



Mental strength is the key for Paul Drinkhall

Author: Paul Stimpson

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Confidence, consistency, mental toughness and belief – those are the attributes Paul Drinkhall says he and his team-mates are adding to their world-class technical skills as they continue to make waves on the international scene.

Drinkhall helped to deliver Team GB's best Olympic table tennis tournament in Rio – beating two higher-ranked players to become the first Brit to reach the last 16 since 1992 and only the third to do so, alongside Desmond Douglas and Carl Prean.

"When you say those two names, to be alongside them is a privilege," said the Teessider. "Obviously I would like to have gone further, not just to be the furthest Brit, but if you asked them after they lost in the last 16, they would say the same thing.

"I'm happy with my performance but it makes me want it more."

In the team event, a memorable first-round win over France was followed by a 3-0 defeat to eventual gold medallists China – though GB were the only country to win a set against them in every match.

Following the World Team Championships bronze earlier this year, Drinkhall is happy to see other countries sitting up and taking notice of what GB and England are doing.

"The last few years, other countries have been wary of us and they've known that on our day we can challenge the best teams, but we might have a good day then a bad day," he said.

"But over the last two years we've proved we can challenge on a regular basis. Before, it could be a one-off, but now the good days are coming more often.

"I think it's down to confidence as individuals and as a team and believing in ourselves, plus team spirit. The spirit has always been good but I think it's in a better place than ever now."



Drinkhall rocketed to a new high of No 32 in the world after Rio and believes the fact that he, Liam Pitchford and Sam Walker are pushing each other can only help to kick them all on to greater heights.

"We're all striving for the best results," he said. "Sam is looking towards us and trying to get to No 1 in the team. Me and Liam are moving up the rankings and it's good for him to try to catch us.

"When I was growing up, I missed that until Liam started improving and that helped me raise my game again. We're all helping each other in that way and we can encourage the next generation of players to see that, coming from Britain and England, you can challenge the best."

One of those players, 16-year-old Tom Jarvis, was Team GB reserve in Rio and Drinkhall added: "Tom's still got a lot to learn in a lot of ways, but he did learn a lot and it was a great opportunity for him to learn not just from us but from other athletes and other sports as well.

"Hopefully he's taken a lot from it and we'll see that at the Commonwealth Games.

Those Commonwealths in Australia in 2018 is another big target, and Drinkhall believes having a major multi-sports event to focus on will also be beneficial.

"If it's just the Olympics, four years can seem quite a long way away, but it's good that we've got the Commonwealth Games two years after the Olympics – it's something to stay focused on," he said.

"I would like to win a singles medal there – and there's no reason why that can't be gold – and then work towards the dream of an Olympic medal.

"It's very tough and the draw is very important, but I think I've known deep down that I've been capable of getting there or thereabouts, and now I'm starting to show it.

"Hopefully everything can go well – a lot can happen in four years but hopefully I'm still able to play and qualify for the Olympics.

"All in all, it's obviously been a vast improvement on the past and we've already done great things, but we

believe and know we can do a lot more. It's interesting times."

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