

Medals would cap a great season, says Cooke

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Alan Cooke chats to Daniel Reed at the Lilleshall training camp. Picture by Steve Parkin

Alan Cooke is backing England's players to deal with expectations and round off a great season by finishing on the podium at the Commonwealth Games.

In spite of the threat posed by the likes of Singapore and India, England's performance coach believes his charges are ready to peak both physically and mentally when the Games get under way in Glasgow next week.

After a training camp in China last month, the squad continued their preparations at Lilleshall and Cooke said: "There are a lot of good signs on this training camp – they're very enthusiastic, fitness levels are good, energy levels at the table are very good. We're nearly there but not quite.

"Everybody's in the right frame of mind. All the extra things that have been put in this week (including media duties and sports science seminars) could potentially disturb a player's concentration but I think they've handled it really well and the quality of the table tennis has been good."

Cooke, who himself came out of retirement to play at the Commonwealths in Melbourne eight years ago, points to the fact that eight of the 10 players have previous Games experience as a crucial factor in determining their potential success.

"Overall we've got quite an experienced squad," he said. "Although they're still relatively young, most of the players here have played a Commonwealth Games before and a number of them have played the Olympics as well, so they have been here before. The difference for us at a Commonwealths is that we have expectations to medal.

"I think they are all totally focused this year on trying to give themselves the best chance, be it in team, in singles, in doubles.

"I think we've got opportunities in many of the events but most of these have got the experience to not think too far ahead.

"They know what the goal is but it's about doing the right things day in, day out between now and when we start the competition."

Among the 'right things' are putting into practice the good habits of sport science – and the squad have had the input of strength and conditioning coaches, physiotherapists and a sports psychologist at Lilleshall, thanks to a partnership with Sheffield Hallam University.

"Most of them have already experienced all the things they are experiencing this week," said Cooke, "but it's still good having the sports science guys."

"It's just keeping them switched on to things that will be important when you play a competition over a two-week period. It's important you are continually on top of rehydration and so on, because if your concentration levels drop at the wrong moment then your performance is going to cost you."

With the men's team having already clinched promotion back to the top flight of the World Team Championships this season, plus individual successes including Paul Drinkhall's Spanish Open triumph, Commonwealth medals would cap a memorable few months for England.

"Touch wood, it has been a great season so far," said Cooke. "Lots of good things have happened for the individuals and the team, so certainly the players are confident but not complacent coming into the Games."

By Paul Stimpson (July 17th, 2014)

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