



Germany too good for England

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England women found European champions and Olympic silver medallists Germany too good as they were beaten 3-0 in their European Team Championships qualifier in Preston tonight.

The 9-0 game score was not an entirely fair reflection of play, but Germany were always in charge as none of the English trio could bridge a significant gap in world rankings to overcome their opponents.

English No 1 Kelly Sibley had an uncertain start against Shan Xiaona, who plays penhold, is ranked No 22 in the world and has an Olympic silver from Rio on her CV.

Shan, who also employed a high toss on the majority of her serves, took the first three points of the match, and six of the first seven, before Sibley had a run of three to close to 6-4. The German responded with four in a row, and although Sibley saved two game points, she could not make further inroads.

The second game showcased arguably the highest-quality play of the whole evening as Sibley, world ranked No 168, opened up a 4-1 lead and kept her head in front to 7-4. A run of three German points prompted a time-out, and Sibley took the next point.

A fearsome rally at 8-7, the pair trading high-speed blows, was ended on a heartbreaker as the German was helped by a dead net-cord.

Still Sibley was not lying down, smacking forehand winners down the line to make it 9-9 and across the table to make it 10-10. But the German won the next two to move 2-0 up and sealed the first win of the match 11-8 in the third.



Tin-Tin Ho takes on Nina Mittelham (picture by Trevor Parsons)

Tin-Tin Ho was facing world No 111 Nina Mittelham, a powerful player who held sway in every set against the 193rd-ranked teenager.

The first was won with a four-point run from 7-5, while there was never more than two points in the second until the very end, Mittelham taking it 11-8.

At 3-0 down in the third, a time-out was Ho's last throw of the tactical dice. But it did not have the desired effect as the German continue to pummel the winners, particularly on the forehand, and eased to an 11-4 scoreline.



Action from Karina Le Fevre's match against Yuan Wan (picture by Trevor Parsons)

It was up to Karina Le Fevre to keep England in the match and she certainly showed enough in the first game to suggest she could do so, trading points all the way up to 9-9 before Yuan took the crucial next two.

Yuan, ranked No 175 to Le Fevre's 386, doubled her advantage for the loss of five points in the second, but the third followed the pattern of the first as neither player could open up a lead.

Le Fevre led 9-8 but then faced a match point at 9-10, which she saved. A game point of her own was missed and another match point saved, before Yuan took her third chance to give Germany overall victory.

England end their qualifying campaign with a trip to Slovenia on March 7, 2017.

After the match, the England players were philosophical in defeat.

Kelly Sibley's verdict was:

"We're obviously disappointed, though we knew it was going to be tough. For me, playing against Shan was very, very difficult – the gap is huge.

"The first set, she took control but in the second set I came out more positive and took my game to her and got a lead, so I'm disappointed not to take that because at 1-1, she would have the pressure on her and I'd have nothing to lose. But at 2-0 she could relax a bit.

"There were some positives to take and I can learn from that match and not be too down, because she's a very good player."

Tin-Tin Ho added:

"It was tough, she's a really good player, very powerful but really relaxed. I don't think I was at my best today tactically, and my placement could have been better."

Karina Le Fevre said:

"At the beginning, I was struggling with her serve and making a few errors, missing a few flicks, but I was always trying to think of how to get into my game and I did that in the last end."

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