

Liam and Paul ready to take on the world

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A World Championships in China might seem like going into the lion's den for table tennis players from any other country.

But while no one would deny the tough task ahead, Paul Drinkhall and Liam Pitchford are relishing the chance to test themselves on the highest stage.

With some good recent results behind them, and being seeded through to the main draw, England's leading men travel with optimism to Suzhou for the tournament, which begins on Sunday.

For Drinkhall, it is a first individual Worlds in four years – he missed the 2013 edition in Paris through injury.

And the Loftus player believes that, if he can find the form he enjoyed at the Russian Open earlier this season, there is no reason he cannot reach the later stages of the singles.

Drinkhall beat world top-10 players Marcos Freitas of Portugal and Germany's Dimitrij Ovtcharov on his way to the final in Russia in November, and ended the year at a career high of No 33 in the world. He will be seeded 35 for the Worlds.

The 25-year-old said: "There's no limit to what I can achieve – in Russia I showed that, beating two of the top-10 players. It's making sure I'm in the right place, maybe a bit of luck with the draw, and getting out there and doing what I know I can do.

"If I can put a string of matches together, there's no reason I can't be in the later stages.

"I think my game is good at the moment, I've had a great year. It has levelled off a bit towards the end – I've played well but I've not really done as well as I would have liked results-wise. I've been playing well but the games haven't gone my way, but sometimes that happens.

"I've been on a week's training camp in Sweden (practising with the Sweden squad) and it was a great preparation camp. I feel in great shape, so hopefully I can make the games go my way in China."

Meanwhile, Pitchford is drawing confidence from one of his best results of the season. The Chesterfield ace came from 2-1 down to beat world No 26 Bastian Steger 3-2 (11-6, 2-11, 7-11, 11-6, 11-8) and help his Ochsenhausen team win their final Bundesliga match against Werder Bremen.

While not quite enough to secure a play-off place – rivals Saarbrücken won their last fixture to deny Ochsenhausen – it puts Pitchford in good heart for the Worlds.

"I feel like I'm in good shape and playing well," said the 21-year-old, who is seeded 49. "Beating Steger gives me a lot of confidence.

"I'm practising well. We've got a few days in England now with Cookie (coach Alan Cooke) and it's about fine-tuning everything now and getting into the best shape possible.

"It's going to be difficult, but I'm not really scared of anybody. If I play to my level I can put up a fight against anybody.

"It would be nice to avoid the Chinese for the first few rounds, but I'd take whoever I get. I've been beating a few of the guys in the league this year, so it would be nice to get a crack at one of the top Europeans.

"You can never really say what you can achieve. I'll be straight into the main draw, which is nice, but the first match can be difficult when it's against someone with a few matches under their belt."

The fervent atmosphere in China is sure to add to the event, but while unseasoned tournament players might struggle to cope with it, there are no such fears for the English pair.

Pitchford said: "I'm used to it, I've played in those situations before. I've played a few tournaments over there, but not a Worlds. It's going to be good, I'm looking forward to it."

Drinkhall added: "It's good in China, you always get crowds, no matter what day or what stage of the tournament.

"I've performed well in China before – I won the Under-21 Pro Tour out there a few years ago – and I'm looking forward to doing that again.

"But at the end of the day it's another table tennis tournament – yes, it's the worlds, but we're preparing to go there in the best shape and that's the most important thing."

The duo will also compete in the doubles, as they did in the Commonwealth Games, where they just missed out on the medals. They retained their National title in Redbridge last month and enjoy teaming up.

"We had a lot of practice before the Commonwealth Games and prepared probably the best we ever had, so we were disappointed not to get the medal," said Drinkhall.

"Our games seem to fit, we both play quite freely. The more we play, the better we will get and we'll get a big medal one day."

"Me and Paul have played together a long time," said Pitchford. "We don't have that much time to practise together but when we've played together our results have been pretty good.

"If we're in good shape and playing well, we can win some matches."

The championships run from Sunday until the following Sunday, May 3.

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