

England complete historic mixed doubles 1-2-3

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(Press Association)

England's table tennis stars sealed a historic 1-2-3 in the mixed doubles on the final day of action at Scotstoun in the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games with husband and wife pair Paul and Joanna Drinkhall winning England's first gold on the table since Manchester 2002.

And to round off a historic day, Liam Pitchford took England's first ever singles medal, beating India's SK Achanta 4-2 to take a brilliant bronze.

The England team already knew that mixed doubles gold and silver were in the bag following Friday's incredible victory by Liam Pitchford and Tin-Tin Ho over top seeds Jian Zhan and Feng Tianwei, while the Drinkhall duo beat fellow English players Daniel Reed and Kelly Sibley to make it an all-England final.

Reed and Sibley, who came so close to playing for gold in their narrow 3-2 semi-final loss, played first on the showcourt in Scotstoun against the world no.4 and 34 from Singapore Zhan and Tianwei – who had both already achieved team gold medals at Glasgow 2014.

True to form, the top seeds took the first game 11-5 but after that game the English pair mounted an incredible comeback to rattle off three straight games, defying their lowly world rankings, to secure a shock bronze medal and ensure a perfect 1-2-3 for Team England.

Twenty-six-year-old Sibley was understandably delighted: "It feels absolutely amazing, I can't quite believe it, I'm still shaking a little bit. We knew the pressure was going to be all on them but we knew that we play well together and if we just kept the pressure on them, we could cause an upset."

Reed added: "It feels amazing, it shows we have got a good friendship and good trust and when you are under pressure that shows, I'm really proud of us. For England to have a one-two-three is amazing and it's a dream come true."

Bronze was Sibley's first ever Commonwealth Games medal while Reed could celebrate his first doubles medal having twice won silver previously as part of the men's team in 2010 and 2014.



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That set the stage for the all-England final between Drinkhall/Drinkhall and Pitchford/Ho and it was the now Chertsey-based couple of flew out of the blocks to lead 2-0 with 11-7 and 11-3 games, the second sealed by Joanna's glorious forehand as their procession to gold seemed well underway.

However, the prodigal talents of Pitchford and Ho, showed why they are so respected despite their tender years as they came back in strong fashion of their own to level the final 2-2 with a powerful 11-5 third game backed up with a tense 12-10 hold in the fourth.

At that stage the gold medal was well and truly up for grabs and it was the Drinkhalls who made the strongest move and raced ahead. Paul in particular was unleashing all his emotion during each point won as the husband and wife pair set up six match points at 10-4. Although Liam and Tin-Tin saved one they were cruelly denied a chance at a second when a dead net point dribbled over their side to gift Paul and Joanna the win.



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Unfortunate circumstances in which to secure the gold but a podium full of English talent was a dream come true for many within the English game.

Joanna Drinkhall was overcome with emotion after her gold medal success: "It's great to win a mixed doubles event and it's great that we can share that – the crowd here have been fantastic and the whole atmosphere has been so good. To come out with a gold medal – the moment gets the better of you, I'm a bit emotional right now."

While for 15-year-old Tin-Tin, a silver medal was a great return from her Commonwealth Games debut: "It feels great to get a silver medal. They played really well, we didn't get the best of starts, we managed to get back in but couldn't get the last set. It's still brilliant to pick up a silver on my Games debut."

Unfortunately for Joanna Drinkhall and Sibley their day would end on a bitter note as they threw away a 2-0 lead to lose 3-2 in the women's doubles bronze medal match to Canada's Anqi Luo and Zhang Mo.

The English pair were well on top of their opponents throughout the first three ends leading 2-0 and 8-5 but conceded the third game 8-11 before missing a match point at 10-9 in the fourth to get sent to a decider 14-12. That final game also proved close but the Canadian pair came through 12-10 and dampened the day for the English girls.

But England got the perfect end to the Games when Pitchford took the bronze medal in the men's singles – the first time England had won any Commonwealth singles medal.

England's No 1 started aggressively, not allowing a strangely lethargic Achanta to settle as he motored into a 2-0 lead. The Indian roused himself to run away with the third 11-4, but Liam was right back on his game to take the fourth set 11-9 and re-establish his advantage.

Still World No 44 Achanta refused to cave in and an 11-6 win in the fifth kept him in the match.

And when the Indian led 10-9 in the next, the crowd were wondering whether another epic match was on the cards to match the semi-final, when Pitchford went down 4-3 to Gao Ning having led 3-2.

But the Chesterfield man saved the game point with an imperious forehand and took the next two to put himself in dreamland as the first member of England's Commonwealth singles medal-winners club.

Table Tennis England President Doreen Stannard said: "My heartiest congratulations to all. Brilliant performance, I'm very proud."

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Results:

Men's Singles semi-final:

Gao Ning (SIN) bt Liam Pitchford 4-3 (11-8, 11-13, 14-12, 6-11, 10-12, 11-7, 11-6)

Men's Singles bronze medal match:

Liam Pitchford bt Sharath Kamal Achanta (IND) 4-2 (11-6, 11-8, 4-11, 11-9, 6-11, 12-10)

Women's Doubles semi-final:

Feng Tianwei/Yu Mengyu (SIN) bt Joanna Drinkhall/Kelly Sibley 3-0 (11-9, 11-9, 11-6)

Women's bronze medal match:

Anqi Luo/Zhang Mo (CAN) bt Joanna Drinkhall/Kelly Sibley 3-2 (6-11, 10-12, 11-8, 14-12, 12-10)

Mixed Doubles final:

Paul Drinkhall/Joanna Drinkhall bt Liam Pitchford/Tin-Tin Ho 3-2 (11-7, 11-3, 5-11, 10-12, 11-5)

Mixed Doubles bronze medal match:

Daniel Reed/Kelly Sibley bt Jian Zhan/Feng Tianwei (SIN) 3-1 (5-11, 11-9, 11-7, 12-10)

by Russell Moore (August 2, 2014)

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