



Sam Walker targets more big moments

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Sam Walker cemented a growing reputation as a big-match player in Rio and is now targeting more of the same as he looks to the next Olympic cycle.

The 21-year-old saved three match points as he beat world No 17 Simon Gauzy in the deciding match of the first-round team clash against France for the biggest victory of his career.

It follows his win over then world No 20 Yuya Oshima in the World Championships semi-final against Japan in March.

"It was amazing for me to come through with such a great win at the end and I don't think I'll forget it for a long time," said the Worksop player.

"I was happy to be able to perform. This was the Olympics and the other one was the World Championships so I obviously like playing on the big stage. Maybe I just feel the excitement and use it in a good way.

"But I enjoy playing table tennis no matter where it is. I just try to imagine I'm playing anywhere and I think I'm confident to play anywhere and I don't put any barriers in the way.

"I also think I'm quite tough mentally to deal with all the pressure and I think that just comes naturally to all three of us in our personalities – we're not quitters.

"The France match was so up and down between who was in control. It was a record match in terms of length and it was amazing to beat them again, and in that kind of style was incredible.

"We just fought until the end. We saved four match points in total – Liam saved one and I saved three and we showed a lot of character and never gave up."

It was a similar mental approach when GB faced China in the team quarter-finals and Walker said: "We approached it as any other match. We knew they were the No 1 seeds and had three of the top four players in

the world, and the world No 2 was their reserve, but we never for one minute didn't believe we could win. We just tried to play it as a normal match and play the best we could.

"They are not unbeatable and we definitely now believe in the future we can challenge them and maybe one day beat them."

Walker did not feature in the individual event, where Liam Pitchford and Paul Drinkhall were the two players to qualify for Team GB. But he definitely has his sights on qualifying for Tokyo in 2020.

"During the singles I was trying to be calm and support the others, though I was excited to start my competition as well," he said. "It was quite hard to wait and see everyone else playing when I was itching to play, but that was the way it was and it was worth the wait.

"It's definitely whetted my appetite for more Olympics – I think if it hadn't there would be something wrong!

"I'm looking forward to qualifying for the next one and the Commonwealths in two years as well."

Walker had a chance to relax for a couple of days in Rio after the table tennis tournament had finished, and said it was great to be part of the wider Team GB.

"I've been relaxing and went to see the sights and we've been to see some tennis and badminton and athletics," he said. "It's been good that we've been able to get in and watch some other sports.

"When you were around the village you saw people from all the different sports and everybody was upbeat and positive and asked how you're getting on, and you did the same. It was a nice atmosphere."

Walker is now preparing for the start of the new Bundesliga season in Germany – his first match is on Sunday.

"I won't get much of a break, but I don't really mind too much. It will be good to spend some time with family and friends before I go back to Germany," he said.

"We saw all the messages and support from back home during the Games and it's amazing how many people followed it and stayed up to see the France game."

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