

# Walker spares England blushes to seal play-off spot

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Darius Knight won both his matches today

England women made it safely through to the play-off stages at the European Team Championships in Lisbon today – but the men were held up by Finland, requiring Sam Walker to win a deciding rubber to clinch group victory.

The reward for the women is a tie against Greece at 10am on Friday, while the men will face Belgium at 1pm.

Nothing of the drama to come was apparent in the first match of the day as the men began with a 3-0 victory over Turkey. No 1 Liam Pitchford beat Ibrahim Gunduz 3-0 to set the platform and Paul Drinkhall made it 2-0 with a routine 3-0 win over Gencay Menge as Turkey, without their Chinese-born players, did not pose their usual threat.

Darius Knight, playing his first match back in England colours, lost the opening set 11-9 but came back in style to level with an 11-2 game and never looked in trouble after that as he closed out the match 3-1 to complete overall victory.

[Click here to listen to Paul Drinkhall's reaction to the victory over Turkey](#)

Pitchford was rested for the clash with Finland, meaning Walker opened up against Benedek Olah. With not much to separate them in terms of world ranking – Olah 305 to Walker's 285 – it promised to be far from routine for the Worksop teenager

And so it proved, as the Finn opened up a 2-0 lead. Walker rallied to take the third, but Olah completed victory in the fourth.

Drinkhall also had difficulties with his opponent, Roope Kantola, who levelled at 1-1 by taking the second 12-10 in a set which saw neither man ever more than one point ahead until 10-10.

But Drinkhall showed his class to take the next two with relative ease, and Knight then breezed through a 3-0 win over Markus Myllarinen in 15 minutes – although his opponent did save four match points.

That left Drinkhall to see off Walker's conqueror Olah, and when he went 2-0 up, it seemed only a matter of time. Olah had other ideas, though, and took the next two to force a decider.

And the Finn completed an amazing turnaround, surging to an 11-6 success in the fifth.

That left it to Walker to try to stave off an unexpected defeat – and he needed only 13 minutes to seal a 3-0 win against Kantola and confirm that England topped their group.

England women, having beaten Lithuania and Wales 3-1 yesterday, finished their group campaign against Azerbaijan.

Kelly Sibley won the opening match with ease against Maryam Imanova to put them 1-0 ahead, and Tin-Tin Ho was almost as comfortable against Rufat Guliyeva, taking it 12-10 in the third on her first match point.

Hannah Hicks completed a perfect set of 3-0 scores by seeing off Sabina Batmanova, ensuring England top the group.

The men round off the day with their final group match against Finland at 4pm.

## **Results/latest scores**

### **England 3-0 Turkey**

Liam Pitchford bt Ibrahim Gunduz 3-0 (11-9, 11-6, 11-6)

Paul Drinkhall bt Gencay Menge 3-0 (11-5, 11-6, 11-4)

Darius Knight bt Batuhan Ulucak 3-1 (9-11, 11-2, 11-7, 11-6)

### **England 3-0 Azerbaijan**

Kelly Sibley bt Maryam Imanova 3-0 (11-8, 11-7, 11-4)

Tin-Tin Ho bt Rufat Guliyeva 3-0 (11-8, 11-7, 12-10)

Hannah Hicks bt Sabina Batmanova 3-0 (11-6, 11-6, 11-5)

### **England 3-2 Finland**

Sam Walker lost to Benedek Olah 1-3 (7-11, 9-11, 11-8, 8-11)

Paul Drinkhall bt Roope Kantola 3-1 (11-5, 10-12, 11-6, 11-8)

Darius Knight bt Markus Myllarinen 3-0 (11-7, 11-4, 11-8)

Paul Drinkhall lost to Benedek Olah 2-3 (11-9, 11-4, 6-11, 7-11, 6-11)

Sam Walker bt Roope Kantola 3-0 (11-5, 11-5, 11-6)

**by Paul Stimpson**

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