



Four team medals for Para GB in Slovenia

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The GB Para Table Tennis Team won four medals in the team events on the final day of the ITTF PTT Slovenia Open, taking bronze in men's class 8, men's class 6, women's class 6-7 and women's class 4.

With nearly all of the world's top players competing in Lasko the GB team's total of eight medals, including gold medals in the singles for Will Bayley and Rob Davies, is a good indication of where it stands with four months to go to Rio.

Aaron McKibbin and Ross Wilson had reached the semi-finals of men's class 8 with a battling win in the quarter-finals against Belgium and they faced an even tougher test against world champions China.

Despite a slow start the GB pair took the first game in the doubles 12-10 and after losing the next two played superbly to level at 2-2 before the combined experience of world No 2 Ye Chao Qun and No 4 Zhao Shuai clinched the match 11-9 in the fifth.

Wilson, from Minster in Kent, then made a great start against Zhao, taking the first game against the Paralympic champion who had beaten him so narrowly (3-2) in their last meeting in the semi-finals in London 2012. However, since then Wilson has missed two years of competition due to injury and Zhao came back to win the match 3-1 and take China into the final.

Nevertheless it was a promising performance by Wilson, who is still only 20 years old.

"It would have been nice to get some revenge on him but he is a great player," he said. "The doubles was an improvement for us – we have definitely come a long way since Italy in February.

"They are a great team and it is good to know we can compete that well against them in doubles. On another day we could have taken them so it is definitely a positive going forward.

"I've played quite a few matches here and I'm really pleased with how it's gone. I lost to the world No 1 and the Paralympic champion and I know what I need to work on back in the training hall. Going into Slovakia next week

I'm at a good level so that is good to know."

McKibbin can also be pleased with his progress four months away from the Paralympic Games.

"To play so well against China is a good sign," said the 24-year-old Sheffield based Londoner, "as they are one of the teams we are going to have to beat to be successful in Rio.

"We are playing these competitions to prepare ourselves for the major events and we are not far away from them. It gives you confidence when you are losing 11-9 in the fifth – you are disappointed but at the same time you are thinking that in a major event we are really close to them now and we've only got to do a couple of things to change that result around."

Swansea's Paul Karabardak and 21-year-old Martin Perry from Paisley had beaten European champions Denmark on the way to reaching the semi-finals of men's class 6 but they could not find that form again and lost 2-0 to a combined team of Rungroj Thainiyom, the Paralympic champion and world No 3 from Thailand and the Italian Raimondo Alecci.

The doubles was close in all four sets but Thainiyom and Alecci took it 3-1 and the experienced Alecci then secured the win for his team by beating Karabardak 3-1.

While Karabardak was bitterly disappointed it was Perry's first medal at a factor 40 tournament and a good result for a relatively new partnership.

"Doubles today was tough," said Perry. "They have a lot of experience in that team including the Paralympic champion and they've got some really awkward styles to play against but regardless of that I thought that Paul and I played some really good table tennis at times.

"We won one set and were tight in the others so it is something we can definitely learn from. Moving forward we are only going to get stronger. This is my first factor 40 medal and it's my birthday tomorrow so I'm going to call it my birthday bronze."

The teenage partnership of GB's 17-year-old Megan Shackleton and 18-year-old Sandra Mikolaschek from Germany had a tough semi-final in women's class 4 against the world team champions from Serbia and at 0-7 in the first game of the doubles they looked to be heading for a quick defeat. However, they fought back to 8-8 and despite losing the first game 9-11 they played really well as a partnership – taking the second game 11-8 and finally losing 17-19 in the fourth.

Mikolaschek, the world No 4, took the first game against world No 2 Borislava Peric-Rankovic 11-9 but the European champion and former world No 1 used all her experience to take the match 3-1 and take Serbia into the final.

Shackleton, from Todmorden, has had a good tournament and is a great prospect for the future.

"I'm really pleased," she said, "because we have never played as a team before and they are the world champions so to push them as much as we did is an achievement in itself. We didn't start well and the best way we were going to come back was to take the pressure off completely and just try new things while we had the opportunity and that definitely worked in our favour in some respects.

"I'm really pleased to come away with a bronze medal especially in Paralympic year when all the teams are here and getting ready for the Games so that was a big eye-opener for me as well. I've had a really good tournament and I'm starting to play positively and confidently and I want to continue that and maybe just work on a few more technical things to bring to my game next time."

Felicity Pickard is another talented young player and in women's class 6-7 she was teamed for the first time with Yuliya Klymenko, the world No 5 and former European champion from Ukraine. In their semi-final they took on a strong Russian team of Raisa Chebanika, the class 6 Paralympic champion and world No 2 and Victoriya Safonova, the former class 7 No 1.

Despite losing the doubles 0-3 the GB/Ukraine partnership played well and Pickard, a class 6 player, was also far

from disgraced despite a 0-3 loss in the singles to Safonova and can be very proud of her bronze medal.

"It is definitely great experience to play matches like this," said the 21-year-old from Burnley, "and they are a very strong team but I felt that I managed to compete with them and play some good stuff.

"I know that if I go out with a positive attitude and more confidence then I can dictate the game more rather than being worried about their position and looking at world rankings. I feel that if I do that and I get stronger then maybe I can dominate them a bit more and get the wins.

"I didn't expect to get a medal here but it was a good win yesterday and I played well so it's good that the hard work is paying off."

In round-robin women's class 3 event London 2012 bronze medalists Jane Campbell and Sara Head lost their third match to a combination of world No 6 Michela Brunelli from Italy and the world No 7 Alena Kanova from Slovakia 0-2, Campbell finding former Paralympic, world & European champion Kanova in good form in a 1-3 singles loss after the GB pair had lost the opening doubles by the same score.

That meant they needed to win their final match against the combined team from Thailand and Japan to have a chance of a medal. The GB pair won the doubles 3-0 against world No 10 Dararat Asayut and Yukimi Chada before Head came through against Chada 3-2 in the first singles to secure the win for GB.

"It was disappointing to lose the match this morning," said Campbell, "and it is always hard to pick yourself up after a loss but we did it. I think it was just grit and determination that got us through. Our doubles is coming together so that is a positive to focus on for Slovakia next week and also for Rio."

"It was hard and I had to really focus," admitted Head after her narrow win against Chada. "It has been a tough couple of days and I had to pull all my energy together to pull that win out of the bag so I'm happy with that. We were thrilled to beat Croatia here – they are European champions and we got close to them in Italy and we beat them here so we need to keep working on what we are doing and look forward to competing against them in Rio."

Unbeaten China took the gold and with three teams level on two wins each the medals were decided on countback. Croatia took silver and Italy/Slovakia the bronze, leaving the GB pair in fourth place.

GB Performance Director Gorazd Vecko was very satisfied with his team's performance: "I think we must be really happy with the tournament.

"This is like a small Rio Games before the Paralympics in September. We had 90% of the top players here who will compete in Rio and in some classes we had all the top players here – like in men's class 7 where Will Bayley took the gold medal. It was also a great achievement to have an all GB final in men's class 1 with Rob Davies and Paul Davies.

"To take four singles medals and one team medal in a class that is a Paralympic event (men's class 8) – that is a big success for us. It is also good to know that we can beat all the top players, for example Kim Daybell beating the top Chinese player in men's class 10.

"This is showing me where we are and what we need to do for the next four months and it is good to know we are on the right track."

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