



England quartet ready for Worlds

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England's top men have been warming up for the World Championships at a training camp in Sweden this week.

Paul Drinkhall, Liam Pitchford, Sam Walker and David McBeath are all in final preparations for the tournament and have been working with the Sweden national squad – including the two nations playing an unofficial international earlier this week.

This year's Worlds feature individual events, with all four English players competing in singles and doubles – Drinkhall & Pitchford are one pairing and Walker & McBeath the other.

The draw for the event in Dusseldorf takes place on Saturday, with the competition starting on Monday. McBeath begins in the qualifying groups, Walker in the preliminary round and Pitchford and Drinkhall in the main draw.

Pitchford reached the last 32 at the last individual worlds in Suzhou in 2015 – the best performance by an English player since 1999, when Carl Prean and Matthew Syed reached the same stage – beating the then world No 20 Tiago Apolonia on the way.



The Chesterfield man believes he is in good shape this time around. He said:

"I'm feeling pretty good. We've had a few days at a preparation camp in Sweden and mentally and physically I'm feeling good for hopefully having a good tournament.

"In Suzhou I was injured before the tournament and wasn't sure I'd be able to play, but I did and I had a good run, beating (Kalinikos) Kreanga and Apolonia and going out to (world No 17) Saehyuk Joo.

"Hopefully I can go a bit further this time. You never know if the draw is going to be kind so I don't want to set a target. I just want to play my game and see where it takes me."

The bronze medal at last year's World Team Championships certainly made the world take more notice of the English players and Pitchford is optimistic the English contingent can turn heads again, drawing on their good team spirit even in an individual event.

He said:

"More people probably look at us and think 'they are good players' and it's about trying to keep that level – and we've got the capability to do it, it's about doing it on a daily basis now.

"It's about hitting that high level because we know people are afraid of us when we're playing well.

"We've got a good team spirit and we work for each other. It's individual competitions, so you're obviously thinking about yourself, but we want to help each other prepare and warm up and it's good to feel you have people behind you supporting you."

Drinkhall is having a busy month – as well as the training camp, he, Jo and children Dougie and Bonnie have moved into a new home, and will be attending the wedding of Paul's brother Bryn this weekend.

He said:

"There's quite a few important life things going on around preparation for the Worlds.

"That can actually help because it means I can focus when I'm in the training hall, but I'm not over-thinking the table tennis at other times, which I tend to do.

"I feel in a place where I can go there and play really well."



Drinkhall agrees that players from other nations are now more wary of the English athletes, and with good reason.

He said:

"I think me and Liam were on people's radar before but now we are more as a team and I think people look out for us a bit more. Obviously the Chinese players are the ones to beat but after that it's quite open now. There are a lot of good players and we are among them. It's all to play for."

The third member of last year's bronze medal team, Walker, admits his performances this season have not hit the stellar heights of last year, when he also picked up the biggest win of his career over Simon Gauzy of France at the Olympics.



However, the Workshop athlete is going to Germany with a confident mindset after a good training camp in Sweden and a recent win over Pitchford at the Croatia Open.

He said:

"I've had some good performances recently compared to the rest of the season, and I've been training well for a while, so I'm feeling quite good and I'm looking forward to starting.

"As long as I've done everything I can do to prepare, then it's about trying to play how I want to play.

"Any win helps with confidence and Liam is a top player, so of course I was happy to win, but I was just disappointed I couldn't go on and do more in the tournament."

Dusseldorf will be the first appearance at the Worlds for McBeath, who is currently at a career high of No 221 in the world. He will have to begin in the qualifying groups and, if he gets through that, will face a preliminary-round tie for the right to join the top seeds in the last 128.

He knows it will be tough but said:

"I'm feeling good and looking forward to it. I've been playing well all through this season and I'm looking to take my first chance at the Worlds. I'll start in the qualifiers, so my aim is to get into the main draw and then give my best and hopefully cause a few upsets."



McBeath has picked up some notable results this season, not least at the Swedish Open where he beat world No 24 Maharu Yoshimura of Japan.

The 25-year-old said:

"I've now got the belief that I can beat these guys and that they are also fearing playing me."

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