



Leopards' team spirit helped us make history

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Team spirit and seizing opportunities were the biggest factors in the England Leopards' dramatic and historic World Championship bronze medal-winning performance.

The players have been speaking about their achievement in Malaysia, after a well-earned night out celebrating their incredible rise to the top of the world game.

The squad of Liam Pitchford, Sam Walker and Paul Drinkhall secured England's first podium finish since 1983 and became the first team to be promoted to the top division (in Tokyo two years ago) and win a medal at the following Championships.

They needed a bit of a favour from Sweden to make it out of the group on countback ahead of second seeds Germany, but then took full advantage with wins over Poland and France – the latter courtesy of [Drinkhall's 13-11 win in the deciding game](#) of the deciding match against Emmanuel Lebesson.

It put them into a [semi-final with Japan](#), which they lost 3-1, despite Walker's victory over world No 20 Yuya Oshima.

Here is what the players and staff made of a stellar week in Kuala Lumpur.

Liam Pitchford: "It's absolutely amazing. We never thought it was possible but we've done it. We knew we had to approach it with the belief that we could do it.

"Our aim was to stay up but to be in the semi-finals and put on a great tournament is out of this world.

"I think the main reason is team spirit, not just between us but between the whole group out here, the girls' team, the staff and everyone who was supporting us.

"In the match against Germany, we knew Timo Boll wasn't playing but they were still favourites on paper. But we

also knew we could beat them and we all played really well.

"We still needed a bit of luck from Sweden taking two matches off Germany so we could get out of the group, then we got a good draw and made the most of it.

"We've proved we can mix it with the best teams in the world and that gives us a lot of confidence."

Sam Walker: "I think we'll need a bit more time for it to really sink in. It's a fantastic feeling and an amazing achievement.

"Our realistic goal was to stay up and we didn't really think about getting a medal, it was just a dream. To do it was fantastic.

"Personally the match against Oshima was my best match but unfortunately we lost the overall match so I couldn't celebrate that as well."

Paul Drinkhall: "It's amazing. We just keep looking at each other and thinking 'we've got a medal!' It's something you think about but you don't really see it happening – we just took our chance and made it happen.

"I think the win against Germany was the turning point, even then we needed Sweden to take two wins off Germany, which they did.

"For us to get through the group was a big positive and we relaxed after that and started to play a lot better.

"In games like the one against Lebeckson, it is mental. We play at the same club and know each other's games well. We're at a similar level.

"I managed to build up a lead and he did well to stay in the game, though I should have closed it out. When he had the match point I just tried to put him under pressure and then I got the two points I needed.

"We had the belief as a team and looking at the others on the bench, and the supporters in the crowd, helped me to get through it."



Paul and Liam support from the bench

Coach **Alan Cooke:** "The good thing was the preparation coming in. Paul and I went out to Germany to Liam and

Sam's club and had two weeks there and then we went out to Singapore early, so we probably had a little bit more time together in the build up.

"The realistic goal was to stay in the top 16, which was a big achievement in itself and was hard to do with the likes of Germany, Sweden and France in the group.

"But we didn't put a ceiling on what we could do. It was the old cliché of one game at a time and being fully focused on one point at a time, and the players did it brilliantly.

"We knew there was an opportunity and all three played amazingly. The team spirit has been something we will never forget.

"Only having three players there, in some ways it's harder, but in fact I think it bonded them closer together and the team spirit was awesome. They were fighting every single ball and when they needed inspiration, they could get it from each other.

"Every neutral there seemed to get behind us and that was terrific and a reflection of the respect they had for the team. I've never experienced anything like it – they all wanted England to win, and that gives you a real boost when you need it."

Head of Talent and Performance **Simon Mills**: "They've done an outstanding job and took their opportunities. We had great support from the physio Freddie Murray and there was an outstanding atmosphere in the team. They've made history.

"It was always part of the plan to return to the top of the world. We've done it a bit earlier than expected and the challenge now is to use this as the launchpad.

"It proves English and British players can achieve in the modern era and battle with the rest of the world."

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