

England 'can achieve even more' after division win in Tokyo

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The England team (from left) Sam Walker, Paul Drinkhall, Daniel Reed, Liam Pitchford, Alan Cooke (coach)

England's men have won the Challenge Division title to put the icing on the cake of their World Team Championship promotion campaign – and performance coach Alan Cooke believes it could be the beginning of something special.

The team beat Italy 3-1 in Tokyo today to complete an unbeaten tournament which saw them climb into the Championship Division to reclaim their place in the top tier of the table tennis world.

Liam Pitchford, as so often, gave them the perfect start with a 3-1 win over Leonardo Mutti, before Paul Drinkhall withstood a comeback from 2-0 down by Marco Rech Daldosso to close out a 3-2 victory.

Sam Walker, in at No 3 in place of Daniel Reed, went down in four ends to Niagol Stoyanov, but Pitchford beat Daldosso in four to spark the title party.

The achievement follows a promotion-clinching Saturday in which the team battled back from 2-0 down to beat Nigeria in the quarter-finals and then 2-1 down to vanquish Slovakia in the semis.

And Cooke backed his team to rack up further achievements in the years ahead.

"It's a young team and from their point of view it's the start of a journey," he said. "I honestly believe this team has got the potential to achieve a lot in the future.

"We've got a lot of things to challenge them and keep them on their toes and the next thing is the Commonwealth Games.

"Beyond that, we've got two years to really push on and hopefully in two years' time (at the next World Team Championships) we will have improved and will be ready for that challenge. We want to be right up there at the top standard.

"They all brought something different to the team and they've all gained something. It's been a super experience for everyone – but it's the start of a journey."

Spanish Open champion Drinkhall was the experienced head in the squad and said: "As a team it's been perfect. The group was an amazing start and we all played well, then we had the scare against Nigeria, but sometimes that can help. I think it got us into the spirit of close matches and helped us come through.

"Personally I would have like to have played a bit better, but it's been a great tournament and it's unbelievable to get promoted."

Pitchford added: "Everyone's had a great team spirit. It's been a while since we were in the top division, so everyone was jumping.

"Yesterday was a long day and we didn't get a lot of sleep, but we thought we might as well go for the win today and get the title as well and that completes a great tournament."

Reed, who came into the squad late after the withdrawal of Andrew Baggaley, played a key role by kick-starting the comeback against Nigeria, and said: "I wanted to be strong for the team and I think I've played really well, winning seven out of eight matches. It was really nice that Alan gave me the responsibility of playing at No 3.

"We cruised the group in a way and the lads were all playing well, but the big one was when we were 2-0 down against Nigeria. It was a bit of a shock and the atmosphere stepped up, but I stayed focused and played the way I had through the group."

Walker believes the experience will stand him and the team in good stead. He said: "We can be proud of what we've done. Our main target was to get promotion but we still wanted to win at the end today – we've finished the job off now."

"I'm disappointed that I didn't win some of the matches that I played, but the experience has been good for me. We had a great team spirit and I really felt part of the team."

Result:

Challenge Division Final:

England 3-1 Italy

Liam Pitchford bt Leonardo Mutti 3-1 (11-5, 11-7, 12-14, 11-7)

Paul Drinkhall bt Marco Rech Daldosso 3-2 (11-2, 11-3, 17-19, 6-11, 12-10)

Niagol Stoyanov bt Sam Walker 3-1 (11-3, 11-6, 9-11, 13-11)

Liam Pitchford bt Marco Rech Daldosso 3-1 (11-8, 7-11, 11-2, 11-8)

[Click here](#) to read more about England's World Team Championships campaign

England's women ended in 29th place, having beaten Portugal and then lost to Lithuania in the knockout stages.

Scotland's men finished 53rd, having beaten Finland but lost to Mexico, while the women were 65th, knocked out by Dominican Republic after beating Azerbaijan.

The Wales men's team were 65th when, having beaten Guatemala, they lost to Cyprus. The Welsh women finished 41st, losing their first knockout round to Italy.

Ireland's men were 59th, having been beaten by both Puerto Rico and Lithuania in the knockout stages.

The Guernsey men's team were 108th, beating Namibia but losing to Seychelles, while the women were 89th, emerging victorious against Botswana but losing to Barbados. Jersey's men finished 101st, beating Palestine before being knocked out by Jamaica.

Paul Stimpson (May 4, 2014)

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