

Wilson, Shackleton lead gold rush in France

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Megan Shackleton

It was a golden day for the GB Para Table Tennis Team at the first Cote d'Azur International in Hyères les Palmiers, with Paralympic bronze medalist Ross Wilson (men's class 8) taking gold in his first competition since London 2012, 15 year old Megan Shackleton winning her first gold medal in the women's class 4/5 singles and Kim Daybell taking gold in the men's class 10 event.

There was also silver for Pathway player Martin Perry (men's class 6) and bronze for Ashley Facey Thompson (men's class 9).

Sheffield based Wilson, from Minster in Kent, has endured a frustrating two years since winning a bronze medal in the team event in London, having been unable to play due to a shoulder problem. The 19 year old, who was ranked No 2 in the world before his injury, reached the final with a 3-0 win against the Brazilian Luis Filipe Guarnieri Manara and then belied his lack of matchplay to beat the experienced Fabian Rignell of Sweden in three close sets in the final to take the gold.

"Being in the semi-final was a confidence booster," said Wilson, "and I'm really happy to have got the gold. The final was a tough match and he is a good player but I was playing well and when it came to the big points I was a bit safer and smarter.

"Coming to a tournament and experiencing all the pressure again has been great for me and I can take that with confidence to the next tournament I play and hopefully carry on doing well.

"I think I used my time wisely while I was out injured – it was so frustrating knowing I couldn't play so I used that frustration to work on other parts of my game – my physical strength and the mental side of things – and that has helped my game. It's made me faster on the table and a bit smarter on the close points."

Shackleton, from Todmorden, is the youngest member of the GB Performance Squad and she showed a maturity beyond her years to win her first international gold medal, recovering from the disappointment of losing a match point in the fourth set to defeat the Russian Aleksandra Vasileva in the final 3-2, having earlier shown all her fighting qualities to beat the Norwegian Sabine Solveig Femtehjel in the semi-final 11-7 in the fifth.

"I didn't feel a lot of pressure," said Shackleton, "because I had already exceeded what I had done at the last tournament. I just wanted to play my best and that is what I did.

"I think the semi-final being so close helped me in the final because I battled through it and that gave me confidence, knowing I've got the determination to fight back even when it is very close.

"When I blew the match point in the fourth set I was still determined that I could do it and although I wanted to get it finished quicker than I did I'm happy I finished on a high and not having lost. It's amazing to get my first gold and it means a lot to me with all the training that I do."

Leeds University medical student Daybell has looked in a different class at this tournament, continuing the impressive form he showed at the World Championships in China last month. He beat the Russian Pavel Lukyanov 3-0 in his semi-final and then defeated the Frenchman Karim Boumedouha 3-0 in the final to take the gold.

"I thought I played really well throughout the whole competition," said Daybell. "I didn't really drop my level, which is an improvement for me as normally I do have ups and downs, so I was pleased with that.

"I'm playing a lot more positively – I feel that I'm competing with the best players and I feel that I am one of the best players as I've got the wins under my belt now. When you are playing with confidence as any sportsman

knows it makes a massive difference – you can go for your shots a bit more and be a bit more sure of yourself.”

Perry, 20, showed great determination in his semi-final against Roger Ljunggren of Sweden, winning a titanic battle for the second set 18-16 to level the match at 1-1 and taking the next two sets to reach his first international singles final. His opponent, Tomasz Kusiak from Germany, had beaten him in the group stages yesterday and once again had just too much experience for the Paisley player in a 3-1 win.

“I wasn’t thinking about yesterday’s loss to Tomasz,” said Perry, “as I’ve played really well since then. I was in a good rhythm especially after winning the semi and I started off well but Tomasz played really well.

“I thought it was a good game – I could possibly have done a bit better but I felt comfortable and I think I had the right balance of nerves and confidence. It’s great to get to the final and get a silver medal but it’s still heart-breaking when you don’t get the gold.

“I’ve taken some good wins here and getting to the final is fantastic so it’s looking positive. I’m playing well and training hard and everything is looking good for the future.”

Sheffield based Londoner Facey Thompson, 19, lost his semi-final to the world No 7 Laurens Devos 3-0 but although he made too many mistakes against the very talented young Belgian, who went on to take the gold, he can be proud of a bronze medal after some great wins yesterday.

“He’s a good player and he’s very smart as well,” said Facey Thompson. “It was difficult to get my game going today and my mistakes let me down but he played well, so credit to him.

“When I came here I thought it would be difficult to come back with a medal so although I’m disappointed not to get to the final I’m happy to get a bronze.”

All the GB players are competing in the team event, which starts today and concludes on Sunday.

Fran Bullock

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