

Davies and Davies lead GB medal haul

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Davies and Davies take gold for GB in Slovakia

European champions Paul Davies and Rob Davies produced a great performance at the Slovakian Open to take gold in the men's class 1 team event. During a successful weekend there were also medals for Will Bayley/Paul Karabardak (men's class 7 silver), Aaron McKibbin with Belgium's Marc Ledoux (men's class 8 silver), David Wetherill with Valentin Kneuss from Switzerland (men's class 6 silver) and Jane Campbell/Sara Head (women's class 1-3 bronze).

The two Davies were involved in a titanic battle in the final with a combined team of Jean-Francois Ducay from France and the Italian Andrea Borgato, who took an early lead when Ducay, winner of the singles here, beat Paul Davies 3-0. Rob Davies levelled for GB by beating Borgato 3-1 and the Welsh duo fought back from 0-2 down in the doubles only to lose 5-11 in the fifth.

Rob Davies took a 2-0 lead against the Paralympic silver medalist Ducay, who had beaten him in the semi-finals of the singles, but the Frenchman is a determined competitor and fought back to level at 2-2. In a tense final set Davies always just had the edge and finally clinched victory on his third match point. It then came down to the final singles between Paul Davies and Borgato and after twice coming back to level the match the Welshman played a superb final game to clinch the gold medal 11-6 in the fifth.

"I don't know where I got it from," said North Cornelly's Paul Davies, "it was definitely from the bottom of the barrel. I knew I could do it but five sets was hard. It was a great result – especially to win another gold and to beat Borgato. I wasn't good against Ducay but thank God Rob beat him and it came down to the veteran to do it in the final end. This is massive for our confidence – Ducay and Borgato were the strongest team here and for us to beat them – I'm over the moon."

"It was a very tough match," agreed Rob Davies, "four of the best players at the moment in class 1. It was a brilliant game and so close – just happy to come away with it and Paul played brilliantly. Against Ducay I've been there before so I have that in the bank and it was just about keeping positive. I knew what I was doing wrong so it was just a matter of changing that during the game and trying not to get nervous and playing like I can, which I think I have for the last two days."

In their semi-final against a combined Switzerland/Korea/Kuwait team Rob Davies faced the world number four Chang Ho Lee for the first time since losing to the Korean in the final of the German Open last year and put that defeat behind him with a 3-0 win. With Paul Davies having beaten Sylvio Keller 3-0 in the first singles Davies and Davies secured their place in the final with a 3-0 win in the doubles.

In Men's Class 8 Sheffield-based Londoner Aaron McKibbin and Belgian Marc Ledoux faced a tough challenge in the final against the world number three and four from China but competed well despite a 3-0 loss. McKibbin played well despite his 3-0 reverse against world number four Chao Kun Ye and Ledoux lost a close match with Shuai Zhao 3-2 before a competitive doubles match ended 3-1 to China.

McKibbin, 22, said: "I was looking to play China all week as it is the only chance we get to play them before the Worlds. I think I played quite well against Ye – he is obviously one of the best players in the world and it has helped me because I understand what I need to do against him so I can go back and work on it. I didn't get the result but the performance and understanding of how to play him in the Worlds is what I was aiming for."

On the way to the final McKibbin came back from 0-2 down against Gyula Zborai from Hungary to give GB/Belgium a great start in their semi-final and, after Ledoux beat the world number five Andras Csonka 3-0, they combined to win the doubles 12-10 in the fourth to take the match 3-0.

"Hungary are one of the best teams in the world and Zborai got to the final of the singles here so I knew he was in good form," said McKibbin. "I had a bad start to the match but I kept believing that I could come back into it. I was happy to get the win because he is a higher ranked player and he's playing well so it's good for me."

In Men's Class 7 Will Bayley and Paul Karabardak started well in their final against Ukraine with Karabardak taking the first set against Maksym Nikolenko before the world number one came back to win 3-1. Bayley also made a good start against European champion Mykhaylo Popov but could not take his chances and lost 10-12 in the fourth. Bayley and Karabardak fought hard in the doubles but the Ukraine pair were too strong and clinched the gold with a 3-1 win.

"It was a tough game," said Sheffield-based Bayley, "all the games were quite tight and it was one or two points here or there – he played really well and I didn't take my chances. We can learn from this – you learn more from your defeats maybe more than you learn from winning so that's a good thing."

Welshman Karabardak agreed: "I think we played quite well. We both had chances to win our singles and didn't and then 0-2 down going into the doubles is hard. I played well against Nikolenko and it was a shame I couldn't have taken some of those tight points. I think I've played quite well here and shown that I can compete with the top players again."

Bayley and Karabardak had earlier won a very tough semi-final against an Egyptian/Polish combination that had put out China in the quarter-finals. With Bayley beating Michal Deigslar 3-0 and Karabardak losing in three deuce sets to Ahmed Sayed the GB duo found themselves 1-2 after a comprehensive 0-3 defeat in the doubles. Bayley displayed all his fighting qualities to come back from 1-2 against the very talented Egyptian Sayed for a 3-2 win and Karabardak secured their place in the final with a 3-0 win over Deigslar.

Paralympic bronze medalists Jane Campbell and Sara Head evoked memories of London 2012 in beating a Turkey/USA combination that they had lost to in Slovenia last week. Campbell came from 2-1 down to beat Pamela Fontaine but a 0-3 loss for Head against the world number seven Nergiz Altintas from Turkey and a 1-3 doubles defeat left them needing to win both of the final singles. Another great fight back from Campbell, this time from 0-2 against Altintas, levelled the scores and Head clinched the match with a 3-0 win against Fontaine.

That match won them the bronze medal and despite losing their final match against China the two GB players are taking all the positives from the experience.

"China are always going to be tough," said Campbell, "and we've just got to try not to be afraid of them because they are China and play our game. We've learnt a fair bit playing them today and it is a good reminder as we haven't seen them for a while."

Campbell can be proud of the way she fought back twice against both Altintas and Fontaine. "It was understanding the tactics a little bit better each time," she said, "but also just desperately wanting a bronze medal – we always fight for a bronze medal! I've lost to Pamela Fontaine the last three times I've played her so I was quite fired up for that one. It was the best I've returned her serves and I was really chuffed – I wasn't going to let that one go."

Torpoint's David Wetherill and Swiss partner Valentin Kneuss lost the doubles against Sweden in their first match of the day but two wins in the singles for Wetherill helped to give GB/Switzerland a 3-1 win. Their final match in the round robin event against Spain was effectively a gold medal match with both teams unbeaten. World number one Alvaro Valera and Alberto Seoane, winner of the class 6 singles here, proved too strong and took the gold with a 3-0 win.

"I was disappointed not to play my best against Seoane," said Wetherill, who also lost to the Spaniard in the semi-finals of the singles, "but I've only lost three games over the two weeks (in Slovenia and Slovakia) so overall I've had a good two weeks and it's nice to win another medal."

"I think we need to be happy with the final preparation tournament before the World Championships," said GB Performance Director Gorazd Vecko. "To have China, Korea and some really strong European countries here was a good test for us. We will have training camps and international camps now to improve performance leading

up to the World Championships in China in September and this tournament has been really good because we know what we need to do better.”

By Franceca Bullock (May 19, 2014)

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