



Famous England comeback sinks Greece

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Deciding game, deciding match – and the England Leopards again proved their indomitable spirit as they defeated Greece 3-2 in their opening European Championships Qualifying tie.

With match points saved along the way, it was a familiar story for Paul Drinkhall, Liam Pitchford and Sam Walker, who engineered a fightback from 2-0 down to finally see off visitors who fought every bit as hard as their hosts.

It brought a crowd of well over 500 to their feet at Fenton Manor Sports Centre in Stoke and set up England for the return match in Greece – and the double-header with Netherlands in the same group.

The whole occasion was screened live on TheSPORTbible Facebook page – where it was watched by 2.1 million unique viewers.

If you missed it, you can watch here:

It was Drinkhall who applied the coup de grace, as he famously had in the World Championships quarter-finals in March.

There was not quite as much drama on this occasion as, after his opponent Konstantinos Papageorgiou led 2-1, Drinkhall took the fourth 11-9 and opened up a commanding lead in the fifth, crossing the line at 11-5.

That England found themselves going the distance says a lot about the character of a Greek squad also featuring world No 27 Panagiotis Gionis and Ioannis Sgouropoulos.

Indeed, at one stage it looked as if the visitors would win it 3-0 as 16-year-old Sgouropoulos held two match points against Walker, having seen his more experienced colleagues open up a 2-0 match lead.

Papageorgiou himself overturned a 2-0 deficit against Pitchford in the first match.

There were never more than two points in the first two games, but the Englishman took both – the first with a

memorable dismissive backhand down the line – after saving game points.

Papageorgiou hadn't read the script, though, as he blitzed the third 11-3 with some controlled play close to the table and followed up with an 11-5 scoreline in the fourth.

The players worked their way to 8-8 in the decider, via a time-out apiece, and two successive points for Papageorgiou gave him two match points. Pitchford, refusing to play it safe, saved both and brought up one of his own – which he missed by a hair's breadth. Such are the margins – within two more points it was all over and Greece had point one on the board.



Paul Drinkhall (picture by Steve Parkin)

Gionis would start as narrow favourite against Paul Drinkhall, and the 11-9 score in his favour in the first verified that.

When Gionis worked his way into a 6-4 lead in the second, Drinkhall took his time-out and it resulted in a noticeable change of approach, varying his length and pace more.

It worked to a degree, but the Greek star is as hard to shake off as a sticky toffee paper and on several occasions it seemed Drinkhall had to win a point three or four times.

Gionis had enough to shade the second. The Englishman led 6-1 in the third but saw his opponent battle back to 7-7, helped by one devilish edge at 7-4.

Drinkhall brought up a game point but found the net, then saved a match point. But Gionis took his second chance to complete a 13-11 win, as Drinkhall pounded the table in frustration.

Walker was up against 16-year-old Sgouropoulos – but his opponent showed no sign of being overawed.

Stockily built, he unfurled a series of powerful shots to rock Walker back in taking the first 11-7 and the second 12-10 – Walker having been 8-6 and 10-9 up in that one.

When the Englishman trailed 3-4 in the third, a time-out was called and, though he lost the next point, a run of six gave him the platform to pull one back.

A similar foundation of a 6-1 lead in the fourth was enough to hold off his young opponent to level the score, but if anyone thought that would be that, they were wrong as Sgouropoulos fought hard, engineering himself two match points.

Walker, as we know, is a past master in situations like that and he duly delivered again with four points on the bounce to keep the Leopards alive.



England's Liam Pitchford celebrates victory over Panagiotis Gionis (picture by Steve Parkin)

For sustained brilliance, Pitchford's match against Gionis would take some beating and at times resembled the irresistible force against the immovable object as Gionis, chopping for all his worth on the backhand, got ball after ball back on the table.

The Englishman was not all about power though, mixing it up intelligently as he bounced back from losing the first 11-6 to save game points in both the second and third, taking them 13-11.

When Gionis led 10-6 in the fourth, it looked like another decider was on the way, but Liam reeled off a five-point rush to give himself a match point.

Gionis saved that with a forehand thumper but two more points for Pitchford made it three 13-11s in a row – and didn't he savour the moment as the crowd got to their feet.

It set up Drinkhall's decider, and the Loftus man duly obliged, raising the roof once again.

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