

Magnificent seven go through in Slovenia

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Paul Karabardak

On a good day for the GB Para Table Tennis Team at the Slovenia Open seven players progressed to the knockout stages of the singles events, including world champion Will Bayley and world No 1 Rob Davies.

They will be joined by Paul Karabardak (class 6), Billy Shilton (class 7), Aaron McKibbin (class 8), Ashley Facey Thompson (class 9) and Kim Daybell (class 10) while Jane Campbell (class 3), Sara Head (class 3) and Martin Perry (class 6) can still progress if they win their final group matches today.

In his first match since the World Championships last year Bayley recovered from a slow start against Alexei Samsonov to beat the Russian 3-1 and then secured top spot in his group with a 3-0 win against Viktor Karp from Ukraine.

"I've played better but it is always difficult when it is the first tournament of the year," said Bayley, "and I was a bit nervous today but I've come through it."

With so many entries in class 7 the 27 year old faces the prospect of four matches on Thursday if he is to successfully defend his Slovenia Open title.

Davies was also competing for the first time since taking silver in the World Championships last September and he started with a 3-0 win against the Brazilian Bruno De Paulo before winning the group with a 3-0 victory over the Hungarian Endre Major.

"I'm really happy with the way I played," said the Welshman. "I'm trying to deal with being world No 1 and I seem to be doing that better at the moment. I had a hard game against Major in the Worlds so it was good to beat him 3-0 today and prove a point to myself as well as him. My shot selection was quite good so it's just those little touches that I need to be better at for the next round but I'm excited about tomorrow."

Paul Karabardak beat the American Michael Brown 3-0 and then recorded a 3-0 win over the very experienced Thomas Rau to ensure that he will progress to the knockout stages.

"I didn't think I played that well this morning," said Karabardak, "but you can't always play well and it is good to know that you can be not at your best and still manage to get results."

"I knew I had to put in a better performance against Thomas Rau because he has been a very good player for a long time and I managed to play well enough to get the win in the end which was very pleasing."

Shilton was a comfortable 3-0 winner against Bogdan Omelchuk from Ukraine and then lost nothing in defeat to the world No 5 and World Championship bronze medalist Jean-Paul Montanus, taking the second set against the talented Dutchman but eventually losing 3-1. A 3-0 win against the American Daryl Sterling secured second place in his men's class 7 group and the 16 year old goes through to the knockout stages for the first time in a factor 40 competition.

"I think I played well in all my matches especially against Jean-Paul so it was a good day," said Shilton. "It always gives you confidence playing these sort of competitions because all the top players are here and no match is easy so to get out of my group is great and I'm really happy with how I played today."

McKibbin was gifted a walkover in his first match when his Venezuelan opponent Carlos Alberto Fasanaro Russian withdrew and he fought back well in his second match to beat the experienced Belgian and top seed in the group Marc Ledoux 3-1. A 3-0 win against Alejandro Perez from Argentina ensured him top spot in the group.

"I'm very happy with how I played," said McKibbin. "I feel my level has been quite consistent and I've looked to

put into practice what I've been working on in training and I felt very relaxed. It's nice to be in the knockout rounds – I think I need to come with the same focus and keep pushing and try to get better with every match."

Facey Thompson began with a 3-0 win over the German Yannick Schneider and then fought back from losing the first set against Esa Miettinen of Finland to beat the world No 12 and top seed in the group 3-1. He completed his group matches with a 3-0 win against Nurzhan Korpetayev from Kazakhstan to go through as group winner.

"I'm very pleased with the way I played," said the 20-year-old Londoner. "In the second game I nearly let myself beat myself by letting my head dip a bit with frustration and anger but I kept it together. I feel like I'm always in the matches now – every match I play I've always got a chance even if I'm not playing 100% and I can carry that confidence into tomorrow."

Daybell beat Bunpot Sillapakong from Thailand 3-0 in his opening match but then struggled to produce his best form against Vladimir Glazov and the imposing Russian produced some powerful shots to take the match 12-10 in the third. The Leeds University medical student came back to win his final group match against Supriyatna Gumilar from Indonesia to go through.

"It was quite a difficult day," said Daybell, "and I found it hard to get going playing against the Russian who is an awkward player. Nowadays with Para table tennis if you don't turn up with your best game on the day everyone is a good player and anyone can win against you."

Head began with a 3-0 win against Osrita Muslim from Indonesia and played well in a 3-1 defeat to the world No 5 Andela Muzinic from Croatia.

Campbell also made a winning start with a 3-0 win against the Australian Rosalie Turnbull and then produced a determined performance to beat the world No 7 Nergiz Altintas from Turkey 3-1.

Jack Hunter-Spivey started with a 3-0 win over the American Mohan Vallabhapurapu and then led the World champion Valentin Baus 2-1 before the German won a very tight match 12-10 in the fifth. The 19 year old from Liverpool fought hard in his final match against Tatok Hardiyanto but the Indonesian proved just too strong in a 3-2 win.

"I played very well against Baus and had chances to win that match," said Hunter-Spivey. "I'm very disappointed but that's the way it goes so I'll move on and see if I can get better results in the team event."

Megan Shackleton pushed the German Sandra Mikolaschek all the way in her first group match but the world No 6 used all her experience to take the match 11-8 in the fifth. The 16 year old showed all her fighting qualities in her second match, recovering from losing the first set against Martha Verdin of Mexico to win 3-1, but needed a win in her final match to progress and the world No 12 Zorica Popadic from Serbia had too much experience.

"I had a really good match against the world number six," said Shackleton, "and last year in Spain I had quite a struggle against her so it has proved to me that I can do it with a lot of hard training. I feel like I have a lot more respect from the other players now since they've watched me progressing over the last year and I feel that it will be my day soon if I keep working hard."

Tom Matthews played well in defeat to the world No 2 Jean-Francois Ducay from France and the Korean world number 10 Ki-Won Nam.

"Against Ducay I think I played really well," said the 22-year-old from Aberdare. "His experience shone through but I took him close in all three sets so I was quite pleased with that. Against Nam I played well in the first set but lost my concentration so it's little things that need to improve and hopefully that will come."

Perry had a tough first match against the world No 11 Alexander Esaulov and although he saved four match points the Russian proved too strong in a 3-0 win. A 3-0 win against Matias Nicolas Pino Lorca from Chile kept his hopes of progressing to the knockout stages alive and he will be hoping to beat Danny Bobrov from Israel in his final match today.

The GB team withdrew Ross Wilson (class 8) from the tournament as a precaution due to a minor knee injury.

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