

Medals would crown Paul's stellar year

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Paul Drinkhall

Paul Drinkhall is looking to cap the best year of his professional life with a possible haul of four Commonwealth Games medals.

The 24-year-old ascended to a career high of No 81 in the world rankings in June on the back of eye-catching performances at the World Team Championships and a historic triumph in the Spanish Open, where he became only the second English player to win a World Tour event.

Now he is aiming to add to the team silver and mixed doubles bronze he won in Delhi four years ago.

He has four chances to do so – in the team and singles events, in the men's doubles with Liam Pitchford and in the mixed doubles, once again with his wife Joanna.

"I think the team is in a very good place and I am as well," said Drinkhall, from Loftus on Teesside.

"It's been a great 12 months coming back from injury last year and then winning the Spanish Open was a big achievement for me, never winning one before, but also just feeling that the hard work I'd been doing in training had paid off.

"It proved that I can win an event and hopefully going into Glasgow that confidence throughout the games will help me.

"I think we can medal in every event and I can medal in every event but you've just got to make sure you prepare as well as you can and do the business when we're there."

The three-time European junior champion puts his resurgence down to two main factors – the legacy of almost two decades playing the game and an enforced break following hip surgery last year.

"I think my success over the last 12 months has just come from practice, really – practice over years and years and years," he said.

"I've been playing for 17 years now so it's all building up and I've been working hard for all of it pretty much. For the last three or four years I've moved abroad – one year in Italy, two in Germany and staying in Germany next year, so I think that's had a big input to it.

"With the injury I kind of had a forced break which I think after a lot of years of training and having a couple of weeks off in the summer – having five or six months off really helped me to get back and focus on my goals and do what I need to do."

Drinkhall, at his third Commonwealths, believes the team are well placed to emulate the line-up of Andrew Baggaley, Alex Perry, Gareth Herbert, Matthew Syed and Terry Young, who won gold at Manchester in 2002.

With Baggaley still a key member of the team, and Pitchford, Danny Reed and Sam Walker on the up, Drinkhall sees plenty of cause for optimism.

"I think from a team point of view we're the strongest we've ever been," he said.

"Obviously, Liam's had a great year and everyone has been improving a lot actually in the rankings, and if not in the rankings then in their game, and it's only a matter of time until that shows.

"I think Glasgow is a great stage for us to really show that we're a team to be looked at for the big majors like the world championships and Europeans.

"Everyone is saying Singapore are the main rivals and that's true, they're the top seeds in probably every event, but there's a lot of players out there, like Gavin Rungay, Ryan Jenkins who are dangerous as well.

"There's a lot of players who are dangerous and you've really got to be focused and playing well to beat them. You've got to take every game really seriously. Even the smaller countries that you wouldn't really think are table tennis countries, everyone can play now – it seems like it's happening in every sport – there's no weak players out there."

The fact the Games is virtually a home occasion can play into England's hands, argues Drinkhall.

"The difference is obviously the travelling, you've not got to factor that into your preparation you know you're just getting a bus journey up to Glasgow and it's a couple of hours and you're there, whereas in Delhi you had to go out early," he said.

"There's going to be quite a lot of support for us, and possibly against us with the Scottish as well.

"It'll be different but in Delhi when we played against India it was quite noisy and the Indians were definitely against us – you could feel that but we managed to come through that game and win the silver medal, so hopefully this time we'll do the same thing.

"It'll help a lot that our family and friends are can be there and hopefully that side will be quite similar to the London Olympics."

By Russell Moore (July 21st, 2014)

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