Our young players did really well and showed great potential and for Will Bayley to win gold in the singles against all the top players in the world was brilliant. We didn't have all of our Performance squad here so we have to be pleased with six medals."

by Francesca Bullock (March 24, 2014)

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