



We're on the up, say Team GB stars

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Team GB's table tennis stars are backing themselves to push on from their impressive Rio displays and continue to make waves on the biggest stage.

Liam Pitchford, Paul Drinkhall and Sam Walker gave top seeds China – featuring three of the world's top four players – a battle before bowing out in the team quarter-finals.

Both Pitchford and Drinkhall took the first game of their respective clashes against singles gold medallist Ma Long and Xu Xin, while Drinkhall & Walker saved three match points in taking Xu & Zhang Jike to four.

It follows on from Drinkhall's [last-16 singles appearance](#) – beating higher-ranked players Gao Ning and Andrej Gacina to become the first Brit since 1992 to reach that stage – and an amazing 3-2 [victory over France](#) in the first round of the team, when Pitchford and Walker saved four match points between them.

All three players are confident they will continue the progress they have shown in recent times.

"Playing China is tough, they're the best in the world and are big favourites but I thought we played well and put them under pressure in all three matches," said Pitchford.

"I started off really well and had my chances but that's why he's world number one and Olympic champion. He dug it out.

"Quarter-finals of the Olympics bodes well for the future so I think we're on the up."



Liam Pitchford takes on Ma Long (ITTF picture/ Remy Gros)

Pitchford said of his singles display, when he lost to Korea's No 9 seed Youngsik Jeoung in the last 32: "It's been ups and downs here for me.

"I wasn't so happy with my singles performance, I lost to a higher ranked player but could have done better. But the team performed well on Friday night against France and again today so I think overall there are a lot of positives."

Drinkhall is already thinking of the next Olympics in Tokyo and added: "Our results as a team are on the up too so I think table tennis in Britain is in a great place. Hopefully we can keep building on that. We're definitely looking at Tokyo 2020.

"It was a tough draw here against China but I think we all believe that if that happens again in Tokyo then we'll go to beat them. We tried to do that today but we're on the rise and Tokyo will be very interesting.

"The response and the support we've had from back home has been great and I think we've had decent coverage on the TV as well so I think the sport is definitely on the up.

"As a team we've got great team spirit and individually we're improving a lot. I think we've got the best team spirit in table tennis."

Walker said: "It was hard today but enjoyable. Obviously it's disappointing to be out of the Games but I think we did ourselves proud and I hope that we've done GB proud as well.

"I think we showed that we can compete with the best in the world. They definitely looked a bit nervous at times. I think this is something we can look at and next time push them even further.

"It's definitely been a great experience and I think I've definitely performed quite well on the big stage. When I get back home and back to training I will look at the matches and work out how to improve from there.

"We've got a good team spirit but if we're all competing individually then it pushes each other to improve and

that's a good element to our team as well."

Meanwhile, world No 1 Ma Long praised both Pitchford and the GB team as a whole.

He told the ITTF website: "They have improved a lot and grew strong over the past two years to make the top four at the World Championships.

"I had a tough match against Pitchford, losing the first game and having to come back from 7-9 in the next; playing first, I wanted too much to win for our team. I was under pressure and I don't know him well, I was tense throughout the rest of the match.

"I'm not in form today, so I had to take things slowly in the match and not be impatient."



Ma Long shows relief after beating Liam Pitchford (ITTF picture/Remy Gros)

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