



China complete Team World Cup double

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Posted On: February 25, 2018

China beat first-time finalists Japan to claim their seventh successive ITTF Team World Cup title in London.

Japan fought hard but were never in contention, though Koki Niwa took a game off Ma Long – only the third China had dropped in the whole tournament.

A packed Copper Box Arena crowd featured supporters from both sides and plenty of neutrals, but it was a sizeable Chinese contingent which cheered their heroes on to yet another global title.

The doubles set the tone for the whole match as Niwa & Jin Ueda were in it but never really IN it – the margins of three, two and four points in each game telling a tale of Ma Long & Xu Xin keeping them at arm's length.

Two points pivoting around the end of the second game exemplified this, China taking the second 11-9 after the best rally of the game and then Xu Xin darting across court and smacking a winner while virtually sitting on the floor on the first point of the third game.

Niwa sent a smash wide to bring up three match points, and a return then drifted off the table to hand China the first.

World No 2 Fan Zhendong versus the 14-year-old Tomokazu Harimoto was a mouthwatering prospect but in the end it turned into a bit of a lesson for the Japanese.

Harimoto, searching for winners and taking risks, mindful of his opponent's talent, was a fraction off target for most of the match, netting and missing with a number of big shots.

By the time he was 9-4 down in the second, he was looking a little forlorn and Fan rubbed it in with a fizzing backhand down the line, accompanied by what sounded like a shout of 'yes!'

We'd heard little from Harimoto to that point, but his first big 'cho' came early in the third as he attempted to up his volume and get his body language back on track.

But a succession of points followed which were typical of Harimoto's match – a big 'cho' on one point, followed by a stamp of the teenage foot the next, a big backhand winner and then more frustration on the next point. He won a big rally, he lost an equally big rally.

But then, shouldn't we be marvelling that such a young player is normally so consistent, rather than criticising inconsistency against the world No 2?

In the end, a backhand flicking off the net cord and dropping off the table sealed Harimoto's fate and underlined Fan's status near the top of the rankings.

Facing Ma Long when 2-0 down must be as soul-destroying as seeing Lionel Messi come on as a substitute when his team are already winning 5-0. Yet that was what world No 6 Koki Niwa had to content with.

Ma has dropped to No 7 in the new world rankings system, but many would still consider him a worthy No 1. He looked like a No 1 in the first, always ahead and taking it 11-8.

The second game was more one-sided at 11-3 – but it was the Japanese who won it, taking only the third game off the China players at this event (Kallberg and Pitchford against Xu and Fan the others).

Niwa lost a couple of superb smash/lob/dropshot rallies but was otherwise untouchable – Ma Long looking unusually ragged and returning one serve way over the table.

Surely this wouldn't be the start of a sensational comeback? Well, no. There are other countries – with talented, super-fit athletes – and then there is China. The great man upped his game, took the third 11-5 and opened a lead in the fourth.

At 7-3 it felt like the beginning of the end, Niwa sagging and Long doing a mini 'lap of honour' at his end of the table.

The end was in fact only four points away and the celebration from Ma Long was low-key, as if to say: "that's what we do".

Results

China 3 Japan 0

Ma Long & Xu Xin bt Jin Ueda & Koki Niwa 3-0 (11-8, 11-9, 11-7)

Fan Zhendong bt Tomokazu Harimoto 3-0 (11-7, 11-4, 11-8)

Ma Long bt Koki Niwa 3-1 (11-8, 3-11, 11-5, 11-3)

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