

Team GB men hit the gold standard

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Posted On: May 10, 2014



Paul Davies

The GB Para Table Tennis Team picked up seven medals in the team events at the Slovenia Open today, including three golds in the men's class 1, men's class 6 and men's class 7 events. For Rob Davies and Will Bayley, it added to the singles titles they won on Thursday.

In the men's class 1 team the Welsh combination of Rob Davies and Paul Davies had to come through a tough semi-final against Italy to reach the final and Paul Davies gave them the perfect start against Germany, beating Paralympic champion Holger Nikelis 3-1.

Rob Davies made it 2-0 after beating Marcus Sieger 3-0 but Germany came back to win the doubles 3-1. In the fourth match Rob Davies got off to a slow start against Nikelis but fought back magnificently to take the match 15-13 in the fourth and give GB the gold 3-1.

Paul Davies was delighted with gold and another win against world No 2 Nikelis.

"The way my performance was yesterday I didn't think I had it in the tank," said the North Cornelly player, "but obviously there is still fight in the tiger and I just gave it all I had.

"The doubles was nip and tuck – it didn't click the way we wanted but they played the better doubles on the day and luckily Rob did the business in the end. The team was important to us to keep our European No 1 status – I couldn't have asked for a better tournament so it's on to Slovakia next week."

European champion Rob Davies showed once again why he has reached world No 1 with a typically battling performance.

"I needed a lot of energy to pick myself up after the doubles," he admitted, "but I managed to start playing a bit better and he was getting a bit nervous. Once I was ahead I just tried to keep it going but there were some very close points and I managed to keep my cool. That's the biggest part of my game at the moment – keeping my nerve and fighting."

Rob Davies also paid tribute to coach Neil Robinson: "I've got to say thank you to Neil as he's had a massive influence on Paul's and my game and without him we would be nowhere near the standard.

"If we get better he pushes us a little more and that is what is doing it for us at the moment. It's amazing to start the year with two gold medals – that was my goal before I came out here but doing it is another thing."

Will Bayley, Paul Karabardak and Billy Shilton won GB's first gold of the day in the men's class 7 team beating a combination of Belgium and the Netherlands in the final, but first had to come through a difficult semi-final against Germany.

After 15 year old Shilton understandably found the experience of world No 6 Thorsten Schwinn too much in the first singles, Bayley took on double Paralympic champion Jochen Wollmert for the first time since London 2012. At 2-7 in the fifth the world No 2 from Tunbridge Wells looked in trouble but he fought back to take the set 11-8 and the match 3-2.

Bayley and Karabardak then took the doubles 3-1 before Bayley secured GB's place in the final with a 3-0 win over Schwinn.

"It is difficult playing against Jochen Wollmert," admitted Bayley. "He is a champion and I've got a lot of respect for him which makes our matches even closer as I get a bit edgy sometimes when I play him. He is a great player so I was really pleased to get through that match."

In the final, Karabardak lost a tight first match against Jean-Paul Montanus of the Netherlands and Bayley then beat the tricky Ben Despineux of Belgium 3-0 to level the tie. Bayley and Karabardak produced some of their best form to win the doubles before Bayley secured the gold with a mature performance against Montanus, beating the talented Dutchman 3-1.

"We really believed we could win today," said Bayley. "We might not have been favourites going into the final as my record against Montanus isn't good – he is one of the players I tend to struggle with so I was quite nervous playing him but I just stayed really cool and calm.

"He forced the game a little bit and I think I just had the edge today and it was great to get the gold medal. Paul played brilliantly in the doubles – that was probably the best we've played together in the doubles."

"I think we're getting back now to playing our best," agreed Swansea's Karabardak, "because I don't think we've played our best doubles for maybe a year and a bit so to beat the Germans and then a good combination of Belgium and the Netherlands is really good and it was key to beating both teams today.

"The gold means quite a bit – I was disappointed not to win my singles when I had a great chance but it's a good gold medal to win here and I think we deserve it really because we have lost a lot of finals so to win one is really good."

Shilton, from Stonehouse in Gloucestershire, was winning his first international gold medal and is clearly benefiting from the experience.

"I've learnt a lot from being involved in these big matches with Will and Paul," he said, "and it's my first gold medal which is great. I just need to keep training hard and playing well."

Dave Wetherill added gold to the bronze he won in the singles, winning the men's class 6 event with the Croatian Pavao Jozic.

In the semi-final against Russia Wetherill won both his singles and combined with Jozic to beat the Russian pair of Aleksandr Esaulov and Dinar Safiullin to set up a final against France. After Jozic lost to world No 6 Bastien Grundeler, Wetherill beat the French No 2 Thomas Fernandez 3-1. The Torpoint athlete then won the doubles with Jozic and clinched the gold with a great win over Grundeler 3-0, taking revenge for his loss to the Frenchman in the final in Italy in March.

"When I was 2-0, 9-1 up I just wanted to make sure I got it done," said Wetherill. "He has caused me some pain in the past and it was nice to beat him so convincingly. It's the end of four days of really intense table tennis and in the past maybe this is where I've struggled.

"I was pleased because I thought before the game that I just needed to work my hardest and battle. I think I've got a few more gears and I'm always looking to improve. I've only lost one match here (in the semi-final of the singles) and I've had a good tournament."

In the men's class 10 team Kim Daybell and Aaron McKibbin beat the Netherlands in their semi-final 3-1, combining well in the doubles before Daybell clinched the tie with a great 3-2 win over class 10 world No 5 Bas Hergelink. They had to wait for nearly two hours to play their final as Spain eventually beat Russia in a titanic semi-final and had to settle for the silver after Spain ran out 3-0 winners.

"I think we have been good throughout the whole team event," said Daybell, the Leeds University medical student from Sheffield. "We maybe just ran out of steam a little bit but overall it's the first time we've played together and we've played well.

"Aaron has held his own against all the higher class players and I've been able to pick up results here and there so overall it's been positive for the worlds. I've won some tight games that maybe I was losing a couple of months ago so I'm in good shape."

For Sheffield based Londoner McKibbin, a class 8 player playing in a class 10 event, it was an improvement on his performance in the singles event.

"This is the best I've played all season," he agreed, "and it's been nice to play with Kim. The final doubles against Spain was the first doubles match we've lost and that's the best I've played in doubles for a long time.

"I played well in the singles matches as well – obviously it's harder for me to get the wins but I've been competing so I'm happy with that and it's a good medal to win. It's put me in good stead for Slovakia and I just need to keep it going."

Jack Hunter-Spivey and Tommy Urhaug had a comfortable 3-0 win over Turkey in their men's class 5 semi-final and took the silver after losing a tight final to France 3-2.

For Widnes teenager Hunter-Spivey, who celebrates his 19th birthday on Sunday, the experience of playing with the Paralympic champion and world No 1 is invaluable.

"Tommy has a wealth of experience," he said. "You can learn everything from him, from technique to lifestyle to how he conducts himself in different situations. I felt I could have played a lot better in the final but on reflection I've had a good tournament and need to kick on for Slovakia now."

Sara Head and Jane Campbell, bronze medalists in London 2012, came up against a tough combination of world No 7 Nergiz Altintas from Turkey and the American Pamela Fontaine in their women's class 1-3 semi-final and in their first tournament since the European Championships last year lack of match practice told as they went down 3-0.

"I think I played well in patches but just not consistently enough to win the match," said Campbell. "I need to work on more consistency on my backhand particularly. They are both very good players and very aggressive but we'll come back fighting."

Head has had to fight her way back to fitness after an operation in the winter and showed improved form throughout the tournament.

"I've come back and fought really hard," she said, "and had some really good matches so I am actually pleased that I have improved as the week has gone on. Hopefully I'll improve even more again between now and Slovakia next week.

"More match practice will improve my positivity and my mental focus. After seven months of not competing it is hard to bring it back so now I've got it I'm looking forward to Slovakia."

Tom Matthews can also be very proud of his bronze medal as he and his Swiss playing partner Sylvio Keller lost their semi-final in men's class 1 to a strong German team. Matthews, a former mountain bike rider from Aberdare, is still very inexperienced at this level but is showing great potential for the future.

"I've learnt to focus on the game more," he said, "and not get distracted by things around me. I'm rushing the shots a bit too much but that will come in time. My first medal at a factor 40 tournament is huge so I'm well happy with that. I'll take everything I've learnt here on to Slovakia now and hopefully come away with another medal."

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Francesca Bullock (9th May 2014)

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