

England quintet aiming to be Swede sensations

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Andrew Baggaley, Paul Drinkhall and Sam Walker will all be on England duty in Sweden, alongside Liam Pitchford and David McBeath. Picture by Steve Parkin

After Paul Drinkhall's spellbinding run to the final of the Russian Open, it's a case of 'follow that!' for him and four fellow Englishmen at the Swedish Open.

But the fact that Liam Pitchford is seeded as low as 22 on a world ranking of 46, while Drinkhall is not even seeded, shows just how tough it will be to make headway against a world-class field.

Joining Drinkhall in the early rounds are Andrew Baggaley, Sam Walker and David McBeath – and while they all harbour hopes of earning a crack at a top player, they are also realistic about their prospects of reaching the latter stages in Stockholm.

Teenager Walker is taking inspiration from Drinkhall as he looks to make his mark, doubly so after events in Ekaterinburg.

Speaking before the Russian Open, he said: "It's great for Paul to win the Spanish Open and it's good for English table tennis. I guess it does put a bit of pressure on us to do better, but if anything it gives me confidence that if Paul can do it, why can't I?"

"It gives me motivation in training every day and things like winning the Heritage Oil Open (a feat Walker achieved in July) gives me confidence that I can beat those players on the day, if I play well."

The 19-year-old Worksop player is happy with the state of his own game going into Sweden and believes he is reaping the benefits of his training regime in Germany, where he practises alongside Pitchford with Ochsenhausen and plays for ASV Grunwettersbach.

"I've been here since August 12th and the training is a lot better than where I was before," said Walker. "I really feel like my game is improving a lot through practice.

"The coaches are really helping and the practice partners are all extremely good. I can't let up at all in practice, it's pushing me really hard – it's a good environment.

"I'm doing quite well in my league matches and the team are doing okay. I've played nine matches and won seven and I managed to beat Dave McBeath in an important match to get a draw for us against Ruhrstadt Herne."

In Sweden, Walker will play in the Under-21 singles and in the doubles with McBeath, as well as in the senior singles.

Of the doubles he said: "It's a strong entry, so we're just going to try to get a bit of experience in doubles, get some practice and see how we play together.

"Realistically, we can't say we're aiming to win it so we'll just go out there relaxed and focused on trying to beat whoever is in front of us.

"It's a lot to do with experience, especially in the men's singles. I'm just going to go out there relaxed, positive and focused. It doesn't matter who I'm playing, I'll take nothing for granted and if I'm playing someone from the top 50, I'll still believe I can win.

"It's the same in the under-21s, though I've got a bit more of a chance. I'm getting myself in good shape now and

you never know, if you play a good tournament, where it can take you.”

Andrew Baggaley reached the last 16 in the Hungarian Open on his last World Tour outing in March, and he said: “It’s quite a while since I played a Tour event, so I’m excited to be playing in it and really looking forward to it.

“I just want to play to my potential. Every time I step out to play internationally or on the Tour that’s what I want to do.”

The 31-year-old Milton Keynes player recently signed to play for Poltarex Pogon Leborg in the Polish Super League, and he added: “I’ve just started playing in the Polish league and I’m winning matches. I’m in a good place with my game.

“First I’ve got to get past the group stage. Whoever I face, I’ll concentrate on my own game and getting into my zone.

“Against the very best guys it’s always going to be very tough, but if I play to my potential I’m in there to compete against the top, top players.

“But it’s getting stronger in depth now. More countries are more professional now and every year it’s getting stronger and stronger, so it’s a great achievement to beat supposedly easier players as well.”

David McBeath’s target is to get out of his group and hopefully land a plum draw against one of the leading lights.

He said: “I’ve been training quite well but I’ve been ill in the last week and have only just overcome that. Apart from that, I’m feeling good.



David McBeath

“It must be the strongest tournament of the year outside of the world championships, because everyone is trying to qualify for the Grand Finals.

“But the good thing is it gives everyone the chance to play against the best. I’m really excited to be playing at such a big event.

“I’ll have to go through the qualifying stages – the aim is to get to the main draw and then see how I can go.

“I’ve not played as well as I would have liked in the league, although I’m playing a slightly higher standard than last year, and I’ll be looking to do something big in Sweden to make up for that.”

The 22-year-old Southampton player also has his eye on progress in the doubles and said: “I think we’ve got a good chance. I’ve been playing with and against Sam since I was 14 or 15 and we’ve got similar styles.”

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