

Rob & Co ready to take on the world

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Rob Davies

World No 1 Rob Davies heads to China next week hoping to add the title of world champion to the men's class 1 European crown that he won last year.

The former rugby player from Brecon is one of nine GB players who will compete in the 2014 ITT Para Table Tennis World Championships in Beijing from September 6-15.

"Training has been going really well," said Davies. "I'm well prepared and happy with the way I'm playing and can't wait to get out to China now. It should be an amazing atmosphere."

The 30 year old has come a long way since he made his World Championship debut in Korea four years ago.

"The experience I've gained over the last four years should be massive," he said. "I've learned so much and I know what to expect now, so I'll take that with me."

"Knowing how to prepare for a major championship is really important for me as I have my set routines and then I know I can perform like I do at home."

"Winning the Europeans gave me a lot of confidence and I've been training harder than ever – I know that no one will have trained harder than me and hopefully that will stand me in good stead."

Having taken over the world No 1 ranking from reigning World and Paralympic champion Holger Nikelis last year Davies, confirmed his status this season by taking gold in the Slovenia Open, although a semi-final defeat to his old rival Jean-Francois Ducay in Slovakia showed that the Frenchman is likely to be one of his toughest rivals again in China.

"There are a lot of good players," said Davies, "and I'm not looking at anyone as my main competitor. It would be massive to be world champion – winning the Europeans, Worlds and Paralympics are my three goals."

"I've got to play well and if I do then I will have a good chance. As long as I'm enjoying my table tennis and having fun then I know I can play well."

London 2012 star and world No 2 Will Bayley has reached the final of the men's class 7 singles at the last three major championships and will be hoping for a first World Championship medal after taking gold in the Europeans in 2011, Paralympic silver in 2012 and European silver in 2013.

"The experience of the past three finals helps massively," said the Sheffield-based 26 year old from Tunbridge Wells, "because I know how to prepare for these big tournaments and I believe in myself 100 per cent that I can perform under that sort of pressure."

"The World Championships in China will be brilliant. Table tennis is their national sport and it's somewhere I feel I've got unfinished business after not playing my best in Beijing in 2008 – I want to play well there this time so I'm looking forward to it."

"It is going to be a real test for us but I feel that the whole GB team is so well prepared that we can take on anybody."

Bayley also has good prospects of a medal in the men's class 6-7 team competition with Swansea's Paul Karabardak – the pair won European bronze in 2013.

Karabardak said: "Will is a very strong player but I bring some consistency to that and we gel really well because

of our styles. I'm really steady and Will can win the points and that is a good combination."

Jane Campbell and Sara Head, Paralympic bronze medallists in the women's class 1-3 team event in London, have also developed a great partnership and have won medals in the team event at every major championship since 2009, including bronze in the World Championships four years ago. Head, 32, from Beddau, took a bronze in the singles at the Europeans last year but admits that the team event is special.

"I really love the team event," she said, "because you play your singles and your doubles and you have to both play well together and support each other.

"I'm so lucky to have a team partner like Jane and we can train hard together and motivate each other. If we can achieve a medal at the worlds together again then it will be really special."

"I've always enjoyed team more than singles," agreed Campbell, "although I will focus on the singles first. But I love playing with Sara and I'm lucky that we are such good friends. Past success means we can trust ourselves to go and play our best.

"We've shown we can cope with the pressure – we dealt with it in London and if we can do it there then I think we can do it in China. We seem to produce our best at major championships so I just hope the magic doesn't wear off."

The youngest member of the GB team in China is Liverpool teenager Jack Hunter-Spivey, a class 5 player who will be competing in his first World Championships. The 19 year old has recently moved to Sheffield to train full time with the GB squad and has made great progress this year to improve his world ranking from 17 to nine.

"I think I've improved a lot this year," said Hunter-Spivey, "not just technically but my mental game as well. The Europeans last year was a real learning curve for me – I didn't deal with the pressure well there but we've been working on that and I've had some big wins against high ranked players, so it gives me more confidence.

"It will be amazing going to China – it's the home of table tennis so you couldn't get a better place for the World Championships."

Aaron McKibbin (class 8), who won a bronze with Bayley in the men's class 6-8 team competition in London, has struggled with consistency this year but has some good wins against higher ranked opponents to his credit.

"I always believe I can compete with anybody in my class on my day and if I'm playing well," said the 23 year old Sheffield-based Londoner.

"I've trained very hard and I've been getting good results but I need to take it one match at a time and I believe that if I focus then I can achieve a lot."

McKibbin will team up with class 10 player Kim Daybell in the men's class 9-10 team event and the pair could cause some surprises, having taken silver in the Slovenia Open in May.

Daybell, a 22 year old medical student from Sheffield, has been able to focus on his table tennis since finishing at Leeds University for the summer break at the beginning of July.

"It's been really good to have a solid block of training since then," said Daybell. "It has helped me find my focus again and my form.

"I was only 17 when I played in the last World Championships and probably wasn't quite ready – I made the quarter-finals so it would be good to try to build on that.

"I'm a much better player than I was four years ago and think that my level has gone up since London 2012. I'm a lot more experienced now – I know how to handle the big points and hopefully that will help me."

The GB team is completed by former Commonwealth and European champion Sue Gilroy, who was a world bronze medallist in 2006.

"I've had a disappointing few years at majors," she admitted, "but I had an operation on my shoulder two years

ago and that's the best thing I've done.

"I've had a really good two years since then and have medalled at every tournament I've played in and I'm playing so much better. I really want to medal and hopefully if I get a good draw and play to my best ability I know that I can do that."

By Fran Bullock
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