

# England end on a positive in Lisbon

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Hannah Hicks in action in Lisbon. Picture: ITTF

England's men and women ended on a high at the European Team Championships after the disappointment of missing out on promotion yesterday.

The women were first in action, taking on Slovenia, and the first three matches went the distance, with the victor coming back from 2-0 down to win in the first two of those.

Kelly Sibley was the first to pull off that feat, winning the crucial fourth against Jana Tomazini 12-10 before taking the decider 11-4.

But Hannah Hicks found herself on the receiving end of a similar comeback by Alex Galic to leave the tie poised at 1-1.

Tin-Tin Ho kept up the five-set theme, although in this case the young Englishwoman twice came from behind to level against Tamara Pavcnik before taking the decider.

Sibley then sealed the 3-1 overall win by beating Galic in symmetrical fashion, taking all three games to eight to ensure England finished in 21st position.

The best the men could hope for was 23rd after their defeat to Slovenia yesterday, and they faced a Turkish team they had beaten with ease in the group stage.

On this occasion, No 1 Liam Pitchford was rested, and it was left to Paul Drinkhall to get England off to a good start, which he did by beating Batuhan Ulucak in three.

Sam Walker then came from 2-1 down to beat Ahmet Li, before Darius Knight lost in five to Gencay Menge, blitzing the first 11-1 but then being edged out over the remaining four, very close ends.

Worksop teenager Walker ensured the event ended on a positive both personally and for the team as he saw off Ulucak in three straight.

However, it could not disguise the overall disappointment, with England having had high hopes of emulating their division winning performance from the World Team Championships earlier this year.

It also means the team will not qualify for the inaugural European Games in Baku next summer, although individual places remain to be won.

## Player reaction

**Kelly Sibley:** "Obviously, the goal was to get promotion, and we didn't get it. It's been hard for us because Jo didn't play a game, though without her we've put in some good performances.

"Personally, I had a few up and down moments, but to finish on a high and with a few wins under my belt is always a positive. I know what I need to work on and try to tweak things and get better."

**Hannah Hicks:** "Personally, it's been okay. I've won the matches I should have won. I'm a little bit upset that I lost my last match as it would have been nice to be undefeated. I can be satisfied with my performance.

"In terms of the team performance, if Jo had been fit enough to play, it would have been a different story, our team would have been a lot stronger. It would have been nice to get to the semi-final and try to go for that promotion, but unfortunately it wasn't meant to be. Against Greece (QF) we were expecting to win, but two of their players really raised their games and put us under a lot of pressure. But the girls put up a good fight."

**Tin-Tin Ho:** "We didn't get the promotion which we hoped for but we played a lot of matches and it was a good experience. I played as No 2 for most of the matches and it was a good way to see how I would cope with that. I think I coped all right, but I hoped to play a bit better against Greece."

**Joanna Drinkhall:** "It's very frustrating – I've never been in the position before of having to sit on the bench for every match and it was hard. Especially in the match against Greece, but it's one of those things and the girls did really well without me. If you're looking for the positives, as you should in any situation, it gave the girls a lot more matches than they would have played and hopefully they have learned a lot from that."

**Paul Drinkhall:** "It's slightly disappointing, to be honest. We've had a great year with the Worlds and Commonwealths and we came here to go up and qualify for Baku, which obviously we didn't do. It's a disappointment, especially me as I don't think I played near my level except in patches. I was 10-7 up against Belgium and lost – it was small margins, and that's when you've got to be playing well, and unfortunately I wasn't at that point. Me and Liam, at this level, should come through in those matches. But we'll come back. We don't want to let it affect us but it's a warning that we need to stay focused and look to improve and keep moving forwards."

**Liam Pitchford:** "It's slightly disappointing – we came here to get promotion and we didn't. I wasn't playing as well as I would have liked and I lost the important matches. I was leading in the fourth and fifth against Belgium and somehow I've ended up losing. We all had a long summer and not much of a break, and the new ball came in, so it's been hard. But we'll be back."

**Darius Knight:** "I was probably lacking a bit of matchplay and confidence. I had match points today and yesterday but didn't take my chances. It's one of those things. I think I showed my best in the early rounds but made a few mistakes on the returns against Belgium."

**Sam Walker:** "It's not been our best, but we gave everything we had. I personally didn't play at the level that I wanted to play, but we still won our group and got to the quarter-finals. We gave everything we had but they played a strong match. We're all disappointed but we've had a good year and we know we will come back stronger. I was disappointed to lose my first match against Finland but I was happy I managed to play well and do enough to win the last match. I was happy that my performances improved through the tournament but there are a lot of i

## Results

### England 3-1 Slovenia

Kelly Sibley bt Jana Tomazini 3-2 (9-11, 7-11, 11-6, 12-10, 11-4)

Hannah Hicks lost to Alex Galic 2-3 (11-8, 11-6, 9-11, 6-11, 6-11)

Tin-Tin Ho bt Tamara Pavcnik 3-2 (6-11, 11-2, 7-11, 11-4, 11-5)

Kelly Sibley bt Alex Galic 3-0 (11-8, 11-8, 11-8)

### England 3-1 Turkey

Paul Drinkhall bt Batuhan Ulucak 3-0 (11-8, 11-5, 11-6)

Sam Walker bt Ahmet Li 3-2 (11-8, 10-12, 7-11, 11-8, 11-3)

Darius Knight lost to Gencay Menge 3-2 (11-1, 11-13, 10-12, 12-10, 11-13)

Sam Walker bt Batuhan Ulucak 3-0 (11-8, 13-11, 11-2)

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