



Davies leads historic 1-2-3 for Britain

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Paralympic champion Rob Davies retained his men's class one singles title at the European Para Table Tennis Championships in Slovenia but Will Bayley had to settle for bronze in his bid to add the European crown to his world and Paralympic titles.

Davies led a historic British clean sweep of the medals in men's class one with Tom Matthews taking silver and Paul Davies bronze. David Wetherill took silver in men's class 6 and there were bronze medals for Sue Gilroy in women's class 4-5 and Ross Wilson in men's class 8.

In the semi-final Rob Davies had to take on his great friend and fellow Welshman Paul Davies in what was a repeat of their final in the European Championships in 2013. It went to a deciding set and the 33-year-old from Brecon proved just too strong for the 50-year-old from North Cornelly in taking the match 11-5 in the fifth.

He then had to take on another fellow Welshman in Matthews in the final and used all his experience to close out the match 11-9 in the third to secure his third consecutive European title.

"It feels pretty amazing," said Davies. "It was a very emotional semi-final playing Paul. To say he has been through a hell of a lot in the last 12 months is an understatement and for him to come back and perform like that shows what he is made of and the character of him.

"For Tom as well to win the semi-final shows how much GB Para table tennis is coming on and the young players are improving all the time.

"The world title next year would be nice. That is definitely my aim – I didn't think I would be in the finals here, to be honest, but I've done it, dug deep and battled through every match and got there. That gives me a lot of confidence.

"I'll be better prepared next year, lose some weight and get back in the gym and hopefully I'll be in better shape again for the Worlds next year."



Tom Matthews and Rob Davies (ITTF photo)

Matthews faced Federico Falco, the Italian who had taken Rob Davies to five sets in the group stages, in his semi-final and showed great character and fight to come back from 2-1 down to take the final two sets 11-8. The 25-year-old from Aberdare was not quite able to reproduce that form in the final but having taken bronze two years ago was happy to take the silver this time.

"Rob is a true champion and a great guy," said Matthews. "I'm happy for Rob, happy for myself and happy for the team. We have had a one, two, three and made history so I can't really complain.

"To be honest, I was really nervous going in to the fifth set against Falco and Neil (coach) really calmed me down and said 'fight for it – you want it'. So I put everything in to it and came out on top.

"I've got to give Rob a bit more of a challenge next time; I didn't play my best in the final but he deserves it and bring on the next Europeans."

London 2012 bronze medallist Paul Davies was also delighted to be back in the medals at a major championship.

"It was a really good game," he said. "I've got to give the guy (Rob) credit, he is a talented player and I'm the master who taught him! He deserved to win but I think I pushed him to get that win today. We got the one, two, three and that has never happened before, so happy days.

"A lot of people questioned if I would come back after last year and of course I wanted to come back. To perform here like I have done – I never thought I could do that – so it would be silly to stop now. I'm not finished yet – no way."

Wetherill once again showed all his battling qualities with a 3-2 win in the quarter-final against the world team gold medallist Alberto Seoane Alcazar from Spain and reached the final of men's class 6 with a four-set win against the Romanian Bobi Simion, who was a surprise winner against the Paralympic and defending European champion Peter Rosenmeier.

The final against the world No 1 Alvaro Valera proved to be one match too many for the 27-year-old from

Torpoint and although he kept fighting and took the third set the Spaniard took the match 11-5 in the fourth.



David Wetherill after his quarter-final victory (ITTF photo)

“Even in the set I won I didn’t feel comfortable,” said Wetherill, “and he made it really difficult for me today. I wanted to make it difficult for him and I didn’t really do that, to be honest. I just had nothing left in the tank.

“I tried my best but in hindsight I should have taken my chances a bit more in the previous rounds as I made it more difficult for myself than it could have been.

“At the end of the day I got the wins but sometimes over the course of a tournament you have your ups and downs and you need to conserve your body a little bit.

“It was disappointing not to go into the final feeling fresh because I would have been a lot more confident than I was but take nothing away from Alvaro – he did the business.”

After a 3-0 win against the Frenchman Kevin Dourbecker, Bayley faced Mykhaylo Popov in his semi-final in a repeat of the European Championship final in 2013 that the Ukrainian won. The 29-year-old from Tunbridge Wells started slowly and although he fought back from 2-0 down to level at 2-2 he could not close out the match against an in-form Popov.

“He is No 3 in the world and he has been European champion before so he is a great player,” said a disappointed Bayley. “But that is sport and that is table tennis and anything can happen on the day. He got on top of me and deserved to win today for sure.

“I knew when I was 2-0 down it would be a mountain to climb but I started to climb it and come back but I just couldn’t get to the top. I gave it everything and it was close in the end.

“I reached the final in every major from 2011 to 2016 and although the bronze is not what I wanted, to get another major medal makes me proud. I need to look forward now towards the World Championships and try and improve again.”

Wilson was European silver medallist in 2011 at the age of 16 and despite a series of injuries which have hampered his career since London 2012 has won team bronze medals in London and Rio. After edging a close first set against the World, Paralympic and European team gold medallist from Poland, Piotr Grudzien, 12-10 the 22 year old from Minster showed his class to secure a 3-0 win.

His reward was a semi-final against the World champion and world No 1 Viktor Didukh and he pushed the Ukrainian all the way, coming back from 2-1 down to force a decider which Didukh won 11-7.



Ross Wilson in action in Slovenia (ITTF picture)

"I'm happy with how I played," said Wilson, "but I wish I could have reversed the result and got a 3-2 win. So it is really hard at the moment but I am sure that when I get back to training it will be something to spur me on to do better in the World Championships next year and eventually Tokyo.

"I think last year I wasn't really pushing the top guys very much – I was always a level down and now I have really upped my level and my game again and I think I am competing with the top three guys in the world now. I just want to keep improving next time and come back even stronger."

Gilroy came through her quarter-final against Zorica Popadic 3-0 to face another Serbian Borislava Peric-Rankovic. The Paralympic champion and world No 1 has so often been her nemesis in the past and so it proved again, with Gilroy unable to produce her best form in a 3-0 loss.

"I'm really disappointed with how I played against Peric," said the 44-year-old from Barnsley. "Normally I give her a really good game and unfortunately I didn't do that today. I've been out for the last three months after having surgery on my arm and I've only been back playing for six weeks so I didn't expect to get a medal and it is brilliant to get a bronze.

"Fingers crossed I can turn it round in the team event and play the standard I know I can play."



Sue Gilroy in action (ITTF photo)

Gilroy will be partnered in the team event by Megan Shackleton who also faced Peric-Rankovic in her quarter-final. She took the first set before the Serbian showed her experience in taking the next three but it was a promising performance by the 18-year-old from Todmorden.

"I'm really proud of how I competed today," said Shackleton. "It was obviously going to be a tough draw in the quarter finals against the Paralympic champion but I am showing I can compete and that gives me great confidence going into future matches."

After some impressive performances over the first two days Kim Daybell could not quite find his best form in his men's class 10 quarter-final against the European bronze medallist in 2015 Filip Radovic. The 17-year-old from Montenegro was quick out of the blocks and took the first set 11-1 before Daybell levelled at 1-1. The third set was crucial and Radovic edged it 12-10 and went on to take the fourth 11-8 and the match 3-1.

Daybell has been focusing on his medical studies since Rio and was competing in only his second international tournament since the 2016 Paralympic Games but was still disappointed to go out at the quarter-final stage.

"It was tough," said the 25-year-old from Sheffield. "He came out flying and I felt under pressure for the whole game and I never really settled. I think the match hinged on the third set – whoever went 2-1 up there was probably going to take it. But it was close all the way and he played a really good game today."

"I'm looking forward to the team event now with Ash (Facey Thompson). There are lots of strong teams and it will be tough but we will do our best and see what we can do."

Facey Thompson put up a good performance against the men's class 9 Paralympic champion and world No 1 Laurens Devos, losing in three close sets to the 17-year-old Belgian.

"The set scores were really tight," said Facey Thompson. "I was believing in myself the whole way – I felt that I was competing with the best player in the world at the moment in my class and I did well to make him a bit nervous. I kept fighting but there were just a few points that let me down – the quality and the placement of the balls."



The GB team show their support from the stands (ITTF photo)

Liverpool's Jack Hunter-Spivey led the men's class 5 world No 2 Ali Ozturk 2-1 in their quarter-final but the fourth set proved crucial and after edging that 11-9 the Turkish player ran away with the fifth set to clinch the match 3-2.

"I've had a good tournament and applied what I was doing in training," said Hunter-Spivey, "but I'm very disappointed as I feel I could have won that match and a medal was mine at some point. That's just the way it goes.

"I played a good level of table tennis but he is world No 2 and he was better than me on the day. I'm up there but I want to be winning – as an athlete you always criticise yourself and at the moment I'm just really disappointed that I lost but when I look back I'll probably feel it was a good performance."

The Championships continue with the team events, which conclude on Wednesday.

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