

Karabardak just misses out on double

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Paul Karabardak

Swansea's Paul Karabardak narrowly failed to add the Lignano Master Open title to the Hungarian Open title he won the previous weekend, taking the silver medal in men's class 6.

On a good day for the GB Para Table Tennis Team there were also bronze medals for Jane Campbell (class 3), Sue Gilroy (class 4), Jack Hunter-Spivey (class 5) and Kim Daybell (class 10).

Karabardak has grown in confidence since being reclassified as a class 6 athlete this year and he topped his group with a 3-0 win over Mars Gabdullin of Russia and a determined performance against Bobi Simion of Romania, clinching the match 12-10 in the fifth in a repeat of their final in Hungary. A 3-0 win against Vjekoslav Gregorovic of Croatia took him into a semi-final against Alexander Esaulov of Russia and he beat the world number nine 3-0 to set up a final against Simion. This time it was the Romanian who took the honours in four close sets 12-14, 12-10, 11-9, 12-10 and the Welshman had to settle for a well-deserved silver medal.

Campbell beat the Korean Sun-ja Kim and came back from 2-1 down in a hard fought 3-2 win over Kezban Kakir of Turkey. A 3-1 loss to the Frenchwoman Fanny Bertand left her in second place in the group which sent her through to the knockout stages. A 3-1 win in the quarter final over Hatice Duman of Turkey took her into a semi-final against Michela Brunelli of Italy. After losing the first two games the Londoner came back to take the third but the world number seven held on to take the match 14-12 in the fourth.

Barnsley's Gilroy topped her group with three wins out of three and a 3-1 quarter final win against Nada Matic of Serbia took her into a semi-final against her old adversary Borislava Peric-Rankovic in a repeat of their dramatic World Championship semi-final last year that Gilroy had won 3-2. Gilroy made a great start, taking a close first set 14-12, but the Serbian world number one came storming back to take the next three sets and the match 3-1.

Despite two losses in his group Jack Hunter-Spivey progressed to the knockout stages on countback. In the quarter-finals he faced the French world number seven Gregory Rosec who had not dropped a set in his three group matches but the 19 year old from Liverpool produced his best form to win 3-0 and go through to a semi-final against Ehab Fetir. It proved to be a great battle with Hunter-Spivey leading 2-1 but the Egyptian fighting back to take the match 11-9 in the fifth and go on to take the gold medal.

Daybell came through his group comfortably with wins over the Brazilian Claudio Massad, Igor Misztal of Poland and Filip Radovic of Montenegro and then beat Nariaki Kakita of Japan 3-0 to set up a semi-final against Pavel Lukyjanov. The experienced Russian took a 2-0 lead and although Daybell fought back to take the third set 14-12 Lukyjanov clinched the match 12-10 in the fourth and went on to take the gold medal.

Although out of the medals Tom Matthews (class 1), Ross Wilson, Aaron McKibbin (class 8) and Ashley Facey Thompson (class 9) all came through their groups and reached the quarter finals.

Matthews started with a great 3-2 win against the world number eight Andrea Borgato from Italy and despite a narrow 3-2 loss to the experienced Sylvio Keller from Switzerland he progressed from the group to the quarter-finals. Another battling performance against the Korean Ki Won Nam just failed to take him into his first factor 40 semi-final as the world number ten came back from 2-1 down to take the match 11-6 in the fifth. It was nevertheless a great performance by the Welshman who is improving all the time.

Sheffield-based Wilson's world ranking has dropped from two in 2012 to 16 after a two-year absence through injury but the 19 year old from Minster is determined to make up for lost time and 3-0 wins against the Belgian Marc Ledoux, Marius Olczak of Poland and the Russian Artem Lakovlev took him through to a last 16 match against another Russian Aleksei Saunin. A 3-0 win earned him a quarter final against Piotr Grudzien but the world number six from Poland proved too strong in a 3-0 win.

Sheffield based McKibbin also came through his group with wins against Mathieu Loicq of Belgium, Aleksei Saunin and the Norwegian Steffen Salomonsen. His reward for a 3-1 win in the last 16 against Niklas Andersson of Sweden was a quarter-final against world champion Victor Didukh and the Ukrainian world number one was always in command in a 3-0 win.

Facey Thompson started with a tremendous 3-2 win over the world number three Yuriy Shchepansky, holding his nerve to win 11-9 in the fifth after the Ukrainian three time European champion had come back to level the match at 2-2. Another tough match against Koyo Iwabuchi of Japan in which Facey Thompson fought back from 2-0 down to win 11-5 in the fifth gave him a bye into the quarter-finals as group winner but the 20 year old Londoner lost out 3-1 to Frederic Bellais of France who went on to win the gold medal.

The GB Para Table Tennis Team picked up another three medals in the team event with silver medals for Wilson and McKibbin in the men's class 8 event and Matthews with his Hungarian partner Endre Major in men's class 1 and a bronze for Daybell and Facey Thompson in men's class 10.

Wilson and McKibbin started their competition with a narrow 3-2 loss to Ukraine but a 3-0 win over a combined France/Germany team took them through to a quarter-final against the experienced Belgian pair of Marc Ledoux and Mathieu Loicq who had come through their group without dropping a set. An impressive 3-0 win earned the GB pair a place in the final and another chance to take on Ukraine but the world champion and world number one Viktor Didukh and his compatriot Ivan Mai proved just too strong again in a 3-1 win.

Nevertheless it was a really promising performance by the Sheffield based pair in their first team competition together for more than two years.

"It went really well," said 19 year old Wilson. "It is great to have a silver medal at a factor 40 – there is definitely a difference in the level between factor 20 and factor 40 and it is just nice to finally be able to get back into one after such a long time away. I can now knuckle down in training and I know what I have to work on – this will give me a lot of motivation for the rest of the season."

"It was a good result," agreed McKibbin. "It's great to be back playing with Ross and to get to a final in our first competition. I played better in the singles here than I did in Hungary and got to the quarters finals. Ross and I played well in the doubles and we can only get better."

Matthews and Major lost a tight first match to world champions Korea 3-2 but a 3-2 win against Sylvio Keller from Switzerland and the Russian Dmitry Lavrov took them into the semi-final against Italy, bronze medalists in the European Championships in 2013. With the tie level at 2-2 it came down to the final rubber between Matthews and Falco and the 22 year old from Aberdare showed great character and determination to fight back from 2-0 down to win 11-6 in the fifth and take his team into the final against Jae-kwan Cho and Ki-Won Nam of Korea. The Koreans are both world top ten players and their combined experience showed in a 3-0 win but Matthews has had a great competition, including a win over world number six Andrea Borgato in the singles, and was understandably delighted with his performance.

"It hasn't really sunk in that I beat Borgato," admitted Matthews. "The semi-final against Falco was hard work. At 2-0 down I just got my head back together and started to relax and play my game and it worked. This is definitely a step on again from Hungary – I controlled my nerves a bit more and I'm getting better all the time so I'm happy with that."

Daybell and Facey Thompson progressed from their group in second place after wins over Japan and a combined team from Hungary and Ireland and a narrow 3-2 loss to France. They came through a quarter final against Igor Misztal from Poland and the Israeli Aviv Gordon 3-1 to set up a semi-final against the class 10 world number six Denislav Kodjabashev from Bulgaria and Filip Radovic from Montenegro but had to settle for bronze after a 3-1 loss.

With Kodjabashev and Radovic going on to take the gold it was a creditable performance by the GB pair.

"It was a good start to the season," said Leeds University medical student Daybell, "and overall it was a good performance. I lost in the semi-finals of the singles to Lukyanov who had a really good tournament and beat all the top players and I still felt it was a really tight match. After my exams I'll be able to train full time and I'm

looking forward to that and seeing what kind of level I can get myself to. Ash had a really good competition and played well in the singles; he has shown great improvement and is competing with class ten players and I think a lot of teams will be scared to come up against us now."

Class nine player Facey Thompson, 20, had enjoyed a great win the singles competition against the Ukrainian world number three and said: "To beat a player like Shchepanskyy in a factor 40 was definitely one of my best wins. I played better than in Hungary; I was more positive and I'm really happy with my performance here."

Karabardak just missed out on a medal in the team event with Martin Perry but was encouraged by his silver medal in the singles in his first factor 40 tournament in class 6.

"It was a tight match and I didn't take my opportunities in the final," said the Swansea player. "Simion played really well but I think I can play better and hopefully beat him next time we play. It would have been nice to have won the gold but it's still quite pleasing to get silver in a factor 40."

GB Performance Director Gorazd Vecko said: "We were without Will Bayley, Rob Davies and Paul Davies so to get eight medals in the first factor 40 of the season is very encouraging. It's not all about medals in the first tournaments of the season and we can build on some great performances here.

"Ashley Facey Thompson beating Shchepanskyy was the result of the tournament for us; Tom Matthews beat the world number six Borgato and young Megan Shackleton, although she lost 3-2 against the world number 4, is going to be a top player in the next two or three years. We aim to have the players at their best for the major competition which this year is the Europeans in October and we know what we need to work on now over the next few weeks before the next tournaments in May."

Fran Bullock
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