



Leopards beaten but settle for bronze

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England's spellbinding World Team Championships journey is over – but they have a podium place for the first time in 33 years.

The Leopards today lost 3-1 to Japan in the semi-finals in Kuala Lumpur, a scoreline which doesn't do justice to England's effort.

In the end, World No 7 Jun Mizutani clinched the crucial victory over Liam Pitchford, having saved four match points in the fourth game, but what a story had gone before – not just in this match but in the rest of the tournament.

The rest of the world cannot fail to have noticed England's eye-catching displays, winning a medal for the first time since Tokyo 1983, and believed to be the first time a side promoted from the second level at the previous Worlds had reached the podium.

With China already in the final, having despatched Korea 3-0, could England keep European interest alive? On paper it was always going to be a tough task as the three Japanese players selected for the match were ranked No 7, No 20 and No 24 in the world – and they had the luxury of not selecting world No 14 Koki Niwa.

Against that, Paul Drinkhall is ranked No 72, Liam Pitchford 64 and Sam Walker 159 – though all will be on the up after this stellar tournament.

But momentum and belief can see the sporting applecart upset – just ask Leicester City football fans – and England certainly had both in spades after their brilliant victory over France in the quarter-finals. This would be closer than those rankings suggested.

Drinkhall was first up against the left-handed world No 7 Jun Mizutani, and he led 6-3 in the first and 5-2 in the second before his opponent, defending doggedly at times and staying in rallies where lesser players would probably not have done so, found a way back and then took control in the third.

Pitchford will feel hard done-by against Maharu Yoshimura, ranked No 24. Having lost the first to 5, the Chesterfield man saved seven game points in the second to take it 14-12. After the next two had been shared – Liam taking the fourth 12-10 – the English player led 9-6 in the decider, only for his opponent to get on a run of five points to take the tie.

Just the 139 places between Walker and his opponent, No 20 Yuya Oshima, surely too much ground to make up? Not a bit of it! Walker took the first two by identical 11-6 scorelines and then found a high level again to take the fourth after Oshiwa had cut the deficit.

It was the biggest win of Walker's career and the Leopards were back in it! Could Pitchford now take down Mizutani?

At 2-1 and 10-6 up, it seemed we were heading for a decider, but the Japanese, again hanging in rallies and getting one more ball back, took six in a row to level it. He then showed his class in the decider to leave Pitchford desolate.

But that podium place, and the points picked up in the race to Rio, should be massive consolations once the disappointment has subsided.

Thanks for all the support and messages we have received as well, it's much appreciated and we hope you enjoyed it as much as we did! ☺

– Liam Pitchford (@liampitchford) [March 5, 2016](#)

Scores

Jun Mizutani bt Paul Drinkhall 3-0 (11-8, 11-9, 11-4)

Maharu Yoshimura bt Liam Pitchford 3-2 (11-5, 12-14, 11-7, 10-12, 11-9)

Sam Walker bt Yuya Oshima 3-1 (11-6, 11-6, 8-11, 11-9)

Mizutani bt Pitchford 3-2 (8-11, 9-11, 11-7, 12-10, 11-6)

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