

Training camps get GB Para team in great shape

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Billy Shilton will be travelling to Brazil for a high-profile match

The GB Para Table Tennis Team has been looking overseas as it continues to prepare for next year's Paralympic Games. The 2015 season will be a key time for the team with athletes needing to qualify for Rio by the end of the year and looking to get among the medals at the European Championships in Denmark in October.

Hours of hard training during the winter are spent preparing the athletes for the international competitions which begin in March, and GB Performance Director Gorazd Vecko and head coach Greg Baker believe that regular training with international opposition will help their elite athletes to keep improving.

An August training camp in Slovenia with other European countries has become a feature of the GB team's preparation for the year's major championship and four of the athletes, including World champion Will Bayley, have just returned from a week-long training camp in Slovakia where they had the opportunity to train and play matches against Olympic players as well as fellow Para players.

"It was a brilliant experience," said Bayley. "The level of the other players was unbelievable and it really pushed us. We all improved dramatically during the week and it has taken us to a new level."

With preparation for Rio in mind, Vecko has been forging close links with the Brazilian Table Tennis Federation and the 2016 host's best hope for a Paralympic table tennis medal, Bruna Costa Alexandre, world ranked No 3 in women's class 10, is currently on a 10-day visit to train with the GB team at the EIS in Sheffield.

In March, one of the GB team's brightest young players, 16 year old Billy Shilton, will travel to Piracicaba in Brazil to take on fellow class 7 player Paulo Salmin in a match that will be shown live on national Brazilian television.

"Giving our players as much experience of training with and playing against top class international opposition can only help their development," commented Vecko. "We do not have a women's class 10 player and Bruna is a great sparring partner for our standing athletes."

"Billy is one of our most talented young athletes and the experience of travelling to Brazil and playing against one of their top players in a major venue will be invaluable for him at this stage of his career."

Fran Bullock

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