

# Maria and Helshan make case for defence

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Maria Tsaptsinos. Picture courtesy of Steve Parkin

Helshan Weerasinghe and Maria Tsaptsinos are relishing the chance to defend their National Junior Singles titles in Preston at the weekend.

Both players enjoyed their maiden triumphs at this level last season, beating Igor Morais and Tin-Tin Ho in their respective finals.

Tsaptsinos had started the event as second seed behind Ho, and the positions will be the same this time around.

The two are the class acts in the field and it would be no surprise if they once more locked horns in the final.

And, despite being the defending champion, Tsaptsinos believes the pressure is no different to last year and accepts that Ho is still the one to beat.

"I don't think the pressure is any different," said the Reading player. I don't go out thinking 'I must win', I just go and do my best.

"At the moment, Tin-Tin is playing well and she's beaten me the last couple of times we've played. But on the day, you never really know – it's how you play and how you are mentally and physically.

"We train together and I don't think there's much difference in our games."

The pair are now together on the England scene and both recently featured at the Hungarian Youth Open.

Tsaptsinos said international events were now forming a greater focus for the pair – although the Nationals are still high up in the order of priorities.

"Making your mark in England is one thing, and you always like to win those big competitions, there's no doubt about it," she said.

"When we were younger, it was the be-all and end-all, but now we're getting all these chances to go abroad as well.

"Tin-Tin's getting those international results right now, but I didn't play at the top of my game in Hungary – maybe it was the pressure and nerves of my first big tournament since the big improvements in my game. But those results will come in time.

"I feel my game has improved tremendously over the last 18 months and people are starting to notice that."



Helshan Weerasinghe. Picture courtesy of John Upham

For Weerasinghe, last year was a case of finally getting his hands on the trophy after he had lost the previous two finals to Sam Walker.

The Sussex player, who will again be top seed, said: "Winning last year after two finalist appearances was more relief than anything else, but I was really happy.

"The final match, even though it was a 3-0 scoreline it was a close match and it was the pressure of a national final. This year I'm feeling a bit more relaxed and confident, and hopefully I can repeat it.

"I kind of enjoy the pressure. Everyone wants to get to where I am and it's a compliment in a way that there is

pressure. It's a good thing and hopefully I can use it to my advantage."

With Morais having moved into the Senior ranks, there can be no repeat of last year's final. But Weerasinghe knows there is no shortage of players who will go into the event believing they have every chance of winning.

"The likes of Sam Mabey, Danny Lawrence, Tom Jarvis, Marcus Giles . . . they're all very capable and I'm sure they will want to take that title away from me," said Weerasinghe.

"But I'll do my best to stop them."

**Paul Stimpson**

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