



Liam and Paul ready to seize Rio chance

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Liam Pitchford and Paul Drinkhall aim to keep the good times rolling for English table tennis as they bid to qualify for the Rio Olympics.

The top English pair are in Halmstad for the European qualifying event which begins on Tuesday, having been switched to Sweden from Istanbul because of security concerns.

They are understandably high on confidence after last month's stunning World Team Championships, where they and Sam Walker came home with bronze medals.

Drinkhall followed up with his fifth career singles title at the PG Mutual National Championships, while Pitchford has risen to a career-high No 39 in the world in this month's ITTF rankings.

There are 10 Rio places up for grabs in Halmstad, and while both Englishmen know booking a place on the Team GB plane will not be easy, they also know none of their opponents will relish facing them.

"It's been a crazy month or so with the Worlds and the Nationals, but I feel good and confident in myself and aim to keep the momentum going," said Drinkhall.

"There's no one I wouldn't want to play. I think on my day – and my day is happening more often now – I'm not scared of anyone, especially in Europe.

"It's the same for Liam as well, people will be wary of us."

Pitchford added: "It's good to get a career-best ranking, it gives me confidence going in to the qualifiers.

"Obviously I want to go higher. I don't want to set myself a limit on how high I can go. If I keep working hard and getting results I think the sky's the limit."

Drinkhall will be first into the action on Tuesday and Wednesday, playing in round-robin groups for the right to

join the top 16 seeds – including Pitchford – in Thursday’s main group stage.

Thursday will see eight groups of eight played on a knockout basis, with each group winner qualifying for Rio.

The final two qualifying places will be determined on Friday and Saturday as previously eliminated players are put into one of two groups of 32. These will be played on a knockout system, with the two group winners qualifying for Rio.

Those who do not qualify by right in Sweden will still have the opportunity to get to Rio by virtue of their world rankings.

Drinkhall said: “It’s pretty tough but you’re hoping to qualify and if not to make sure you play well and your ranking goes in the right direction.”

Pitchford feels the move from Turkey to Sweden, which also delayed the tournament by a few days, can help the English challenge.

He said: “Moving it and making it a week later, it’s been perfect for me, giving me longer to rest and prepare.

“After the Worlds and the Nationals I was pretty tired but now I’m rested and ready to go again.

“It’s a nice challenge and it’s never going to be easy to qualify for an Olympics but I’ll give it my best. There will be highs and lows – that’s table tennis – but it’s always fun.”

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