

# Drinkhall looking to end the year in Grand style

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Paul Drinkhall

Paul Drinkhall enters virtually uncharted territory for English table tennis when he competes in the ITTF Grand Finals in Bangkok.

His first round match will be against Hong Kong's Peng Tang at 5.45am UK time on Friday (December 12).

The 24-year-old Teessider is the first English player to qualify for the event since Carl Prean in the inaugural competition in 1996.

And he did so in style, winning the Spanish Open and reaching the final in Russia to qualify in fourth place in the standings.

His run in Russia saw him beat top-25 players Eonrae Cho, Marcos Freitas and then world No 5 Dimitrij Ovtcharov, earning him a leap in the rankings from No 80 to a career high of No 45.

Now he will compete against 15 of the best players in the world for the overall title – and the little matter of the \$100,000 top prize.

Paul's triumph in the Spanish Open made him only the second English player to win a World Tour event, after Prean's victory in the Brazilian Open in 1996.

It was part of an incredible year, which included helping England's men to promotion at the World Team Championships and winning Commonwealth gold in the mixed doubles alongside his wife Joanna. The couple later announced that Jo is expecting their first child.

"It's been the year of my life, in and outside of table tennis," said Paul.

"It's great to be creating history in terms of recent years. To win the Spanish Open and then qualify for the finals, it's a great achievement."

But Paul insists he is not going to Thailand for the tourism, and harbours ambitions of taking the top prize.

"With the performances I've been putting in, I'm going there to win, not to make up the numbers," he said.

"The highest-ranked player is Ovtcharov, who's a great player, but I managed to beat him last time. If I can keep my form up there's no reason I can't go there and do it again.

"I'm ranked fourth, so I will play someone who qualified 9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> in the first match.

"Most of them are ranked quite a bit higher than me because the seedings are done on points rather than ranking, so you get some real high-ranked players who qualify lower in the draw.

"Every player is a strong player and they could all win it if they hit form, and that's what I'm looking to do."

Although it is the first time he has qualified, Paul has experience of playing at the Grand Finals – he and Jo were given wildcards when England hosted the tournament in 2011, when it was used as the test event for the London Olympics. He also qualified for the under-21 event in Seoul in 2010.

This time around, even if he loses his first match, he will receive \$8,000 prize-money. Quarter-finalists receive \$15,000, semi-finalists \$30,000 and the beaten finalist £60,000.

Paul said: "Everybody needs to live and survive and in table tennis there's not that many tournaments to win big

money, so it's a bonus.

"But if I can come away winning the Pro Tour Final, that's the main aim. The prize-money is the icing on the cake."

Paul also has financial backing from Heritage Oil for the trip and he added: "Heritage Oil are going to be sponsoring me to help with my expenses. It's the first time I've had a personal sponsor for a tournament and it's good to see people are interested in supporting table tennis."

Paul's stellar year has resulted in him receiving an invitation, alongside England's other Commonwealth Games medallists, to the BBC Sports Personality of the Year event in Glasgow on December 14.

Ironically, his success might cause him to miss the TV extravaganza – the Grand Finals run from December 11 to 14, with the semi-finals and finals on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

Paul said: "My flight is after the quarter-finals, so if I get through I'll have to change it. Although it would be a shame, I'd be quite happy to say I missed Sports Personality because it means I will have done well."

#### **Players in order of qualifying points:**

Jun Mizutani (JPN, World Ranking No 5)

Dimitrij Ovtcharov (GER, 7)

Koki Niwa (JPN, 13)

Paul Drinkhall (ENG, 45)

Marcos Freitas (POR, 11)

Vladimir Samsonov (BLR, 12)

Chi-Yuan Chuang (TPE, 8)

Steffen Mengel (GER, 28)

Yuto Muramatsu (JPN, 30)

Masataka Morizono (JPN, 37)

Peng Tang (HKG, 17)

Kohei Sambe (JPN, 134)

Tiago Apolonia (POR, 18)

Eonrae Cho (KOR, 23)

Chun Ting Wong (HKG, 55)

Max Pongsri (THA, 429)

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