

Sam's ready to take the plunge at Bristol GP

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Ben Larcombe (left) with his 'protege' Sam Priestley

Months of intensive drills and training are to be put to the test as Sam Priestley prepares to take the plunge into the world of tournament play.

Sam and his coach Ben Larcombe have been working since the turn of the year on a [mission to turn Sam from a knockabout player into one capable of breaking into the top 250](#) in the country.

And he is now ready for his first tournament – the Bristol Grand Prix this weekend, where he will be competing in Bands 5-6.

Both men accept it is a big step into the unknown, but are confident Sam's grounding in the basics of the game – totalling an estimated 350 hours since the project began – mean he has every chance of acquitting himself well.

He has also played a variety of opponents in club situations – mostly at ISH (International Student House) every Sunday for the last few months and also at Highbury TTC and Finsbury TTC.

And even if his first foray into competition is not a huge success, the plan is for Sam to be battle-hardened in short order – he has further tournaments arranged almost every weekend through to the end of January.

"I think we're both pretty happy with how Sam's playing and the quality of his shots," said Ben.

"We're working more and more on consistency and cutting out unforced errors because that's what's letting him down at the moment.

"If you watch him at a club against a standard league player, he looks better because he's got the technique and the coached skills which they might not have."

Sam, 25, said: "I'm keen to go in there calmly and treat it like any old match so that I can hold up under pressure.

"The pressure may build if I do really badly in the first few tournaments. But by being relaxed, I'm more likely to do well."

Sam does, however, know one thing he would like to avoid in Bristol.

"I don't want to play people who are very unorthodox," he said, "because my brain doesn't have the knowledge to know what to do to react to that."

Ben added: "We have no idea how it will go at Bristol – we will just turn up and see what happens. Bands 5 and 6 can be so varied but he's got the qualities to do well.

"We're not expecting huge results at the first tournament, but he can build week on week after that – and we'll film all the matches to see what's letting him down and what he can improve on.

"He's got quite a good backhand, backspin serve and he wants to play short rallies where he gets in a topspin as soon as possible and wins the point outright or plays one more shot. That's quite a common tactic.

"Blocking is probably a weakness because we've focused so much on attacking."

Sam is in Group 2 of the Men's Band 6 singles, alongside Jay Ghazi-Timms and David O'Connell.

In Band 5, he is in Group 1 with Chris Clifford, Alan Hewitt and Mat Pearce.

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