



## Liam Pitchford aiming to Coast to Gold

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Liam Pitchford says winning gold at the 2018 Commonwealth Games has to be the next target after helping to deliver Team GB's best Olympic performance.

The Chesterfield player won team silver and individual bronze with England in Glasgow 2014, but has bigger and better in his sights next time at the – hopefully appropriately named – Gold Coast in Australia.

Beyond that, improving on the Rio show in Tokyo 2020 is already on his agenda.

“You don’t want to think too far ahead but hopefully in Tokyo we’ll be four years older and better,” said Pitchford. “And at the Gold Coast in two years, we’ve got to be taking golds in some of the events we missed out on in Glasgow, especially the team – we want to be taking that gold.

“We’ll probably be the favourites if we keep improving, even though Singapore will be strong and India will be strong. We believe we can win it. I’d like to do better than bronze in the singles too.”

Pitchford says there is a lot to build on from Rio, not least in the team competition, where a brilliant 3-2 win over France was followed by a 3-0 defeat by eventual champions China in the quarter-finals – though Britain gave the top seeds a fright and were the only nation to win a set in every match against them.

Pitchford saved a match point in the fourth match of that tie, against Tristan Flore, before Sam Walker came from 10-7 down to win the deciding game of the deciding match 12-10 against Simon Gauzy. And Pitchford says that is the result of a lot of hard work on the mental side of the game.

“We went into it knowing we beat them last time (at the World Championships in March) and we had a good chance, but it was closer than we would have liked!” he said.

“We’ve been working with Alan Cooke and Simon Mills, trying to instil in us that every point matters and to stay in the moment and I think we all did that really well.

"It just proved that no matter what the score, we just kept fighting and tried to find a way. I guess you make your own luck when you do that.

"The France match was pretty long and tiring but the atmosphere was amazing and my whole family stayed up to watch back home."



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

As for China, the approach was more of the same as Pitchford took the first set against world No 1 and singles gold medallist Ma Long, as did Paul Drinkhall against Xu Xin.

"We just went in like any other match – there's no point going in scared of them because then you've got no chance," said Pitchford.

"We believed we had a chance and went in with that thought process, especially in the first sets when me and Paul stuck to the tactical plan really well and played some good stuff.

"Obviously they were going to change things, but I had a good chance at 1-1 and 9-7, and two balls I'd normally make. But he's the Olympic champion, world champion and hasn't lost for 30 matches. I'm disappointed to lose but pleased with our form.

"I wouldn't say they underestimated us because they've seen how we've done this year but they probably weren't expecting us to come out like we did. They're probably used to people going out there thinking 'it's China, we've already lost', but we went with a different attitude and that showed.

"We had them worried at a few points and after the match the coach had Ma Long straight back in the practice hall."

In the singles, Pitchford was seeded 31st and duly reached the last 32, but was pitted against No 7 seed Youngsik Jeoung of South Korea and lost in five.

"I was a bit disappointed with the draw when I saw it, but it is what it is and you can't do anything about it," he

said.

"I had a good first round against Kenjaev, though I hadn't seen him play before and he surprised me a bit.

"I thought I played quite well against Youngsik, there's not much more that I could have done. He had an answer to everything I tried. Maybe if I'd taken the third set when I came from 10-5 down to lead 11-10, it might have been different, but it's something to work on."

Pitchford says the sport's progress had been noted by other members of Team GB.

He said: "I had a bit of a chat with Andy Murray in the physio room and he was friendly and interested in how we were doing. I think there's a lot more respect for table tennis in the other sports after what we've done this year.

"It just goes to show that there's one Team GB and everyone's supporting each other, and that's why we're doing so well."

Next on the agenda for Pitchford is the new season, and he will be competing for Hennebont in France after three seasons at Ochsenhausen in Germany.

"It's been a long year and the new season is back up and running in a few weeks, so I'm taking a bit of a break and my first match in the French league is on September 6th," he said.

"The French league's got a lot of good players, so there are going to be good matches. I'm looking forward to a different system.

"It's something new and hopefully it will be good for me."

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