

Golden boys Will and Billy reign over Spain

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Billy Shilton

Will Bayley and Billy Shilton produced a great performance in the final of the men's class 7 team event at the Slovenia Open today to beat the World champions from Spain 3-1 and take the gold.

On a good final day for the GB team 16-year-old Megan Shackleton took silver in the women's class 4 team event with her Slovakian partner Alena Kanova and London 2012 medallists Jane Campbell and Sara Head took bronze in the women's class 3 event.

After 16-year-old Shilton had played well in a 3-1 defeat to the world No 4 Jordi Morales, Bayley, the class 7 World champion, levelled the tie with a 3-1 win over the men's class 6 World champion Alvaro Valera. The doubles is always key in team events and the GB pair dominated throughout for a 3-0 win to move 2-1 ahead.

In the first of the reverse singles Bayley started well against Morales but the Spaniard is a tough competitor and in the end it came down to a fifth and deciding set. Although it was close Bayley always had a slight advantage and held his nerve to win the set 11-7, the match 3-2 and the tie for GB 3-1.

"I just thought I've got to fight for every single ball," said Bayley, "because he (Morales) is going to play a lot of balls on the table and I just thought I've got to try and get one more ball back than he does.

"That is pretty much my tactic against him because he is hard to hit through; it seemed to pay off in the end but it was tough. I think we had to win the doubles but I felt pretty relaxed all the way through because Billy played so well and we dominated from the start.

"It means a lot to beat the world champions and shows we've got a really world class team – hopefully we'll get to play Ukraine soon and compete for major medals – that is what I want to do."

Shilton was understandably delighted to win team gold here for the second time.

"It means a lot," he said. "Last year we won with three of us but this time it was just me and Will and and I'm really happy we won the gold.

"Everyone here is a top player and to play against top players all the time you have to believe you can win. I think I've done that quite well and because of that I've played my best table tennis. Even when I was two sets down I felt relaxed and just loosened up a bit and played my table tennis and I think that is how I won sets from 0-2 down.

"This will help my singles as well and give me even more motivation. It is great to play with someone like Will – the way he fights for every single point is something I need to bring into my game more."

Bayley was full of praise for his young partner. "I think he has impressed me most by the way he stayed calm," he said.

"There was a lot of pressure this morning and he was feeling a bit nervous but he didn't show any of that in the match. He was very calm and collected and that is all you can ask for really in a team partner and he did a great job."

Shackleton and Kanova reached the final with a 3-1 win over Thailand. Although Shackleton lost a close singles match against Chilchitraryak Bootwansirina she combined well with Kanova to win the doubles and the Slovakian's two singles wins took them through to meet World champions Serbia.

In the final Kanova made a great start to the first singles and led Nada Matic 2-1 but the world No 5 came back

strongly to take the next two sets and give Serbia a 1-0 lead. Shackleton also made a good start against Borislava Peric-Rankovic and led 6-5 in the first set but the experience of the world No 1 understandably proved too much for the young GB player and she lost in three sets.

That left Kanova and Shackleton needing to win the doubles and such is the strength in depth of Serbia in women's class 4 that Peric-Rankovic was able to watch from the side lines as Matic was partnered by world No 12 Zorica Popadic. However, it was the Slovakian/British combination who came out on top – fighting back from 1-2 down to win the fourth set 12-10 and then take the deciding fifth 11-7.

Kanova is class 3 but a former Paralympic, World and European champion and she showed all her class and experience against Peric-Rankovic – taking a 2-1 lead and recovering from the loss of match points in the fourth set to take the fifth 11-5 and the match 3-2.

Shackleton then had to play Matic in the deciding singles and to her credit she started well and kept fighting but the experience of the Serbian was decisive in a 3-0 win to clinch the tie 3-2 and take the gold.

"There was a lot of pressure going into that match," admitted Shackleton, "but I felt quite positive as I'd had a close match with her in Italy. I've never been in a pressure situation like that before so it was really hard but I'm proud that I played a good match and did the best I could do. It's a really good experience and hopefully if I'm in that situation again I'll deal with it better."

Jane Campbell and Sara Head put up a good fight against Turkey in the semi-final and were level at 1-1 after the first singles matches with Head losing in four close sets to Hatice Duman and Campbell coming back from 1-2 down against Nergiz Altintas to beat the world No 7 11-3 in the fifth.

A 3-0 loss in the doubles left them needing to win both reverse singles but although Head rallied from 0-2 down against Altintas to win the third set the Turk just edged the fourth 11-9 to take the match 3-1 and the tie 3-1.

Nevertheless after the disappointment of last year's World Championships it was a promising performance by the GB pair and a second bronze medal of the tournament for Campbell.

"I was very pleased to beat Altintas," she said, "and this will definitely give me confidence for the rest of the season. I think I've played as well as I could – my forehand has been working really well and that is what is making the difference. I lost confidence in it a bit in Italy and now I've got no reason not to be confident and that is a good feeling."

Head can also look forward to her next competition in Germany later this month after a winter disrupted by illness.

"Both my singles could have gone either way but it wasn't my day today," she said. "I'm happy with my performance at this tournament considering my lack of winter training and hopefully now with some good training things can keep improving."

GB Performance Director Gorazd Vecko said: "I think it has been a really good tournament for us. Paul Karabardak winning a gold medal in class 6 when only two of the world's top 10 players were missing was a brilliant result. Will Bayley and Billy Shilton – a great result to take a gold medal in the team event and to beat the world champions in the final.

"We are also very happy with the young players – Megan Shackleton taking silver in the team and coming very close to beating the world No 6 in the singles. Overall the performance of the team was great and now we go on to Slovakia and try and maintain the results there and then later this month in Germany."

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