

The year the Leopards roared – review of 2016

Author: **Paul Stimpson**

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There is no doubt about the achievement – and image – of the year for 2016. It has to be the England Leopards team on the podium at the World Team Championships.

Paul Drinkhall, Liam Pitchford and Sam Walker took sensational bronze medals in Kuala Lumpur, [beating France in a memorable quarter-final](#) and going [toe-to-toe with Japan](#) in the semis before bowing out.

Just how big this was can be illustrated by three facts – it was England's first medal on the world stage since 1983; they were ranked 18th at the start of the competition; and it was the first time a newly-promoted team had reached the podium.

The run also included victory over Germany in the group stage and put English table tennis back on the map. The effects were still being felt this month, when England were shortlisted for three [ITTF Star Awards](#) – Coach of the Year (Alan Cooke), Breakthrough of the Year and Star Point ([Sam Walker for a brilliant rally](#) during his victory over world No 20 Yuya Oshima in the world semi-final).

As highlights go, this was pretty special, but it was by no means the only cause for celebration during 2016. Here, we look at some of the other achievements in English and British table tennis, with links to the news articles published on our website.

A review would normally start in January – but this was no normal year. So from Kuala Lumpur we move to Rio. More of the Olympics shortly, but it is only right to start with the Paralympics and two more iconic images.

When [Will Bayley took Class 7 gold](#) in Brazil, he celebrated by clambering on to the table. It earned him a yellow card – for which he rewarded the umpire with a hug – and plaudits around the sporting world, including a [top award from the Sports Journalists' Association](#) this month.



Will Bayley's memorable celebration after winning gold in Rio

The golden glow was doubled in Class 1, when Welshman [Rob Davies overcame his Korean opponent](#) to take the top step on the podium. And the medals did not stop there, with [Bayley, Ross Wilson and Aaron McKibbin taking bronze](#) in the Men's Team Class 6-8.

No medals at the Olympics the previous month, but Paul, Liam and Sam kept the resurgence of British table tennis going as they delivered our best results on that stage. Paul beat two higher-ranked players as he reached the last 16, where he saved no fewer than eight match points in [losing a thriller to top-10 legend Vladimir Samsonov](#).

In the team event, France were the victims again as Team GB triumphed in one of the great Olympic matches of all time. Every individual match went to a deciding fifth set and GB twice came from behind to level. That left Sam to put in the performance of his life, saving three match points and taking his own first chance as he [defeated world No 17 Simon Gauzy](#) to put GB into the quarter-finals.



Sam Walker celebrates his victory over Simon Gauzy (ITTF picture)

The mighty Chinese awaited, and not surprisingly prevailed – but not before [GB had delivered a front-foot performance](#) which earned them further respect around the table tennis world.

Elsewhere in the sport, the achievements came thick and fast during a memorable 2016. The new year started with a bang as Andrew Baggaley [successfully defended his World Championships of Ping Pong title](#) at Alexandra Palace, in front of the Sky Sports cameras while, in a prelude of things to come later in the year, [Sam Walker beat world No 43](#) Kim Donghyun at the German Open.

Meanwhile, young umpire Ben Johnson was [shortlisted for a top award](#) at the Sports Officials UK National Awards.

February saw a clutch of medals won by the GB Para team at the [Lignano Open](#) – and many of those would go on to be selected for the Paralympics when the [squad was announced](#) in March.

Lignano was also a happy hunting ground for England's junior girls – Tin-Tin Ho, Emily Bolton and Kate Cheer beat Japan in the final to [win the team gold medal](#) at the Italian Youth Open. To complete a medal hat-trick, [Ho and Bolton took doubles silver](#) and Ho singles bronze

Ho was also a big winner action at the National Championships – [sponsored by PG Mutual](#) and the final stages of which were [shown live on ITV4](#). [Tin-Tin won her first senior singles title – and Paul Drinkhall took the men's event.](#)



Kelly Sibley takes on Tin-Tin Ho in the women's singles final at the PG Mutual Nationals (picture by Alan Man)

April saw a milestone [50th Butterfly School Team Championships](#), and several former alumni of the event also represented England at the World Schools' Championships, where they [won the Fair Play trophy](#). Tin-Tin was again among the honours as she and Tom Jarvis won [three trophies each](#) at the Cadet & Junior Nationals.

April was also the month table tennis [featured in the primetime BBC!](#) show *How to Stay Young*, presented by Angela Rippon, showing how the sport can combat the signs of ageing.

More medals in May – the GB Para players stepping up their Rio preparation with [success in Slovenia](#) and [also in Slovakia](#). Also competing on the world stage were hundreds of English players at the World Veterans' Championships in Alicante, from where [Pam Butcher, Betty Bird and Loresta Trumpauskas returned with gold medals](#).



Pam Butcher in action in Alicante

Brighton TTC [became a Sanctuary Club](#) for its work with refugees, while [Table tennis featured in a pop video](#) as former youth national champion-turned-singer Zak Abel (aka Zak Zilesnik) showcased both his talents in eye-catching style.

In a busy month, Paul Drinkhall and Liam Pitchford were [formally named part of Team GB](#) for Rio, having qualified by virtue of world rankings. [Sam Walker was added](#) in early June, once the team place had been confirmed.

Also in June, [England won double silver](#) at the Lithuania Cadet & Mini Cadet Open, [as well as double bronze](#) at the Cadet 6 Nations in France, and [Jamie Liu finished sixth](#) at the ITTF World Hopes Week & Challenge. At the U10-U13 Nationals, [Sophie Chiang was a double champion](#).

Table Tennis England President Doreen Stannard and former long-serving General Secretary Rob Sinclair shared in the [Queen's 90th birthday celebrations](#) on The Mall.



Rob Sinclair and Doreen Stannard at the Patron's Lunch

The medals kept flowing in July as Tin-Tin Ho bagged a [European Youth Championships silver](#) alongside Tomas Polanksy in the mixed doubles, adding a [bronze in the singles](#). Harry Fairchild and Jenny Turner [returned from the Trisome Games](#) – the Down's Syndrome Olympics – with bronze medals, while there was double [golden success for Mark Allen and Maggie Gambrill](#) at the European Transplant Games.

July also marked a golden anniversary as Alan Ransome OBE marked [50 continuous years' service](#) on National Council. He was honoured at the AGM, where Jill Parker became [Table Tennis England President](#) for 2016–19. And, who knows, perhaps one of the tens of thousands of people taking part in [#TableTennisDay](#) will go on to achieve similar long service.

August saw the start of the Rio 2016 festival, with another Englishman playing a key role in the Olympic table tennis event, where [Stuart Sherlock was tournament referee](#). And among the memorable images from the Paralympics was this of Egypt's Ibrahim Hamadtou:

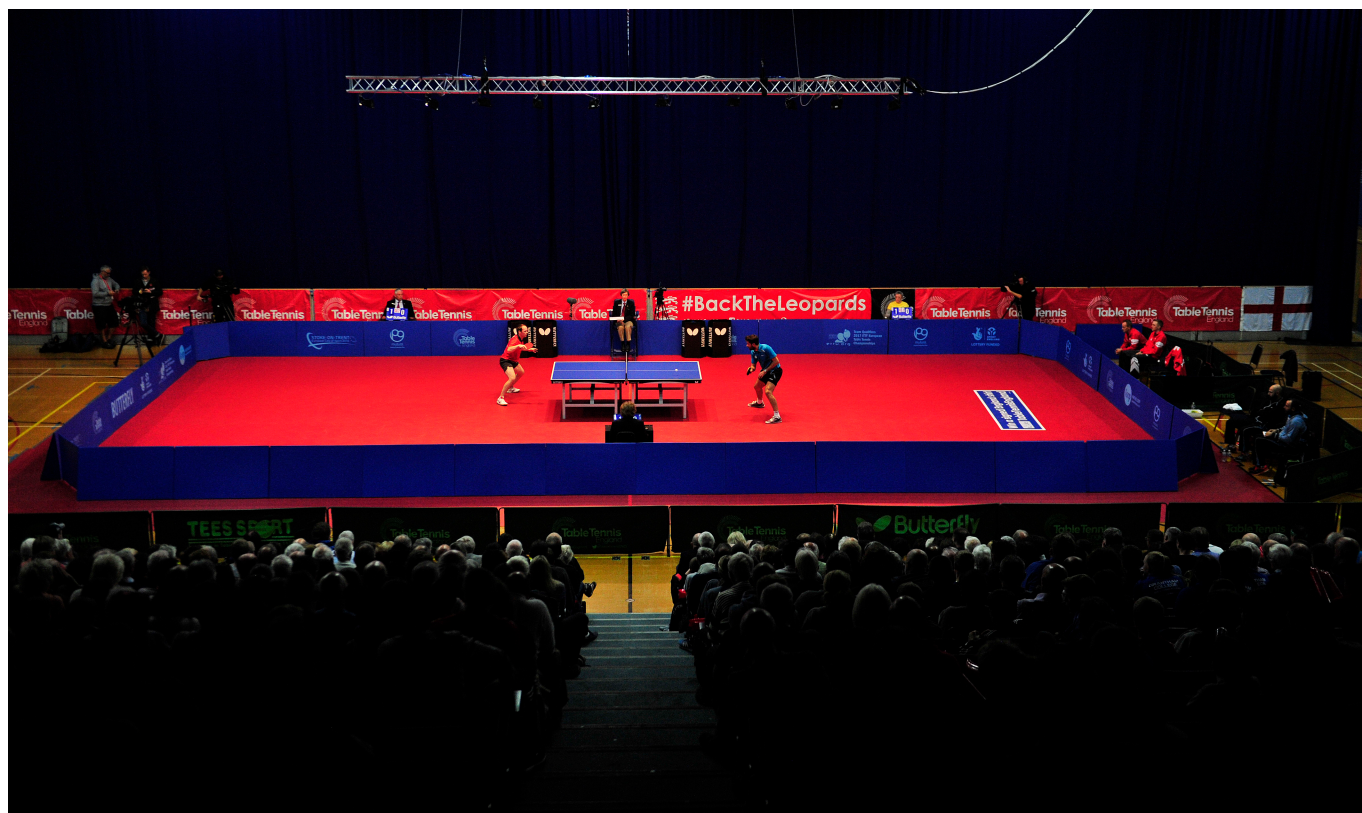


Table tennis made more national headlines as its use as a [drug-free therapy for Alzheimer's](#) was featured on Sky News.

There was no sense of 'after the Lord Mayor's Show' as Rio passed into memory, with October bringing more stories of achievement.

Liam Pitchford & Tin-Tin Ho [reached the mixed doubles quarter-finals](#) at the European Championships in Budapest, where it was announced that Table Tennis England Chairman Sandra Deaton had been [elected to the Board of Directors](#) of the ITTF.

Tin-Tin was sixth in the [Europe Youth Top 10](#) – a competition which Table Tennis England has won the right to host in 2017. Away from elite competition, Rob Searle was named [Ping! Personality of the Year](#).



Hundreds of spectators watch England take on Greece (picture by Steve Parkin)

Into November and European qualifying matches were back on the bill after a break of a few years. England men again showed they were the comeback kings as they came from 2-0 down to record a [3-2 victory over Greece](#) in Stoke, with more than 2.1 million viewers seeing the action thanks to a [landmark deal with SPORTbible](#). Meanwhile, the women's team came from [2-1 down to beat Slovenia](#) in Medway.

At the Swedish Open, David McBeath picked up a career-best victory, [defeating world No 24 Maharu Yoshimura](#) of Japan.

As the year drew to a close, as well as the Leopards [enjoying the red carpet treatment](#) at the ITTF STar Awards, there were also [BBC Unsung Hero honours](#) for two table tennis volunteers, a great end to a stellar year.

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