



Pitchford and Sibley ready to defend titles

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Reigning champions Liam Pitchford and Kelly Sibley are striking a confident note ahead of the defence of their title at the PG Mutual National Championships.

Pitchford last year beat Paul Drinkhall, coming from 3-0 down to win his third title in a row, while Sibley's final victory over Tin-Tin Ho represented the fifth title of her career.

Both athletes arrive in Hatfield this Friday fresh from the World Team Championships in Malaysia, where Pitchford played a starring role as the Leopards won bronze medals – England's first at that level since 1983.

And the Chesterfield ace said of his Nationals campaign: "It's not as important as winning the medal at the Worlds, but it's the biggest English tournament and I've won it three times in a row, so I want to make it four.

"I can't really complain about how I'm playing and I'm always confident, but you never know who's going to play well.

"You've got to get yourself up for the first match and when it comes to the later stages hopefully I'll still be playing and get a chance to play on TV."

Pitchford was referring to the fact that ITV4 is televising the last three hours of the event, with the men's doubles, women's singles and men's singles finals to be aired live.

He added: "It's great for English table tennis and hopefully people will tune in and see some great matches and we'll get some new fans."

Pitchford and Paul Drinkhall will be defending their doubles title and Pitchford said: "Me and Paul have won it three times in a row and we go out there as favourites and we've proved in the tournaments we've played, especially the Swedish Open when we reached the semi-finals, that we're a really good doubles pair. We're quietly confident we can retain it."

Meanwhile, Sibley goes into the women's event in good form, having won nine of her 11 matches at the Worlds, culminating in beating world No 100 Adriana Diaz of Puerto Rico.

"Everybody wants to be national champion in whatever sport they compete in," said Sibley. "Even though I've won it before, I'm still hungrier than ever to retain my title and go on to win more.

"I didn't realise until last year that having five titles put me joint third on the all-time list, so now I want to get the sixth and get into second place and keep going.

"I'm just going to focus on one match at a time and hopefully I can continue my positive form and confidence from the Worlds."

The 27-year-old added: "I think it's great we've got live TV. I think we've had highlights before but we haven't been on live. It's fantastic and shows table tennis is going in the right direction."

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