



China too strong for brave GB

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Team GB's Rio Olympic odyssey is over after a 3-0 defeat to China in the team quarter-finals – but the scoreline obscures a superb performance by Liam Pitchford, Paul Drinkhall and Sam Walker.

All three matches went to four games and Pitchford and Drinkhall both led their singles matches 1-0 as Great Britain gave a front-foot performance against a nation boasting three of the world's top four players.

Pitchford was first up against world No 1 and singles gold medallist Ma Long and roared into a 6-0 lead to set up taking the first game 11-6.

Ma found his range in the second, winning it 11-4, but while the players had dominated a game each at that stage, the third and fourth were genuinely competitive as Pitchford gave a positive and tactically astute performance of real belief.

He had chances in both games too, leading 9-7 in a third game punctuated by brutal forehand-to-forehand rallies but also memorable for a brilliant backhand flick down the line by Liam.

That finished 11-9 in Ma's favour and the fourth was a similar story as Pitchford led that one 9-7 too, but Ma showed the finishing power of a champion to win it 11-9 – and the yelp he let out at the moment of victory more than hinted that he knew he had been really tested.

Drinkhall also made a fast start against Xu Xin, going 3-0 ahead and never trailing in the first, which he took 11-9.

But his left-handed opponent began to find his range in the second and kept his nose in front in all three subsequent games with some brilliant play – one instinctive return of a vicious backhand slap by Drinkhall in the third particularly sticks in the mind.

That was not the only instance of an apparent lost cause somehow coming back to Paul's side of the table, but the Teessider stuck at it, saving three match points, the first with a huge backhand cross, before finally being overcome.

Drinkhall was back in the doubles with Walker, taking on Xu and the 2012 singles champion Zhang Jike. And the first game and a half was probably the only period when China truly dominated the tie, GB unable to find many answers until the end of the second, when they saved three game points, both players contributing outright winners.

That seemed to restore belief and the third was much closer. Two vicious forehand spansks by Drinkhall closed the gap from 6-9 to 8-9, before China forced two match points.

With their resilience still burning bright, GB saved them, and a third at 11-10 thanks to a stretching, almost desperate Drinkhall forehand. That shot kicked off a run of three which saw GB narrow the gap.

If the door was ajar, China slammed it at the start of the fourth, taking a 6-1 lead. And although GB closed it to 6-4, that was as good as it got.

But all three players and coach Alan Cooke can take huge credit from this and all the other performances at the Games as they continue to make the rest of the table tennis world take notice.

Results

China 3 Great Britain 0

Ma Long bt Liam Pitchford 3-1 (6-11, 11-4, 11-9, 11-9)

Xu Xin bt Paul Drinkhall 3-1 (9-11, 11-6, 11-6, 11-7)

Xu Xin & Zhang Jike bt Drinkhall & Sam Walker 3-1 (11-4, 11-7, 11-13, 11-4)

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