

# Paul and Liam upbeat ahead of Russian test

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**Posted On:** November 03, 2014



Paul Drinkhall's last World Tour outing resulted in a memorable victory in Spain

Liam Pitchford and Paul Drinkhall have some of the world's top players in their sights as they prepare to end the year with an ITTF World Tour double-header.

The England No 1 and No 2 are heading to Ekaterinburg in Russia from November 5 to 9, followed by the event in Stockholm, Sweden, which starts three days later – and a host of top names await them.

In Russia, Liam is seeded 14 and Paul is 21st in a list headed by World No 5 Dimitrij Ovtcharov of Germany. World No 7 Jun Mizutani of Japan is also in the field, as are Portuguese top-20 pair Marcos Freitas and Tiago Apolonia, part of the Portugal squad which won the European Team Championships last month.

The field in Sweden is even stronger, with no fewer than six top-10 players slated to appear – five from the Chinese powerhouse, plus Ovtcharov. Liam is seeded at No 28, while Paul will have to play in the group stages.

But both Englishmen are confident they can punch above their weight and achieve some head-turning results.

For Paul, it is his first appearance at a World Tour event since memorably winning the Spanish Open in April, and he has the added incentive of being able to qualify for the season-ending Grand Finals in Bangkok in December.

He is currently 11<sup>th</sup> in the standings, with 15 players to qualify, and will have played in the minimum required five events after Russia and Sweden.

"Russia is a strong tournament but I'll be among the seeds – I think I'm 21, which is similar to when I won in Spain," said the 24-year-old, "but the top seeds are stronger in Russia.

"I've been playing well in the Belgian league and hopefully I can take that form into Russia and get some good wins and make progress.

"Sweden is stronger than Russia, so I'll be playing in the groups and having to qualify for the knockouts.

"But if I can keep up my good form, there's no reason I can't get through the group and take out some of the seeds.

"With Russia and Sweden, I'll have played five World Tour events, so I'd hope to qualify for the Grand Finals. I think I'm in 11th position at the moment and that's the target."



Liam Pitchford is aiming to better his best Tour run of reaching the quarter-finals

Liam goes into Russia on the back of having played Germany's world No 9 Timo Boll and No 21 Panagiotis Gionis of Greece in a recent Bundesliga match.

And although he lost to both in four sets as his Ochsenhausen team were beaten 3-2 by Borussia Dusseldorf, he bounced back to beat world No 42 Masataka Morizono of Japan 3-0 in his latest fixture, helping Ochsenhausen to a 3-0 win over Frickenhausen.

And the 21-year-old from Chesterfield is keen for another chance to test himself in lofty company.

"I always knew I would be more highly seeded in Russia than Sweden, but there's still a lot of good players there," he said.

"I'm aiming to have a good run. My best run in a Tour event is the quarter-finals, and I'm aiming to go further than that."

Liam has singled out No 3 seed Freitas as a dangerman, adding: "Freitas has had a great season and he's probably one of the main ones to watch.

"I'd like to have a shot against one of the top guys like him. Being seeded to get to the last 16 is always nice to know, but there's two rounds before I get there and I've got to take those matches as they come and hopefully get through and have a shot at one of the top ones."

Attention then turns to Stockholm and Liam said: "It's going to be a tough tournament. I'm happy to be in the main draw and not to play in the groups.

"I'm seeded 28 and ranked world No 46, so it shows it's one of the strongest Pro Tours for a while. I'm going to give it my best shot."

Liam will not have played enough World Tour events to qualify for the Grand Finals, but he said: "I'm just happy to get some matches under my belt. I'm not thinking about qualifying for anything. I'm only 21, so I'll have other chances for that."

Paul and Liam will also play doubles at both events, as they did at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

Andrew Baggaley, Sam Walker and David McBeath will also be in action in Sweden, with all three playing singles and doubles, and Walker also entered in the under-21s.

Alan Cooke will accompany the group to Sweden thanks to Olympic Solidarity funding from the IOC.

**Paul Stimpson**

**November 3, 2014**

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