



Pitchford and Drinkhall get Games call-up

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Posted On: April 04, 2017

With exactly one year to go until the Commonwealth Games 2018, Paul Drinkhall and Liam Pitchford have been named in the Team England squad to travel to Australia.

The duo were among the first group of athletes to be confirmed by Commonwealth Games England today for the Gold Coast event – the rest of the England table tennis squad will be selected later this year.

Both players are looking forward to the opportunity to adding to their medal haul from previous Games.

Drinkhall has four medals from three previous appearances, notably the gold alongside his wife Joanna in the mixed doubles at Glasgow 2014 and also team silver from Delhi 2010 and Glasgow, plus mixed doubles bronze from Delhi.

Meanwhile, Pitchford has five medals from two Games, including the historic first singles medal for an English athlete – a bronze – from Glasgow. He also won team silver in both Delhi and Glasgow, men's doubles bronze with Andrew Baggaley in 2010 and mixed doubles silver with Tin-Tin Ho in 2014.

Pitchford said: "I'm really excited. My first Games at Delhi 2010 was the stepping stone for my career. I was 17 and playing in my first big multi-sport games and to take two medals went beyond expectations.

"In Glasgow, I'd established myself as a front-runner and to come away with three medals – well, I'm not going to say I was disappointed but I was disappointed not to get a gold, especially in the team event. We knew we had a chance but we didn't quite play well enough.

"The singles was quite historic, becoming the first English player to win a medal.

"Going into Gold Coast, we've established ourselves further and we go in probably as favourites.

"We know if we play our best table tennis we can definitely bring home that gold. Personally I'm just missing that from my collection."

Pitchford is only one behind England's all-time highest Commonwealth Games medal-winner Andrew Baggaley, who has six.

The 23-year-old Pitchford said: "I've only played two Games and I'm still young and to be almost the leading medal winner gives me confidence. I know Andrew Baggaley has six and I'm looking to go past that. That's the realistic goal."

The Chesterfield athlete is also targeting a better finish than the fourth place he and Drinkhall achieved in the men's doubles in Glasgow.

He said: I've known Paul for quite a while and we've played doubles together since not long after Delhi. In the last few years we've established ourselves as a good pair and had some good results.

In Glasgow I don't think we performed how we wanted. We came to take a medal and fourth was the worst place to finish. We lost 12-10 in the fifth in the bronze medal match, so it's small margins.

"But we'll be well prepared and there's no reason we can't win gold in Australia."

Drinkhall said it was a boost for the pair to have their team places confirmed a year in advance.

He said: "It's great getting named this far out because we can focus on being in the best shape we can be, whereas when you're still thinking about selection you are focused on that.

"It's going to be my fourth Commonwealths and obviously I did well at the last one in the team and the mixed doubles.

"I'm hoping to go one better in the team and hopefully to get that medal in the singles.

I've won a gold before and that's a great achievement but I'd still like that medal in the singles. Going off the rankings now, I'd be one of the top seeds. It's a really open event with a few capable of winning, and I think I'm one of them."

Table Tennis England's Head of Talent & Performance, Simon Mills, said: "We're delighted to be able to name Paul and Liam in phase one of the England team and give them the security to be able to work towards Gold Coast and to get there in their best condition.

"We look forward to adding to the team in December."

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