



Shilton and Pickard strike gold in Belgium

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Gloucestershire teenager Billy Shilton and 21-year-old Felicity Pickard, from Burnley, were the stars of the Belgian Open for the GB Para Table Tennis team, taking gold in their respective singles events.

There were bronze medals in the singles for 17-year-old Daniel Bullen (men's class 5) and 21-year-old Martin Perry, who also took silver in the men's class 6 team event with 18-year-old Conor McAdam, and team medals for Will Bayley and Ashley Facey Thompson and the young Welsh pair Lawrence John and Joshua Morgan.

Following the European Championships in Denmark last month, when Shilton took individual bronze and team silver in men's class 7, the ITTF Para Table Tennis Committee made the decision to look at his classification and the 17 year old, who was classified in class 7 in December 2013, competed here in Belgium in class 8 to allow the international classifier to observe him and make a decision regarding his future classification.

With two wins from three in his group matches Shilton progressed to the knockout stages and a 3-0 win over the Frenchman Lewis Dalby in the last 16 took him through to the quarter-finals. The withdrawal of Belgian Marc Ledoux gave him a walkover into the semi-finals and a 3-1 win over former European champion Marcin Skrzynski from Poland took him into his first singles final and a rematch against Fabian Rignell from Sweden, who had beaten Shilton 3-0 in the group stages.

This time it was Shilton who proved the stronger in a 3-2 win to take his first singles gold medal.

"Playing in class 8 was quite difficult, to be honest," admitted Shilton, "but I think I coped with it quite well. I just tried to relax and play my table tennis. In the final I had extra motivation having lost to him in the group stages and I was really happy with how I played. I think I was a bit more focused and had a game plan whereas before I just played table tennis but in the final I had a clear-cut idea of what I needed to do."

Pickard took a break from international competition after the Slovenia Open last year and has since been focusing on training. She showed her improvement and belied her ranking in the round-robin women's class 6 singles event, starting with a 3-2 win over top seed and 2010 World champion Katarzyna Marszal from Poland, holding her nerve to win a very tight match 14-12 in the fifth. She went on to clinch the gold medal with 3-0 wins over Russian World No 11 Svetlana Nesterenko and Tatiana Ledovskaia, also from Russia.

"I'm really happy," said Pickard. "I just tried to focus on my game and stay more relaxed. I saved seven match points in my first match – I just kept focused and she got a bit tight which helped me and that gave me great confidence for the rest of my matches. Now I know I can handle those situations and stay relaxed it gives me great motivation for the future. The goal here was just to see how I could cope with international competition so

to win gold is a bonus and now I can push on with my training.”

Bullen, from St Neots, progressed from his group with 3-1 wins over Sem Roelofs from the Netherlands and the Japanese player Kentaro Doi, which earned him a semi-final against home favourite Bart Brands. The Belgian was always in control in a 3-0 win but it was a promising performance by the young GB Pathway player.

“I had two good wins in my group,” said Bullen, “and I feel that I have started to play like to play at home – I’m in control of my nerves a lot more which gives me a lot more confidence and I’ve got a new wheelchair which I’ve only been playing in for a week so that gives me confidence for the future as well.”

Perry began his singles competition with a narrow 3-2 loss to Jacobus Meiland from the Netherlands but reached the quarter-finals with a 3-0 win over Junki Itai from Japan. Another very close match resulted this time in a 3-2 win for the Paisley player against the Australian Trevor Hirth which took him into a semi-final against Michael Azulay. The experienced Swede, who took bronze in the team event at last month’s European Championships, was just too strong in a 3-1 win but Perry was pleased with his performance.

“I feel I played very well overall,” said Perry. “My first match I lost so closely in the fifth that I knew I had found some rhythm and I felt I really kicked on from that in my next match. My quarter final was so tight and I felt Trevor (Hirth) and I played great table tennis. In the semi against Azulay I feel it’s the best I’ve ever played against him and I feel I really could have won the match.”

Perry then teamed up with fellow Scot McAdam, from Ayr, in the round-robin men’s class 6 team event and after a hard-fought 3-2 win over a combined team from Russia and Kazakhstan and a 3-0 win over Belgium they played Azulay and Hirth in their final match to decide the gold medal. The GB pair played well to take the doubles 3-1 but had to be content with silver as the Swedish/Australian pair took the match 3-1.

“In my final match I lost to Hirth 12-10 in the fifth,” said Perry, “which was really quite hard to take as I had fought back from 8-2 down to lead 10-8 but I can only take the positives from that and I kept fighting to the end. I feel that I’m really starting to show the level of discipline that’s needed to be a top player. Conor and I won the doubles in our last match which was a really good performance and I’m happy with silver.”

“This was my first international medal so I’m very happy,” said McAdam. “Hopefully there will be many more to come but it’s good to get my first one. I think I played well and it was nice to win a medal with Martin – we’ve known each other since we both started playing so it’s nice that we’ve both come this far.”

Bayley, 27, the men’s class 7 World champion, was playing here in the team event only, alongside 20-year-old Londoner Facey Thompson and they began the round-robin men’s class 9 team event with 3-0 wins over a French/Korean combination and Germany. A 3-2 win against Italy meant their final match against Belgium was to decide the gold medal but the GB pair had to settle for silver after a 3-2 loss to the newly crowned men’s class 9 European champions.

“We did well to get silver,” said Bayley. “We had some good wins against Germany and Italy and only lost 3-2 to Belgium so it was close. The doubles was the key match really. The young players have done really well here and it’s been nice to support them – I’ve really enjoyed it.”

“It’s been an up and down tournament for me,” admitted Facey Thompson. “I won all my group matches but lost 3-2 in the quarter finals of the singles after I had fought back from 2-0 down. The team was also a bit up and down although Will and I played well in the doubles so I was happy with that.”

The Welsh partnership of John, 17, from Swansea, and 24 year old Morgan from Cardiff reached the semi-finals of the men’s class 10 team event with a 3-2 win over the Netherlands but found the partnership of Austrian former able-bodied player Krisztian Gardos and Igor Misztal from Poland too strong in a 3-0 loss and took the bronze.

“Overall I think the tournament has been a massive success,” said GB Development Coach Shaun Marples, “especially Felicity, not only getting her first win but to win gold, and Billy, who has been able to channel his focus to win class 8 – his first singles’ title as well. They both deserve great credit and have been working hard in training back home. The rest of the Pathway players have all come away with wins and gained valuable

experience as well and are great prospects for the future.”

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