



China end England's World Cup adventure

Author: Paul Stimpson

Posted On: February 24, 2018

England's ITTF Team World Cup adventure has come to an end at the hands of top seeds China in surely the finest England match in this country for many a year.

Liam Pitchford's four-set tussle with world No 2 Fan Zhendong will live long in the memory of all those who watched at the Copper Box Arena, live via the BBC website, or in one of the 100 other countries showing the game.

[Missed the match? Click here to watch all this morning's action on the BBC iPlayer](#)

For sustained quality from both men, it takes some beating, and the margins were tiny in favour of Zhendong, who was moved to praise Pitchford in his post-match interview.

And while the opening doubles and Sam Walker's clash against the legend that is Ma Long were not so close, England once again showed they can command the respect of the table tennis world.

What's more, they have another bronze medal to add to the one they claimed at the World Team Championships in Kuala Lumpur two years ago – and this one with the added bonus of coming in front of a home crowd.

England went in with belief for sure, but if they were under any illusions as to the magnitude of the task, they were quickly dispelled by a blistering Chinese start.

The left-hand/right-hand, penhold/shakehand combination of Xu Xin and Ma Long allowed Paul Drinkhall & Sam Walker only two points in the first game, Xu clinching it with an almost contemptuous cross-court flick.



Paul and Sam take on Ma Long and Xu Xin (picture by Alan Man)

England took the first three points of the second game, prompting a chorus from the Chinese contingent in the crowd. It worked, the next four points going to China in the blink of an eye, one almost balletic point seeing Ma Long duck out of the way of another imperious Xu winner.

The led to England coach Marcus Sjöberg calling a timeout, but although the England pair battled and had their moments, the Chinese built a cushion and soon had four game points.

Drinkhall saved one with a ferocious forehand slapped down the line, but it was only postponing the inevitable as Walker drifted wide via the top of the net on the next point.

Pitchford has been in arguably the form of his life at this tournament, defeating Tomokazu Harimoto and Hugo Calderano, among others. Surely he couldn't add world No 2 Fan Zhendong to his list of scalps?

The first couple of minutes suggested he might – inflicting a traditional Chinese fast start on his opponent by going 5-0 and 6-1 up, the last point in that sequence culminating in a sensational slapped backhand winner with minimal reaction time.

That sort of counter-punch was a feature of Pitchford's first set as he went toe-to-toe with his illustrious opponent and won 11-8 – only the second game the Chinese have lost at this event, Sweden's Anton Källberg having taken one off Xu Xin.



Liam goes to-to-toe with Fan Zhendong (picture by Alan Man)

Zhendong's response was an 11-3 game, the score of which was slightly misleading as he enjoyed the benefit of a couple of slices of luck, while Pitchford missed a couple by a whisker.

But Pitchford came out firing again in the third, mixing his counter-attacking with some outstanding defence, unleashing that fearsome backhand at will and crunching a couple of forehand winners. In short, almost the perfect game.

Almost. While Zhendong was undoubtedly under extreme pressure – was that a suggestion of a bemused look at one point, a slumped shoulder at another? – he managed to turn it on when it really mattered, at the sharp end of a game. Two successive points from 9-9 – the second helped by a touch off the net – and he led 2-1.

It was more of the same in the fourth, some sublime high-speed skills from both men thrilling the crowd and keeping the match in the balance. One particular receive from Pitchford, flicking a backhand straight down the line at a velocity which might well have broken the sound barrier, literally (yes, really) brought an involuntary tear to my eye.

But sadly for Pitchford, who deserved more, an under-pressure China were still able to do what China do. Again, it was two points from 9-9 and a warm acknowledgement from Zhendong to Pitchford at the handshake and in interview afterwards.

At 2-0 down, the miracle was not going to happen for England, and the end was swift. Walker's first Chinese opponent in a singles match was Ma Long – many judges' choice as the greatest ever.



Sam Walker looks to attack against Ma Long (picture by Alan Man)

That he only conceded eight points across the match showed that sport can be beautifully brutal. For sure, Walker was not at his best. But he was on the receiving end of a ruthless, clinical athlete revelling in his ability to dominate.

A sad end, but a happy one too – another medal for England and another tournament as the last remaining European nation.

Results

China 3 England 0

Ma Long & Xu Xin bt Paul Drinkhall & Sam Walker 3-0 (11-2, 11-7, 11-4)

Fan Zhendong bt Liam Pitchford 3-1 (8-11, 11-3, 11-9, 11-9)

Ma Long bt Sam Walker 3-0 (11-5, 11-1, 11-2)

Downloaded From:

<https://newsarchive.tabletennisengland.co.uk/news/archived/china-end-englands-world-cup-adventure/>