

GB Para squad facing big test in Slovenia

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Rob Davies

World champion Will Bayley and world No 1 Rob Davies head a 14-strong squad for the Slovenia Open next week (May 6-9), one of three factor 40 tournaments for the GB Para Table Tennis Team in May.

With more than 400 competitors including 10 current world champions, the Slovenia Open will be one of the most competitive tournaments of the season and will not only provide a benchmark for the European Championships later in the year but also have a bearing on qualification for the 2016 Paralympic Games.

Sheffield-based Bayley, from Tunbridge Wells, will be defending his class 7 singles title in Lasko and making a belated start to his season having missed the Italian Open due to a minor foot injury.

"Things have been really good since I've been back in training," said Bayley, who last week became the first Paralympian to be inducted into the Hall of Champions at the EIS in Sheffield.

"I feel really sharp and I'm looking forward to Slovenia. It is always one of the toughest tournaments of the year and in some ways just as hard as the Europeans because you've got players there from outside Europe who are really strong and have different styles, so it will be a really good test for me."

Slovenia will also be Bayley's first tournament since winning the world title in China last September but the 27 year old has his feet firmly on the ground.

"I don't feel any different," he said. "You're only as good as your last training session so you can't afford to take your foot off the gas and think you are better than you are because there are young players coming through and they'll pick you off."

"So I need to keep fighting hard and remember why I became world champion and not take it for granted."

One of those young players is 16-year-old Billy Shilton, who will partner Bayley in the team competition now that former team-mate Paul Karabardak has been reclassified in class 6.

"I'm very excited to play with Billy," said Bayley. "Paul was a fantastic team partner and was like an older brother to me and now it's like I'm the older brother in the relationship and I've got to lead by example. Hopefully we can get some good results because Billy is playing really well. He's been running rings around me in training and I think we can cause a few surprises this season."

European champion Davies will also be making his first appearance of the season after a minor injury ruled him out of Italy, but the Welshman feels that the enforced break might prove to be a blessing in disguise.

"I've had a good break because of the injury and mentally it's done me good," he said. "I've come back more positive and I'm looking forward to seeing where I stand with the rest of the players. I'm really excited about playing in Slovenia."

The former rugby player took silver at the World Championships last year and admits that it has taken him a while to feel comfortable with the world No 1 ranking he has held since October 2013.

"Starting last season as world No 1 there was more pressure on me and I struggled a bit to deal with it," he said. "I was maybe thinking too much about losing my No 1 ranking but I've worked on that since and I feel more positive and confident; so it's exciting to be starting a new season with a different attitude."

Currently his strongest challenger for that top ranking is Jean-Francois Ducay, who beat him so narrowly in London and is always one of his toughest competitors. The Frenchman recently spent a week in Sheffield

training with Davies and the rest of the GB team, something that Davies feels will benefit them both.

"It was good having Ducay on the training camp – he is a top player and we can both see where we are at. The Koreans will be in Slovenia and he plays quite similarly to some of the Koreans so it's good for both of us really."

GB Performance Director Gorazd Vecko said: "The three tournaments in May will show us where we are against the top players in our preparation for this year's major championships which are the Europeans in October.

"The team is hoping for good results – in Italy we were missing Will Bayley, Rob Davies and Paul Davies and although Paul will not be in Slovenia we will have the rest of our Performance Squad there.

"Slovenia has a world record entry of more than 420 players from more than 50 countries – only China will not be there and they will be in Germany at the end of May. All the best European players will be there so if we can get medals in Slovenia then we know the athletes' preparation is going well and if the results are disappointing then we will know what we need to work on with the athletes at the end of May."

The list of players representing GB in Slovenia is:

GB Performance Squad

Will Bayley (Tunbridge Wells/Sheffield) – Class 7

Jane Campbell (London) – Class 3

Rob Davies (Brecon) – Class 1

Kim Daybell (Sheffield/Leeds) – Class 10

Ashley Facey Thompson (London/Sheffield) – Class 9

Sara Head (Bedwyn) – Class 3

Jack Hunter-Spivey (Liverpool/Sheffield) – Class 5

Paul Karabardak (Swansea) – Class 6

Aaron McKibbin (London/Sheffield) – Class 8

Megan Shackleton (Todmorden) – Class 4

Ross Wilson (Minster/Sheffield) – Class 8

GB Pathway Squad

Tom Matthews (Aberdare) – Class 1

Martin Perry (Paisley) – Class 6

Billy Shilton (Stonehouse) – Class 7

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