

Battling Drinkhall misses out on bronze in thriller

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Posted On: June 19, 2015

Paul Drinkhall's dream of winning a medal at the inaugural European Games is over as he was beaten in a thrilling bronze-medal play-off.

The 25-year-old suffered the same fate as team-mate Liam Pitchford had in the quarter-finals, beaten 4-2 (11-5, 7-11, 7-11, 5-11, 11-5, 20-22) by Ukraine's adopted Chinese player Lei Kou.

Paul was quickly into his stride, taking the first 11-5, but saw Kou take three in a row to get one foot on the podium. Paul closed the gap by taking the fifth, but all that went before was overshadowed by an amazing sixth game.

Paul led 5-1, only for Kou to take five points in row. Blows were traded to 8-8, and Paul then won two on the bounce to bring up two game points. It appeared Kou then sent a shot long – certainly, the electronic scoreboard gave the game to Paul 11-8. But that was premature as Paul indicated the shot had clipped the edge.

With most in the hall and watching on the Baku website taking a few seconds to work out what had happened, play continued, though the electronic scoreboard did not help as it went down completely.

Kou saved the next game point to take it to deuce, and there followed an amazing sequence of game points and match points saved as Paul fought to take it to a decider and Kou refused to give up his bronze quest.

Eventually, after eight game points for Paul, Kou took it 22-20 on his own fifth match point, despite an amazing diving return by Paul to keep the rally alive.

So there was to be no medal, but Paul and Liam both performed better than their seedings, helping them in their quest for ranking points to ensure they qualify for the Rio Olympics next year.



Paul Drinkhall in action in the bronze medal play-off. Picture by Paul Sanwell/OP Photographic

Earlier in the semi-finals, Paul was beaten in six sets by top seed and European No 1 Dimitrij Ovtcharov – leading 1-0 and 2-1 before being overpowered by his German opponent.

Ovtcharov had not dropped a set in his previous matches, but Paul changed all that in style in the first, blitzing through it 11-2. The top seed, however, responded in similarly dominant fashion, levelling with an 11-4 scoreline.

The tide turned back in Paul's direction in the third as he prevailed 11-6. Ovtcharov was clearly troubled, being allowed to leave the arena for a few seconds at the changeover to change his shirt, then calling a timeout with the score 3-1 in Paul's favour in the fourth.

The German won four of the next five points, prompting Paul to take his own timeout at 5-4 down. But that did not have the desired effect as Ovtcharov pulled away to take the set 11-6.

The fifth was the closest set, but the top seed always had the edge as he took it 11-7, before really showing his class in the sixth to seal the 4-2 victory (2-11, 11-4, 6-11, 11-6, 11-7, 11-3).

So there was no repeat of the result the last time these two met, at last year's Russian Open, when Paul won in seven on his way to the final.

Ovtcharov went on to win the gold medal, beating Vladimir Samsonov of Belarus 4-3 in another thriller (10-12, 7-11, 11-9, 11-3, 9-11, 11-7, 11-8).

Paul said of the semi-final: "I'm obviously disappointed to lose, at one point I felt I had it to win at 2-1 and 4-1 to

me but I made a couple of easy mistakes in that set.

"He's a great player and very experienced and after that he turned it around and I couldn't get my hands back on the game.

"I played a good game but I didn't play a great game otherwise I would have closed it out. It was just couple of points in the fourth set that changed it around and hopefully in the future I can stop that happening."

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