

Drinkhall: It's the best I've ever played

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Paul Drinkhall celebrates after beating Marcos Freitas in yesterday's quarter-final. Now he has added the scalp of Dimitrij Ovtcharov today

Paul Drinkhall says his fantastic run to the final of the Russian Open was the best he has ever played.

The English No 2 belied his status as 21st seed to take a string of notable scalps in a memorable tournament, including world No 5 Dimitrij Ovtcharov in the semi-finals.

But he found Japan's Koki Niwa, the fourth seed and world No 15, too strong in the final as he lost 1-4 (14-12, 8-11, 5-11, 7-11, 7-11).

[Click here to watch the final in full](#)

Nevertheless, Drinkhall was thrilled with his performance in Ekaterinburg, where he came so close to repeating his triumph at the Spanish Open in April.

"It's probably the tournament of my life and the best table tennis I've ever played," said the 24-year-old Teessider. "I won in Spain, but the results I've had here are much bigger and better than the Spanish results.

"I'm very happy with the way I've played, but slightly disappointed with the final. I've played him before and I've always had difficulty with his serves.

"I still felt I under-performed in the final compared to the other rounds, but I think that's down to his style. I found it difficult to get into the match even though I was leading.

"But overall a great tournament and where I want to be with my game."

Niwa's victory gave the left-hander a double over English players in Ekaterinburg – he had also ended Liam Pitchford's run in the last 16.

Drinkhall's opponent started quickly and Paul found himself 5-1 down. But some amazing defence from the back of the court at 4-8, culminating in winning the point, got Drinkhall's game going and he closed it up to 9-9.

Three times Niwa moved ahead and three times Drinkhall pegged him back. And when Niwa dumped his serve in the net at 12-12, Paul pounced to take the next point and with it the game.

The start of the second saw an even patch of play as the scoreboard showed 5-5. But Niwa started to move up the gears, and although Drinkhall had plenty of flashes of brilliance from then on, Niwa was consistently asking more questions.

He took the second 11-8 and the third 11-5 and, at 4-1 down in the fourth, Drinkhall sensed the match slipping away and took his timeout. It work as he took the next three points, but a net cord in favour of Niwa broke the spell and he pulled ahead again to take it 11-7.

And the score was the same in the fifth as Niwa took the title on his second match point.

Drinkhall, who on Saturday beat sixth seed Eonrae Cho of Korea in the last 16 and third seed Marcos Freitas of Portugal in the quarter-finals, had earlier continued his superb run by toppling top seed Ovtcharov in the semi-finals.

Drinkhall came from 1-0 and 2-1 down to lead 3-2 and then responded after the German had levelled to take the decider 11-2 with a combination of sublime winners and a couple of slices of luck.

But there was no doubting the final score of 6-11, 11-9, 12-14, 11-3, 11-8, 5-11, 11-2 was thoroughly deserved as Drinkhall moved to within one match of becoming the first Englishman to win two ITTF World Tour events.

Furthermore, it was his first victory over Ovtcharov, having lost their only previous meeting in the last 32 at the London 2012 Olympics.

[Click here to watch the video of the semi-final in full](#)

Drinkhall's success was achieved without direct coaching input in Russia – Performance Coach Alan Cooke will join up with the England players on duty at the Swedish Open, which starts on Wednesday.

“Obviously it's good to have a coach with you, but one thing I'm very strong at is getting myself in the right frame of mind to get the results for myself and England,” said Drinkhall.

“I think I've handled it very well at this tournament and prepared properly for each game and hopefully that can carry on in Sweden with Alan back.”

Before then, Paul has a match in Belgium on Tuesday night, and he added: “It's a very tough schedule, but I can take each game as it comes and I think that's what I've done well here.”

Drinkhall is now a virtual certainty to qualify for a place at the Grand Finals in Bangkok next month. The Swedish Open will be Paul's fifth on the World Tour, meaning he will meet all the qualifying criteria for Bangkok.

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