

'Ashes' victory for England

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The England squad celebrate their victory over Australia. Picture by Steve Parkin

England's men whitewashed their Australian counterparts to set up an 'Ashes' victory to send them off to the Commonwealth Games in good heart.

The squad of Liam Pitchford, Paul Drinkhall, Andrew Baggaley, Daniel Reed and Sam Walker proved too strong for the men from Down Under, winning three singles and two doubles clashes at the University of Central Lancashire's Sir Tom Finney Sports Centre in Preston.

And although England's women's line-up of Joanna Drinkhall, Kelly Sibley and Tin-Tin Ho were beaten, the 3-2 losing scoreline meant England clinched a 7-3 overall scoreline in front of an enthusiastic three-figure crowd.

Paul Drinkhall put the first point on the board with a three straight win over William Henzell, though he had to save game points in both the first and third ends before prevailing on his second match point 13-11, 11-6, 14-12.



Paul Drinkhall takes on William Henzell at Preston. Picture by Steve Parkin

But it was soon 1-1 overall as Sibley lost in four to Sally Zhang. Having taken the first 11-9, England's No 2 raced into 6-1 and 8-2 leads in the second, only for her opponent to reel off seven straight points. Sibley levelled at 9-9, but Zhang took the next two to level the tie.

The third appeared destined to be a mirror image of the second as Sibley fought back from 6-1 down to level. The next four points were shared, but Zhang took charge from then on to take the game 11-9 and complete victory 11-8 in the next.

On paper, Pitchford's clash against world No 577 Chris Yan looked routine, but the England No 1 saw his opponent storm out of the blocks to open up a 9-2 lead in the first. Pitchford took the next four points and, although Yan had enough of a cushion to take the game, signs were that Pitchford was finding his form.

And so it proved as Chesterfield's finest showed his class, rattling off the next three 11-8, 11-2, 11-6 to put the men 2-0 ahead.

On the women's table, Joanna Drinkhall made short work of Melissa Tapper, streaking through the first end with only one point conceded and not looking in any trouble thereafter as she recorded an 11-1, 11-5, 11-8 victory.

The doubles featured the only titanic struggle of the day on the men's table as Drinkhall and Baggaley came from 1-0 and 2-1 down to force a dramatic win. The match turned in a monumental fourth end in which the English pair saved four match points – the second courtesy of an almost impossible retrieve by Drinkhall. But the Australians were also in no mood to give up the game lightly, saving five game points themselves before England finally raised the roof by taking their sixth chance to take the end 20-18.

The fifth was somewhat less breathless, the home pair taking it 11-6 to keep up the 100 per cent record on the men's table.

In the first women's doubles, Drinkhall and Sibley took the first 11-5 before a fortunate netcord at 10-10 helped the Australians to level by taking the next 12-10. That seemed to lift the green and gold pair as they pulled away to win in four.

Tin-Tin Ho was unable to prevent Miao Miao clinching overall victory for the women from Down Under. Though never outclassed, the English youngster had to give second best to the extra experience of her 33-year-old opponent, losing in three straight.

Baggaley ensured England could not lose the overall tie, some scintillating forehand play helping him to see off the challenge of David Powell in three.

And a few minutes later Ho and Sibley ended the women's match on a high – and clinched overall 'Ashes' victory for England – with a four-end victory over Tapper and Vivian Dederko.

That left the second men's doubles match – though try telling Sam Walker and Danny Reed it was a dead rubber against Kane Townsend and Heming Hu.

The English pair were full value for a 2-0 lead and it looked as if completing the whitewash was a formality.

But Townsend and Hu had other ideas, taking the third 11-4 and maintaining that form to open a 7-4 lead in the fourth. But Walker and Reed were not to be denied, coming back to take the end 11-9 and with it clinch the 7-3 overall victory.

The England squad, which also includes Hannah Hicks and Karina Le Fevre, were suitably upbeat after the match as they now head off to Glasgow with medal expectations.

Joanna Drinkhall said: "Tonight was really interesting, we did lose 3-2 but the two matches we did win would be in the team event.

"In the matches we did lose we learned a lot that we can take into the few days' training before the games start. We can all play better but there's obvious things we can work on in training to win some of the matches we lost today.

"It's finally here, we're going to the games later today and then we'll be there until the end of the games so it's really exciting. It's good to have some focus going into the training after the match tonight – there's no point practising for the sake of practice so it's good to have something to work on."

Baggaley, who is heading to his fourth Commonwealths, said: "It was a good team performance and a good final match before the games. I think it was important for me personally to get a good victory under my belt and for the team as well – it stands us in good stead and gives us confidence for the games."

Results

Men – England 5 Australia 0

P Drinkhall 3 W Henzell 0 (13-11, 11-6, 14-12)

L Pitchford 3 C Yan 1 (6-11, 11-8, 11-2, 11-6)

P Drinkhall/A Baggaley 3 (6-11, 11-8, 10-12, 20-18, 11-6)

A Baggaley 3 D Powell 0 (11-9, 12-10, 11-8)

S Walker/D Reed 3 K Townsend/H Hu 1 (11-8, 11-7, 4-11, 11-9)

Women – England 2 Australia 3

K Sibley 1 S Zhang 3 (11-9, 9-11, 9-11, 8-11)

J Drinkhall 3 M Tapper 0 (11-1, 11-5, 11-8)

J Drinkhall/K Sibley 1 S Zhang/Miao Miao 3 (11-5, 10-12, 3-11, 8-11)

T Ho 0 Miao Miao 3 (6-11, 9-11, 7-11)

K Sibley/T Ho 3 V Dederko/M Tapper 1 (11-8, 11-5, 9-11, 11-5)

OVERALL SCORE: ENGLAND 7 AUSTRALIA 3

By Paul Stimpson (July 20th, 2014)

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