

Pitchford eyeing promotion push in Portugal

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Liam Pitchford

Liam Pitchford is backing England to repeat their feat from this year's World Team Championships and get back into the top division of European table tennis.

The England No 1 leads the squad for the European Team Championships, which begin in Lisbon on Wednesday.

England are in the Challenger Division and will be aiming to climb into the Championship Division, just as they did at the Worlds in Tokyo in May.

Pitchford is joined in the line-up by Paul Drinkhall and Sam Walker, who both featured in Tokyo, and by Darius Knight.

They will take on Turkey, Luxembourg and Finland in the group stages, with the likes of Ukraine and Slovenia potentially waiting in the knockout stages.

And Chesterfield player Pitchford, currently ranked No 46 in the world, said: "I think we can win the division, definitely.

"We showed in Tokyo we are capable of winning things and we've got me, Paul and Sam who were in Tokyo, so we know what we're capable of and we believe in each other.

"Darius has been out of the team a while, so we've not really seen a lot of him, but he's probably got something to prove and will come in and want to do well.

"This year we've produced some great results as a team and individually, so hopefully he'll want to be part of that."

As well as winning promotion at the Worlds, England's finest also have Commonwealth Games glory fresh in their minds, with the men's team claiming silver in Glasgow.

Pitchford added singles bronze and mixed doubles silver with Tin-Tin Ho, while Drinkhall won mixed doubles gold alongside his wife Joanna.

"We are one of the strongest teams and if we can play to our level in Lisbon we don't have to be scared of anyone," said Pitchford, 21.

"Turkey have good players. They have a couple of Chinese again (Ahmet Li and Bora Vang) but we've played them before and beaten them before, so we know what to expect. It should be a good game.

"The other two are weaker on paper, but we won't underestimate anyone.

"In the knockouts there will probably be teams like Ukraine, who are strong. Slovenia with (world No 50) Bojan Tokic are always a dangerous team, and Denmark if (world No 28 Michael) Maze plays."

Pitchford has made a solid start to the new Bundesliga season, helping his team TTF Liebherr Ochsenhausen to two wins in the first four rounds of matches.

He enjoyed a good win over world No 36 Steffen Mengel in the match against TTC Schwalbe Bergneustadt as his team came from 2-0 down to win 3-2. And in the latest fixture, against RhönSprudel Fulda-Maberzell, he came from 2-0 down to beat Wang Xi, although that was not enough to prevent a 3-2 overall defeat for his team.

"I'm playing all right," he said. "I've played better table tennis but I think I'm playing at a better, more solid level –

not to my highest level at the moment but hopefully by the time of the Euros I will be.”

The women’s squad of Joanna Drinkhall, Kelly Sibley, Tin-Tin Ho and Hannah Hicks will face Wales, Lithuania and Azerbaijan in the group stages.

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