

Golden boy Bayley on top of the world!

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Will Bayley

Will Bayley won gold in the men's class 7 event at the 2014 ITT Para Table Tennis World Championships in Beijing on a great day for GB as Rob Davies and Sue Gilroy also took silver medals in the singles events.

Sheffield-based Bayley, 26, from Tunbridge Wells, did it the hard way – beating the Paralympic champion, the European champion and then the world No 1 in a performance that owed as much to his character and fighting qualities as to his brilliant play.

In the morning Bayley reached the final with a thrilling four-set win over the European champion and former world No 1 Mykhaylo Popov. The Ukrainian had beaten Bayley in the European final in Italy last year and hits the ball with great power but the British world No 2 played brilliantly in the first two sets, keeping the ball short and not giving Popov the opportunity to really find his range.

At 10-8 in the third he had two match points but Popov saved both and went on to take the set 12-10. At 1-4 and 8-10 down in the fourth it looked as if Bayley's chance may have gone but he came back superbly, saving two set points and taking the set 12-10 and the match 3-1.

"When it was 2-1 I thought I needed that fourth set to win the match," said Bayley, "because I knew if Popov carried on playing the way he was playing it was going to be very difficult if it went to the fifth set. I didn't do too much wrong on the match points – he played some unbelievable shots and never missed. I just wanted to keep pressurising him as I knew if I could do that he would get nervous and that is what happened."

That set up a final against another Ukrainian, world No 1 Maksym Nikolenko, in a match that was broadcast live on national Chinese television. It was the tall Ukrainian who made the better start, taking the first set 11-9 and racing into a 7-1 lead in the second with some stunning shots.

But Bayley never gives up and slowly but surely he worked his way back into the game, taking the second set 12-10 and then the third 11-6. But Nikolenko was not giving up either and came back to win the fourth 11-6 and it was down to a fifth and final set.

There was never more than a couple of points in at as the momentum swung one way then another but when Nikolenko went long with one of his forehands it set up a first match point for Bayley, which Nikolenko saved with a great shot. Another match point came and went for Bayley but on his third with the score at 12-11 his forehand caught the edge of the table and spun out of Nikolenko's reach to secure the match and the world title.

"I didn't do too much wrong and I was 1-0 and 7-1 down," said Bayley, "but all I could do was keep going and hope he stopped playing so well. I was just getting the ball on the table and although they were good rallies it suited him because he has more power than me so he was just smashing the ball past me.

"I knew I had to be a bit more clever and it worked. In the final set I just told myself 'he's going to be nervous as well' and I managed to battle it out – either of us could have won that game, to be honest. He played some amazing points on my match points – I was wanting him to miss and he didn't and I needed an edge to win – I don't know whether he would have missed otherwise.

"I didn't have much luck in the match – I just hit one edge and that was on the last ball so that was the nicest edge I've ever had."

Having taken silver in London 2012 and again at the European Championships last year Bayley proved once again that he loves the big occasion.

"I've worked for all my life to get that moment when I can say I'm the best in the world and to come here and win

the World Championships and say I'm world champion means a lot to me," he said.

"I got tested big time out here – I played the best game of my life in the final and I still nearly lost. Nikolenko told me it was also the best game he's ever played so that was good to hear from him."

Davies started the day with a tricky quarter-final against the Brazilian Aloisio Lima and although he lost the second set 12-14 he took the next two 8 and 7 to assure himself of a medal. Less than two hours later he was back to play his semi-final against the Italian Andrea Borgato. Davies took a very tight first set 15-13 but then took the next comfortably 5 and 5 to book his place in the men's class 1 final against the Korean Changho Lee.

Although the former rugby player from Brecon could not produce his best in the final Lee played a great match and was a deserving winner in the end. Having lost the first set 11-4 Davies battled back to take the second 14-12 but although he kept fighting the Korean proved just too strong on the day and took the third 11-8 and the fourth 12-10 to secure the gold.

"After I came back to win the second set I was feeling more positive," said Davies. "It put me back in the game and I kept battling but it just didn't come for me in this game unfortunately. I wanted the gold but I'm happy to get silver although I don't feel it at the moment."

In her women's class 4 semi-final Gilroy faced the world No 1 Borislava Peric-Rankovic, the Serbian who has so often been her nemesis. At 0-2 down Gilroy looked to be heading for another defeat but she fought back magnificently to take the third 11-4 and then level the match after saving a match point at 9-10. The final set started well for Peric-Rankovic but when Gilroy levelled at 6-6 errors started to creep into the Serbian's game and when she netted at 8-10 it was all over and Gilroy had taken a famous victory.

"I didn't play at all the first two games," said an understandably delighted Gilroy, "at 2-0 down I just thought this is my last chance really. I just started playing smooth and spinning the ball – that's all I needed to do.

"It's not very often you see Peric under pressure because she just dominates everything but to see her rattled spurred me on and I just tried to keep calm and spin the ball and do what I'd been doing .

"I've been to the fifth set with her so many times and lost every single time and I just didn't want to replicate that. It's been at least eight years since I beat Peric – I just wanted one win and where better to do it than in Beijing – in the land of table tennis."

Perhaps unsurprisingly Gilroy could not produce a repeat performance in the final against Miao Zhang and the Chinese world No 2 was a comfortable 3-0 winner.

"I'm really disappointed in how I played," said Gilroy, "but I've just got to be proud of how well I've played this week and of winning a silver medal at the World Championships. I think the semi-final was my final really – I think it has been so long coming that it was quite overwhelming.

"I'd like to say a huge thank you to Arnie Chan, Mick Travis, Brian Barret and Neil Robinson my coaches who've stood by me for the last two years and I couldn't have done it without them and the support of my family and friends."

In the quarter-final of the women's class 3 singles Jane Campbell had the misfortune to come up against the world No 2 Qian Lee in devastating form. The Chinese player is clearly in no mood to give up her world title and she ran out a comfortable 3-0 winner.

Campbell will now focus on the team competition in which she and Sara Head won a bronze four years ago and in London 2012.

Fran Bullock
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