

England claim men's team silver at Glasgow 2014

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England claimed Commonwealth Games silver following a gallant defeat to Singapore in the final of the men's team event at Scotstoun on Monday afternoon.

The top two seeds in the tournament had both powered their way to the final over the first four days in Glasgow and rightfully lined up side-by-side for the gold medal match in a packed Scotstoun venue. England, the underdogs, arrived with hopes that home advantage could overturn the ranking differentials of the impressive Singaporean trio of Gao Ning (world rank 12), Zhan Jian (34) and Li Hu (76).

The contest began in impressive fashion with possibly the match of the day between Zhan Jian and Paul Drinkhall.

Jian, born in China like team mates Gao Ning and Li Hu, was playing in his first Commonwealth Games and fell 1-0 and 2-1 behind to Drinkhall – who is ranked 51 places behind the Singaporean. However, rather than be overawed by the occasion, the former Chinese national squad member picked up his game to force a deciding end with an 11-7 fourth game.

The start of the fifth game was always likely to be crucial and it was Jian who cruised ahead. Blow-by-blow the 32-year-old forced his way on top, ultimately securing Singapore a 1-0 lead with a dominant 11-2 final game.

Next up for England was 21-year-old sensation Liam Pitchford who faced Gao Ning, a player whom he had actually previously beaten twice before despite the Singaporean's lofty world ranking of 12.

Despite the Englishman's confidence and a relatively close start, Pitchford fell 1-0 behind to an 11-9 game. At 8-2 up in the second end it looked as though Pitchford had rectified any problems and was returning to the form he showed when the pair last met at the German Open, but an amazing comeback by Ning forced the game into deuce. Ning opened up a 2-0 lead with a 13-11 game to stun the Scotstoun faithful.

Soon after, the world no. 12 completed the 3-0 win with another impressive game – hitting top form to win it 11-3 and leave England's gold medal hopes hanging by a thread.

Those hopes, however, were briefly rekindled when Andrew Baggaley and Paul Drinkhall upset the odds to defeat Ning and Li Hu 3-1 in the doubles.

Despite dropping the first game 11-8 in controversial circumstances – the umpire deciding a serve had not passed the parallel despite replays showing otherwise, Drinkhall and Baggaley worked their way back into the match with a gutsy 11-6 second game. Two more games followed for the Englishmen to secure victory and provide the crowd with some hope that a great turnaround could occur.

That miracle would need to start with Baggaley (ranked 166th in the world) defeating Jian (34th) in the fourth fixture of the final. A win there would set Pitchford up to face Hu, another player who had spent seven years in the Chinese national team, for a conclusive singles match in which the Englishman would start as a slight favourite.

However, despite the 31-year-old's best efforts, Baggaley was unable to match his illustrious opponent for speed and strength of spin as he fell 2-0 behind. With the match at 10-6, Jian showed his first sign of nerves, allowing Baggaley to close to 10-9, but a confident point later he secured the gold medal for Singapore, leaving England to claim another men's team silver after the squad's success at Delhi 2010.

While the team were disappointed to lose on the day, a silver medal was a great return for the English quintet of

Pitchford, Drinkhall, Baggaley, Sam Walker and Daniel Reed who can look forward to the singles and doubles events later in the week with optimism to further build on their medal haul.

England no. 1, Pitchford, said: "We're disappointed but it was always going to be a hard against a very tough team. It's the same medal as four years ago but we've improved so much as a team. We thought we had a chance but it just wasn't to be.

"We knew they were favourites but we tried to get at them and make them nervous. We thought they looked shaky in their semi-final against Nigeria but they brought it together against us and played some really top stuff."

Team mate Drinkhall echoed his sentiments and praised Singapore who had stepped up their own game since the previous meeting in Delhi. The 24-year-old said: "We are there or thereabouts, it's just a couple of points either way but we'll be back in four years and this will only make us determined.

"This is a much stronger Singapore team than four years ago. They've brought in two new players who were not eligible in Delhi and they really pushed on. I think we've closed the gap on Singapore. These guys are very experienced, some of them are ex-Chinese national team members and he's a top player. We are just getting better and better and while they are coming to the end of the career, we are just starting to peak."

Drinkhall then added a final comment about his own medal prospects in the singles and doubles for the remainder of the tournament: "I'm playing well. I've come into the tournament with confidence. I wasn't playing at my best at the start but I've slowly got into it and I can still get better.

"I really think there are three medals for me and I really want one of those golds and I believe we can medal in every event. I know we can beat every pair in the doubles."

Men's Team Final:

Singapore 3-1 England

Zhan Jian bt Paul Drinkhall 3-2 (5-11, 11-5, 6-11, 11-7, 11-2)

Gao Ning bt Liam Pitchford 3-0 (11-9, 13-11, 11-3)

Paul Drinkhall/Andrew Baggaley bt Gao Ning/Li Hu 3-1 (8-11, 11-6, 11-8, 11-3)

Zhan Jian bt Andrew Baggaley 3-0 (11-4, 11-8, 11-9)

by Russell Moore (July 28, 2014)

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