



Liam and Kelly confident England will hit form

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Liam Pitchford says England travel with belief and confidence as they prepare to compete in the top division at the World Team Championships for the first time since 1997.

Pitchford, Paul Drinkhall and Sam Walker will perform in the Championship Division in Kuala Lumpur when the event gets under way on Sunday, England having earned promotion at the last edition of the tournament in Tokyo in 2014.

Andrew Baggaley was originally in the squad, however has withdrawn because of injury.

Seeded 18th, they are in Group B and begin against eighth seeds Sweden, before further matches against France (ninth), Denmark (16th), Germany (second) and hosts Malaysia (24th).

"I'm feeling really good, it will be a good challenge," said Pitchford. "In my opinion we've got a good draw. Obviously they are all hard matches, but we've got nearly all European teams and if we play well there's no reason we can't finish in the top three and get through to the next stage."

England were handed a boost when Germany's world No 5 Dimitrij Ovtcharov was forced to pull out of the tournament through injury, but even before that news Pitchford was upbeat about England's chances.

"Obviously Germany are the best team in Europe, but Paul has beaten Ovtcharov and I've had a good games against him," he said.

"Sweden, we know quite well. They are tricky players with tricky serves but if we can receive well we stand a good chance in the rallies.

"With France, I know Gauzy quite well and Paul has played in the same club as Lebesson this year. They are good players, but we are too and if we play well we can get a win.

As long as we go there and believe in ourselves, anything is possible. We go with confidence."

Sam Walker has been on an upward trajectory since the last Worlds, hitting a career high of 159 in the world rankings, and Pitchford believes that strengthens England's hand.

"Sam has proved he can play against the top players and will have confidence he can play No 3 and win.

"As long as he can keep that confidence in himself when he has a loss – we've all gone through that – and keep believing and keep his game up, he can become a really good player for us.

"Me and Paul have broken through and shown it can be done and hopefully Sam can follow us and we can have a strong team."

With Rio qualification on the horizon, much sought-after ranking points are at stake in Malaysia, but Liam said: "I don't really think about ranking points too much. If I play well, I will pick them up and if I play well enough, I'll qualify.

"We've got nothing to lose. Last time the pressure was on us and we showed what we could do by winning the second division. This time there's no pressure to win.

"I want to peak for the Sunday and that first match, but I'm playing quite well in the league and I'm unbeaten in 2016 and that will give me confidence."

Meanwhile, the women's team of Kelly Sibley, Tin-Tin Ho and Karina Le Fevre are ranked 32 and will face the second division's top seeds, Serbia (25th), plus Canada (34), Belgium (39), Turkey (42) and New Zealand (48) in Group E, beginning against Turkey on Sunday.

They will face Serbia last, and Sibley believes a bit of inside knowledge could see them mount a serious challenge to the top seeds.

She said: "Serbia are the No 1 seeds and would normally be in the top division, but Malaysia have taken their spot as hosts, so they will have a point to prove to show they deserve to be in that top division.

"But we've got no pressure and we can cause them problems and maybe get an unexpected win. I know two of their players quite well – Anamaria Erdelji is in my French league team (Schiltigheim) and I'm the same age as Gabriela Feher so we've played each other all the way through the age groups. It's going to be tough, but if we play well, we've got a chance.

"I think it's quite a tough group. If the other teams put out their strong players, it will be difficult but if we play well and get behind each other we can get some decent wins. The main goal is to go up, but we just want to perform well.

"On a personal note, I was disappointed with how the Europeans went, because we wanted promotion and we weren't able to do that. I want to go there and put in a better performance. I feel my training and match-play has been going well."

Sibley also made light of the fact that the squad is only three-strong rather than four.

"We're also taking a physio, which is good because there are a lot of matches," she said. "It's quite strenuous on the body but we can use the physio, get massages and rest properly.

"We've been training well and we're fit and ready to go."

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