



Superb Drinkhall bows out in thriller

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Paul Drinkhall's brilliant run at the Olympics was ended by Vladimir Samsonov 4-2 in the last 16 – but not before Drinkhall had saved EIGHT match points.

Defeating the world No 9, and seventh seed here, was always going to be a tough task for Drinkhall. And when he found himself 3-0 and 10-5 down, most spectators would have anticipated the match lasting only a minute or so longer.

But, bristling with positive body language and living the old adage of fighting for one point at a time, Drinkhall clawed back the deficit, saved another match point at 10-11 and another at 14-15 and took his own fourth game point at 17-15.

When he added the fifth game, and led the sixth 7-5, one of the great comebacks looked on the cards. But Samsonov took five points in a row and, although Drinkhall saved another match point, eventually Samsonov took his chance and booked his quarter-final spot.

The first three games had seen Belarus athlete Samsonov, in his sixth Olympics, at his metronomic best, repelling everything Drinkhall could throw at him. But Drinkhall gradually worked his way back into the match and Samsonov would have been mighty relieved to advance.

But Drinkhall can feel proud of his display in Rio, beating two higher-ranked players en route to becoming only the third Brit to reach the last 16 at an Olympics.

Earlier in the day, Drinkhall put in a performance of intelligence, maturity, power and guile to see off the Croatian 15th seed Andrej Gacina 4-2.

It was a cagey match with very few runs of points – Gacina picking up a maximum of three in a row at any point in the first four games as Drinkhall refused to let the higher-ranked player dominate.

Yet it was the Croatian who made the better start as he demonstrated superb accuracy, moving Drinkhall

around the table to take the first game 11-8.

But Drinkhall began getting a foothold, varying his own approach, defending when he had to and rarely missing a chance to end a rally with a winner.

He levelled on his second game point in the second game, then pulled out a run of three from 8-9 down to take third.

The fourth saw him come from 6-7 down to win five of the next six points and stand one game from an historic victory.

He was made to wait though as, from nowhere given the previous pattern of the match, Gacina blitzed six points from 5-5 in the fifth to pull a game back.

The first point of the sixth saw amazing defence by Drinkhall from the back of the court, looking second favourite throughout the point but somehow getting a succession of shots back on the table and prompting Gacina to eventually go long.

It was the sort of point that can demoralise an opponent but Gacina still stayed in the game to 5-5. Paul then made the decisive break with a run of four and closed it out on his second match point.

He therefore joined Desmond Douglas (1988) and Carl Prean (1992) as the only Brits to reach the last 16 of the Olympic singles.

Drinkhall said: "I felt good and I felt tougher against his style than I have in the past. I was struggling to get it through him, he was standing very close and taking the ball away from the bounce and normally that is what I can do to opponents and when I stayed close that changed the game.

"I have not really felt much pressure throughout the whole tournament. I am confident in myself and how I am playing. I think I can beat anybody in the world on my day."

Results

Men's Singles

Third round

Paul Drinkhall (GBR) bt Andrej Gacina (CRO) 4-2 (8-11, 12-10, 11-9, 11-8, 5-11, 11-8).

Fourth round

Vladimir Samsonov (BLR) bt Drinkhall 4-2 (11-9, 11-6, 11-8, 15-17, 7-11, 11-8)

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