



Alan Cooke is key to winning recipe

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In the excitement of Team GB's best Olympic table tennis performance, it might be easy to overlook the important roles played by two key people.

While the Olympic spotlight is rightly on the athletes in any sport, team GB's table tennis Coach Alan Cooke and Team Leader Simon Mills have been with Liam Pitchford, Paul Drinkhall and Sam Walker, and reserve Tom Jarvis, every step of the way.

Both were influential in the background as the trio turned heads with their performances in singles and team events.

And it was not just the technical and physical aspects of the game which were at a high level – the mental strength of Team GB made other nations take notice.

"We've been trying to get the preparation right and manage their programmes, and their preparation did work really well," said Cooke.

"They all performed well but Paul in the singles was outstanding, and then in the team, in both matches, they did themselves proud. It was an incredible experience.

"There are a lot of players who hit the ball as well as each other and are physically able to do what is necessary to perform, but the difference between the best and the rest is the mental side.

"We are actively trying to improve that and get it installed in all our players from an early age.

"Without that, you can technically and physically be the best players but you won't win the important matches.

"These guys are still learning and improving that, but under pressure this year they have delivered consistently.

"One of the nice things is the other teams are seeing it as well and people come up to us after matches and say

it's amazing what we are doing, and credit to the boys and the performance team for that."

Nowhere was the pressure higher than against France in the first match of the team competition, when GB won 3-2, with every match going the distance and Walker clinching it by coming from 10-7 down to Simon Gauzy to win the deciding set 12-10.

Britain then gave superpower China a fright, taking a set in all three matches and competing all the way before bowing out.

"The amount of people who stayed up to watch the France match – and you could see 12-year-olds tweeting that they had stayed up – was amazing and that's the inspiration for the next generation," said Cooke, who himself competed at the 1988 and 1992 Olympics.

"The next day, we gave them a rest because France was an incredibly tough match mentally and physically, but they were all up for it against China.

"The conversation we had was there was nothing to fear except fear itself and we wanted to show we could push them.

"The one thing we have encouraged the players to do above all else is to stay in the moment and not worry out the final outcome or about losing the last point – and that's simply all they did.

"For Liam to push Ma Long is showing we can compete with them, and he didn't have to play a high-risk strategy. You're not going to beat them by swinging the bat. Serve and return is the key and if you do that well, you've got a chance.

"We're getting back to the British bulldog spirit. We want people talking about English or British players having that toughness and never say die attitude, fighting for every ball and showing you're not afraid, and whether it's China or a medal match or something less important, it's all the same to us and we want to win every point we play."



The squad in the athletes' village

Mills, the Head of Talent and Performance at Table Tennis England added: "There's no doubt this was the best-prepared team we've put out and they produced our best Olympics, and you can't ask for more. We have our first ever Olympic Diploma (awarded to the top eight finishers).

"The preparation we've had coming in and the small amount of additional funding we were able to access enabled them to get to where they are.

"I think they performed exceptionally well. They did themselves, the governing body and the country proud.

"Their performances, particularly Paul Drinkhall in the singles against Gao Ning and Andrej Gacina and latterly against Samsonov, showed they can perform against the best on a consistent basis. It shows the bronze medal at the Worlds was not an accident.

"There's still big room for improvement and a lot of learnings for the players and staff, but the players have delivered at the top of their game more consistently than they have done in most major tournaments.

"What they showed against the Chinese was that they can mix it against the absolute best, and that was delightful.

"Mizutani (world No 6) lost 4-0 to Ma Long in the singles and only took 19 points, and Liam took 33 points in losing 3-1.

"The Chinese haven't lost for 16 years and we pushed them harder than any other nation.

"Not only are China talking about our programme but so are other countries. People are saying they don't want to play Great Britain and that we are not down and out until the last point is played."

Planning has already started for the Commonwealth Games 2018 and through to the Tokyo Olympics, with the potential for more funding on the agenda.

“The work continues now with UK Sport and Sport England about how we can enhance the support programme, because the players have shown what’s possible without massive support,” said Mills.

“The future is really bright.”

Cooke added: “All of them believe they can improve and hopefully over the next cycle we will see a stronger and better team.”

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