

Pitchford Shines But Singapore Take Gold

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The trio of Gao Ning, Yang Zi and Ma Liang concluded the sixth day of action, Saturday 9th October 2010, on the top step of the medal podium in the Men's Team event at the 19th Commonwealth Games in the Indian city of New Delhi.

In so doing they emulated the success of their Women's Team who had secured gold one day earlier.

They were worthy winners but for the one and only time in the tournament they were challenged, they were challenged by a spirited and determined English team with 17 year old Liam Pitchford rising to unprecedented heights.

He gave England a lead of which they could hardly have dreamt possible.

Set Stadium Alight

Gaining in stature as the opening contest progressed, he beat Gao Ning in a five games duel that set the Yamuna Sports Complex alight. It motivated the whole English team but that was the only success for England against the tournament favourites.

Nevertheless, England, true to tradition, went down fighting; the three ensuing defeats were all in four games.

Paul Drinkhall suffered against Yang Zi and Gao Ning interspersed with defeat for Andrew Baggaley at the hands of Ma Liang.

Biggest Upset to Date

The success for Liam Pitchford could not have been predicted; it was the biggest upset in the tournament to date.

Gao Ning, 28 years old, eleven years older than the Englishman and world ranked at no.17 as opposed to Liam Pitchford at no.292, was the clear favourite.

Dominated First Two Games

Furthermore, that fact was endorsed in the first two games; it was man against boy. Gao Ning dominated matters; it seemed a mere formality that he would win the third game and give Singapore the expected lead.

He was the better player over the table, the first to attack; time and again he forced Liam Pitchford into retreat. However, from an inner strength, Liam Pitchford won the third game; he matched Gao Ning blow for blow and when he loose return accrued he seized the opportunity.

Increased Confidence

More acclimatized to the pace of the play and increasing in self-belief, Liam Pitchford captured the fourth game; from having been totally outclassed in the first two games the English teenager had chance of causing a sensation.

Gao Ning was under pressure, in the deciding he gained a two point lead, Liam Pitchford then reduced the gap, it happened time and time again with Liam Pitchford never in the lead until 9-all when he secured the point to move just one precious step away from success.

Success at Third Attempt

The match point was saved and Gao Ning who despite leading for the first 18 points of the fifth game, never held match point; he saved one more match point before Liam Pitchford jumped in jubilation.

He had recorded the best win of his life and England had an unexpected early lead.

Success at Third Attempt

The win had clearly motivated Paul Drinkhall and had put Yang Zi under more pressure than he surely anticipated.

The Englishman clinched the first game; he matched Yang Zi in the expertise department of table tennis near the net and gained success when attacking the Singaporean backhand with heavy topspin followed by a forehand fading wide to the left handed Yang Zi's backhand.

Determination

However, anything loose and the Yang Zi forehand reaped success; after losing the first game Yang Zi was more determined than ever. After winning the second game he played with increasing speed, more positive and more confident as each point was deposited like dollars in a Swiss bank.

Close second and third games were secured; he was never behind in those games and his speed plus dexterity over the table was starting to reap dividends.

Dominant

In the fourth game, it reaped a high return for the investment of hours of practice in the training hall.

He dominated the game from start to finish. Singapore had levelled.

Ma Liang Responds

The score in the fixture level the third match of the duel was of critical importance; just as in the case of Paul Drinkhall, Andrew Baggaley made the brighter start when faced with Ma Liang before the Singaporean recovered to take control.

Ma Liang proved the more reliable in the rallies, the more stable and assured player as the contest progressed. Furthermore, he was able to execute the first attack on the majority of occasions, directly strong topspin toward the backhand of the Englishman and gaining success.

Attacked Quickly to Gain Success

Attacking quickly he forced Andrew Baggaley to make relatively passive returns from the backhand; equally like Yang Zi in the preceding match, adrenalin was flowing, three games in a row were secured.

Singapore held a two-one lead.

Attacked Quickly to Gain Success

A good start had been achieved by both Paul Drinkhall and Andrew Baggaley but the momentum could not be maintained.

It was the same when Paul Drinkhall returned to the table to face Gao Ning. He won the first game, adrenalin was flowing, the exchanges in the fast and furious but Gao Ning in typical consistent manner steadied the ship.

Gradually, he asserted his authority, he excelled over the table and forced errors from the Englishman; totally focused, recovered from being shell shocked by Liam Pitchford he secured victory.

Celebrations

Normally passive, undemonstrative, Gao Ning celebrated; the whole Singaporean squad rushed into the arena to congratulate their leading player.

It was pride for England, they had challenged the favourites, for Singapore it was gold, precious gold.

By Ian Marshall ITTF

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