



Liam and Paul ready for Euro test

Author: Paul Stimpson

Posted On: October 15, 2016

England Leopards are looking to make another mark on the international stage when the European Championships get under way on Tuesday.

Paul Drinkhall, Liam Pitchford, Sam Walker, Kelly Sibley and Tin-Tin Ho form the England squad who will compete in singles and doubles events in Budapest.

England's leading two men have been preparing at a training camp in Denmark this week, but Drinkhall and Pitchford have had contrasting build-ups.

Pitchford has been busy, playing a series of matches in the French League and the Champions League with his new club Hennebont.

But Drinkhall has not played competitively since the Rio Olympics as his family has recently grown – baby Bonnie arriving to join brother Dougie, mum Jo and dad.

Both are confident they can build on a series of impressive performances in recent years and Drinkhall, who reached the bronze medal match at the European Games a few weeks after Dougie was born, is hoping Bonnie's arrival will prove a similar good omen.

He said:

"I would like to think that's a possibility. I haven't had any competition since the Olympics, which kind of suited my life to get some time with the family.

"Going into a bit of a break and then Bonnie arriving, I'm not in the shape I was at the Olympics, but I still feel confident and I know if I can get my game going and get my head in the right place, then anything is possible.

"It's good to be working again. We're here with the Swedish and Danish players and it's a good relationship which hopefully we can keep building on.

"It's important to get the good practice and come together as a team, to play against different styles and in a different venue. It's preparing your head to get to the tournament.

"Training in the same places all the time can become a bit every-day, so changing scenery and hall conditions can really help prepare yourself for a competition mentality."

Drinkhall is seeded 13th for the singles, and he and Pitchford occupy the same ranking for the doubles.

He added:

"At the Europeans, it's always very open. There's a lot of good players, it's very strong in depth, but I think I can beat anybody there. But there are also a lot of strong players that I can lose to."

Pitchford reached the last 16 of the Men's Singles at last year's Euros, losing 4-2 to top seed and eventual champion Dimitrij Ovtcharov.

Seeded 22 in the singles, his goal is to improve on last year, while he believes he and Drinkhall can also go further in the doubles.

The Chesterfield man said:

"Last time I went to the last 16 in singles and I was playing pretty well but I had a tough match against Ovtcharov which I was disappointed to lose.

"My aim is to go further this time. We've seen in the last few Euros the likes of Par Gerell win a medal, and we've proved we can compete with them. If I play well, I feel anything is possible.

"In the doubles as well, last time we had two or three match points (against Gerell & Jon Persson) to get to the quarter-finals and were disappointed to lose that. But then we beat the same pair a few weeks later at the Swedish Open.

"I think we play well together and if we're on the top of our game, there's a chance to go far. I don't see any other pairs that really stand out or to be afraid of. They will probably be afraid of facing us."

Referencing the new reputation English players are carving on the international scene, he added:

"Before, everyone thought 'they've got potential but never seem to come to the party', but in the last few years, that's changed. We've worked hard as individuals and a team and we've improved, and I'm proud to be part of that. Hopefully we can be the stepping stone for the future and getting English table tennis back to the top."

Pitchford has been settling in to his new routine of being based in Sweden, where he trains, and travelling to play for Hennebont.

He said:

"I've played some French league matches, and Champions League. I feel I'm playing pretty well after a long season and a long summer.

"I took a week's holiday after Rio, then got back into it after that. It's been going pretty well but there's still a long way to go before I'm playing how I want to be.

"It's obviously a change for me. I'm travelling a lot more but I'm enjoying it – it's a new step for me and I'm happy travelling, so it's not a problem."

Pitchford has also been joined in Sweden by Tom Jarvis, the 16-year-old who was reserve for Team GB in Rio.

Liam said:

"I'm trying to help him as best as I can. He's training all right, he wants to be in the hall – maybe too much sometimes and I've told him he has to look after his body too.

"Hopefully he'll keep improving. The Olympics gave him that motivation and that can only be good for table tennis if he starts coming up as well."

Pitchford also has a new arrival in the household – he and his partner Agnes are now 'dog parents' to a beagle puppy, Max.

Liam said:

"I've always wanted a dog but I never had a chance when I was living in England or Germany. He brings some happiness – after a long training day he's pleased to see you, and Agnes has some company when I'm away."

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