



Visitors leave England with much to do

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England's hopes of qualifying for the top division of the European Championships suffered a double hammer blow as both men and women lost the home legs of their play-offs tonight.

The men were defeated 3-1 by Slovakia – a thrilling five-game triumph by Liam Pitchford the high point – while the women's team were seen off 3-0 by Spain.

It leaves both with much to do in their respective away legs in a week's time if they are to overturn their deficits and book a place in the Championship Division, rather than the second tier, in Luxembourg later this year.

Men's match – England 1 Slovakia 3

Liam Pitchford's victory over Wang Yang gives England hope for the return leg, but a 3-1 deficit remains to be overturned next week.

Paul Drinkhall opened proceedings for the Leopards against veteran Lubomir Pistej. After a disjointed start to the match a fierce forehand winner from Drinkhall set the tone for the early stages, as he raced to an 8-3 lead from 2-2. And he had enough in hand to take it 11-8.

The second was a different story as Pistej stepped up his game to lead 8-4, despite Drinkhall rarely producing any slip-ups. Drinkhall temporarily halted his momentum, but at 9-7 lost a crucial point and Pistej went on to take it 11-7.

Pistej continued in ruthless fashion racing into a 6-1 lead in the third despite some good defensive play from Drinkhall as he was forced back.

The third game ended 11-6 to the Slovak and the fourth followed a similar pattern as Drinkhall fell to a 3-0 deficit

from which he never recovered, losing it 11-4.

Pitchford next faced the chopper Wang Yang but the Englishman's aggressive approach in the first game forced his opponent into several errors, Pitchford taking it 11-5.

Nothing changed in the first six points of the second as Pitchford charged into a 5-1 lead, however, Yang decided to change his mentality and hit a couple of aggressive forehand winners, he continued to turn it around winning seven straight points to go 8-5 up, which he converted into an 11-7 win.

A lucky slice from Yang that trickled over the net at 5-5 turned the tide of the third, which also finished 11-7. But Pitchford stopped the rot in the fourth with an 11-7 scoreline of his own.

Understandably, the next game was tense, showcasing Yang's incredible defensive game and some exquisite Pitchford forehand winners, creating a brilliant spectacle. However, with the backing of the England fans, Pitchford edged the final game 11-8 much to his joy, levelling the score at 1-1.



Liam Pitchford picked up a good victory over Wang Yang (picture by Trevor Parsons)

Sam Walker looked to build on that as he matched up against Peter Sereda. Unfortunately, he ran into a confident Peter Sereda, who took the opener 11-7.

Walker showed improvement in the second, which he took 11-9, but he saw that momentum quickly halted as Sereda raced into a 7-1 lead in the third. Just as quickly, it shifted back in the Englishman's favour as he closed back up to 8-8.

It felt like a pivotal moment and so it proved, some fantastic exchanges following as both players sensed the chance to take a crucial advantage. In the end, Sereda shaded it 15-13.

The fourth saw some high-quality play and Walker held two game points – only for Sereda to win four on the spin to claim it 12-10 and put his country ahead again.

Drinkhall and Wang Yang also shared some quality exchanges, but the Slovakian claimed the first two 11-8.

An early timeout at 2-0 down could not create an upsurge as Drinkhall found himself 5-0 down and that created the buffer Yang needed to complete at 11-4 set for a 3-0 individual match win and a 3-1 overall scoreline.

Scores:

Lubomir Pistej bt Paul Drinkhall 3-1 (11-8, 7-11, 6-11, 4-11)

Liam Pitchford bt Wang Yang 3-2 (11-5, 7-11, 7-11, 11-7, 11-8)

Peter Sereda bt Sam Walker 3-1 (11-7, 9-11, 15-13, 12-10)

Yang bt Drinkhall 3-0 (11-8, 11-8, 11-4)

Women's match – England 0 Spain 3

Spain have one foot in the Championship Division after a 3-0 win in the first leg.

Tin-Tin Ho faced Mario Xiao in the first game but struggled to find any rhythm early on, unforced errors contributing much to an 11-4 defeat in the opener.

However, Ho bounced back in the second using her confident backhand to good effect, edging out Xiao 11-8 to level things up.

The third game was finely balanced throughout with both women producing fantastic winners. Ho held two game points but saw her opponent turn it around to take it 12-10.

It was close again in the fourth as the players traded points. However, at 9-7, Ho lost a well fought point and Xiao close it out to put Spain in front.



Kelly Sibley in action against Galia Dvorak (picture by Trevor Parsons)

Kelly Sibley's match against Galia Dvorak took a while to get going, with Sibley in particular little out of sorts.

Losing the first two 11-8 and 11-7, it looked a long way back, but Sibley found some momentum and won the third

11-9 to keep her's and England's hopes alive.

Dvorak was always just ahead in the fourth and although Sibley saved two match points at 10-8, the third chance was taken by the Spaniard.

Debutant Denise Payet took on Sara Ramirez after the interval and acquitted herself well against an experienced opponent some 300 places above her in the rankings.

The 15-year-old certainly wasn't overawed by the situation or the opponent and was very much in the first game, which she lost 11-9.

But experience proved telling as Ramirez kept Payet at arms' length from then on, taking the next two 11-4 and 11-5 to complete the visitors' 3-0 triumph.

Scores:

Maria Xiao bt Tin-Tin Ho 3-1 (11-4, 8-11, 12-10, 11-7)

Galia Dvorak bt Kelly Sibley 3-1 (11-8, 11-7, 9-11, 12-10)

Sara Ramirez bt Denise Payet 3-0 (11-9, 11-4, 11-5)

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