

# New dad Drinkhall will have Rio focus

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**Posted On:** June 08, 2015



Paul is interviewed during the Team GB kitting out day for the European Games

New dad Paul Drinkhall admits it will be tough to leave his family behind when he competes at the inaugural European Games.

But with a guaranteed place at the Rio Olympics up for grabs, he will have plenty to focus on when he competes at the Baku event, which begins on Friday.

Paul and his wife Jo are celebrating the arrival of baby son Dougie last month.

The 25-year-old is certainly enjoying the life-changing event but is ready to put his 'game head' back on in Azerbaijan.

"It's been good, very good," said Drinkhall. "You find yourself smiling sometimes for what seems like no reason, but obviously there is a reason.

"We've had slightly less sleep than normal but it's not been too bad, I've been pleasantly surprised.

"Going away does play on your mind a bit. I never really liked going away before and when Jo was pregnant I wanted to be a home to help out, and now it's even more so.

"But it's what I do, it's my life and I've got to try to focus when I'm there."



Drinkhall, world ranked No 54, goes in with belief that he can go deep into the tournament, having won the Spanish Open and reached the final of the Russian Open last year – upsetting two world top 10 players on the way.

And even if winning the gold medal proves a step too far, preserving his world ranking ensures another route to Rio remains very much on the cards.

"The way my game is, there's no real limits – it's making sure I do everything I can to get myself in the best place for when the tournament begins," he said.

"If I can repeat or better my performance from Russia or Spain . . . I beat the then No 1 and No 3 in Europe in Russia . . . I can steal that place for Rio.

"But the main aim is to score ranking points to secure it that way.

"I feel in the past I haven't had that many shots at European players, I often seem to play the Asian players at Tour events, so hopefully I can make that count."

One of those Asian players, world No 18 Chun Ting Wong, beat him in the last 64 of the World Championships in April, and Drinkhall said: "I played okay at the Worlds, which doesn't sound great because you want to perform well.

"I didn't lose to anyone ranked below me and the positive thing was I still pressured somebody ranked 18 in the world when I didn't feel I was performing well. It was only a couple of points here and there."

Drinkhall was speaking at the kitting out day, when athletes pick up their Team GB kit, and he added: "This kitting out hasn't had as much anticipation as normal – because of the little man arriving it's taken a back seat. But it's still good to wear the Olympic rings and the lion."

The Games opens on Friday June 12 and runs until Sunday June 28, with the table tennis taking place between

the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>.

Tomorrow – read the views of Kelly Sibley . . . with Liam Pitchford and Alan Cooke to follow on Wednesday!

**Paul Stimpson**

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