



Drinkhall reign ended by McBeath

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The reign of champion Paul Drinkhall was ended by England team-mate David McBeath at the PG Mutual National Championships today.

Drinkhall has won the last two editions of the tournament and triumphed six times overall, so McBeath's win in five games was the stand-out result on Day Three of the competition at the Copper Box Arena.

Liam Pitchford and Sam Walker are safely through to tomorrow's semi-finals, while Tin-Tin Ho and Kelly Sibley, the top two seeds and with seven titles between them, were also relatively untroubled.

Aaron McKibbin beat fellow Paralympic hero Will Bayley to win the Men's Class 7-10 event, and the doubles events threw up some interesting results and some pointers towards the Commonwealth Games.

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Men's Singles

David McBeath's win over Paul Drinkhall would not be filed under U for Unbelievable, but it's fair to say it was a surprise. After all, Drinkhall has six singles titles under his belt, while McBeath has yet to appear in a final, and there are the best part of 120 places between them in the world rankings.

But Drinkhall was out of sorts and McBeath took advantage with a front-foot performance, his win making it the first time since 2010 that Drinkhall has not appeared in a final.

McBeath had the advantage of having had a tough match in the previous round (see below) while Drinkhall had yet to play singles after having a bye – though the deposed champion said it would not have made any difference.

Walker saw Chris Doran come from 2-0 down to level, purveying his usual mix of sublime skills and shouts of exasperation when he missed – donkey one of his favoured descriptions of himself today.

But although every game was decided to seven or better, Walker won the big points in the last two games to advance to his semi-final.



Chris Doran (picture by Alan Man)

The other half of the draw was more straightforward with two 4-0s – Jarvis giving Adam Harrison no encouragement at all in winning 3, 3, 3, 6 and Pitchford withstanding some magic moments from Mike O'Driscoll to remain in control from the time he took the first 12-10 with three successive points – he went on to win the next three 4, 9, 7.

So tomorrow's semi-finals will see McBeath line up against Walker – who is looking for a third final appearance in a row – and Pitchford face Jarvis, a quest for a fourth title up against a bid to reach a first final.

Earlier in the day, Harrison and O'Driscoll upset seeds in the first round, knocking out Danny Reed and Helshan Weerasinghe respectively.

Both were one-sided wins in terms of the 4-0 scorelines, though the game scores were a more accurate reflection – Harrison winning 6, 11, 10, 7 and O'Driscoll 7, 8, 8, 10.

McBeath was given a huge scare by 15-year-old England Youth Squad member Ethan Walsh, who played a great containing match and led 3-2, taking the fourth and fifth on deuce.

McBeath, who has not had much action outside the practice hall in the last couple of weeks, looked rusty at times but he managed to shake that off when he really needed to and the last two games were easier by comparison with what had gone before. The final scoreline was 4-3 (11-5, 6-11, 11-5, 12-14, 12-14, 11-5, 11-4)

McBeath described the match as "a wake-up call" and added: "Credit to him, he played well and put a lot of balls on the table. I had a slow start but when I was 3-2 down I got my tactics sorted and it was quite straightforward after that."

Walsh said putting balls on the table had been an important part of his gameplan. He said: "I tried to make sure he couldn't dominate the match and get a massive lead, and I tried to make him as nervous as possible.

"I won the two games that went to deuce and on the big pressure points I thought he was getting a bit nervous.

"Then he started attacking more, finding the angles and making it as hard as possible for me and he ran away with it in the end.

"I didn't know if I could get to that level, but I've learned I can compete with people like that."

Doran, seeded five, was pushed to six games by Luke Savill, but the other three ties were over in a jiffy, Walker and Jarvis both featuring an 11-0 game against Josh Bennett and Sam Mabey respectively, while Pitchford demolished yesterday's hero Craig Bryant for the total loss of 15 points.

Women's Singles



Tin-Tin Ho chats with Kelly Sibley (picture by Alan Man)

Tin-Tin Ho looks in no mood to relinquish her title as two successive 4-0 wins put her into the last four, where she will be joined by the other top three seeds.

Ho's progress as she goes for a third singles win, and the progress of five-time champion Kelly Sibley, was expected and smooth, with barely a glove laid on either although Sibley did drop a game in the last 16.

The closest Ho came to any inconvenience was when Yolanda King pushed her to 12-10 in the first, the next three games were won by a confident 3, 7, 5.

Sibley's last-eight clash was against Emily Bolton, and the closest the sixth seed got was eight points in a margin of 4, 6, 8, 8.

Ho will face Karina Le Fevre, who was asked plenty of questions by 15-year-old Charlotte Bardsley, who

overcame a slightly tentative start to pull back to 2-2 before succumbing 4-2 (11-7, 11-4, 6-11, 8-11, 11-7, 11-5).

Sibley, as last year, will play Maria Tsapsinos in the last four. It was a bit of an arm-wrestle at times as Tsapsinos took on Hannah Hicks, particularly in the middle games, but she found a way past her opponent in the end by 4-1 (11-3, 11-7, 9-11, 11-7, 11-2).



Karina Le Fevre in action (picture by Alan Man)

Earlier, the eight seeds made it through to the quarter-finals with few hiccups between them, though Hicks needed six against Evie Collier.

Bardsley repeated her Under-21 victory against Denise Payet, eliminating last year's semi-finalist. It became a relatively straightforward win as she won the last two games for the loss of only seven points in total after Payet had taken the third game – the final scoreline 4-1 (12-10, 11-6, 7-11, 11-3, 11-4).

It was also 4-1 for Tsapsinos, Sibley, King and Le Fevre, none of whom were ever behind, though Emma Torkington did level at 1-1 against Sibley.

Winning in three straight were Ho and Bolton, the latter taking time to shake off a stubborn Mollie Patterson, who ensured all but the last game were close.

Para



Will Bayley takes on Alex Bland, with Aaron McKibbin in the foreground (picture by Alan Man)

Aaron McKibbin defeated his fellow Paralympic hero Will Bayley in three close games to take the Men's Class 7-10 gold.

The pair know each other's games so well that nothing they do would come as much of a surprise to the man at the other end of the table.

On this occasion, McKibbin had the edge – certainly once he shaded a close second he was favourite to close it out – though he felt some relief to get through 3-0 (11-6, 14-12, 11-9).

He said: "Me and Will train with each other every day and our matches are always close. I was surprised it was 3-0 – he was coming back into it and I was playing quite negatively, but I managed to get through it.

"It's really nice to play in this venue. Table Tennis England have put on a great show and hopefully we can get more championships like this.

"To be able to play on a table like that and have it shown on the BBC, you only normally get that at the Paralympics."

Not surprisingly, McKibbin and Bayley had arrived at their final meeting without having dropped a game in their matches against Craig Allen and Alex Bland as their Paralympic class told. Allen beat Bland in four games to end in third place.

The competition was reduced from two groups of three to one round-robin event because Ross Wilson and Ashley Facey Thompson withdrew through injury.

The Class 3-5 competition was postponed as Jack Hunter-Spivey was unable to travel because of the weather, while Megan Shackleton was injured. It is hoped to re-stage the event during another championships before the end of the season.

Men's Doubles

It was Commonwealth Games squad all the way as the pairings of Liam Pitchford & Sam Walker and Paul Drinkhall & David McBeath advanced to the final.

Playing in unusual combinations – with an eye on preparation for the team matches in Gold Coast next month – it was pretty much plain-sailing for both pairs, although the latter did lose a game against Jack & Josh Bennett.

Pitchford & Walker booked their final place against teenage pair Matt Leete & Luke Savill 3-0 (11-7, 11-4, 11-9), while it was also 3-0 (5, 5, 9) for Drinkhall & McBeath against James Hobson & Victor Guang Shi.

The quarter-finals had thrown up a couple of brilliant five-set matches, with the winning pairs both coming back from 2-0 down.

In the case of Savill & Leete, the position was a seemingly hopeless one at 2-6 down in the third against Craig Bryant and Mike O'Driscoll, but wily coach Paul Beck called a timeout and persuaded his young charges they were still in it.

They duly turned it around to cross the line at 3-2 (9-11, 6-11, 11-8, 11-6, 11-4) – leaving Beck full of praise, though admitting he hadn't been as optimistic as he had told his players during the timeout!



Paul Beck watches Luke Savill & Matt Leete, who he helped inspire to a notable victory (picture by Alan Man)

The other comeback was by Hobson & Guang Shi, who ended the hopes of Tom Jarvis & Chris Doran

In the other quarters, Pitchford & Walker wasted little time getting the better of Adam Harrison & Alim Hirji, while Drinkhall & McBeath dropped one game against the Bennett brothers but advanced comfortably enough in the end (11-2, 8-11, 11-5, 11-6).

Women's Doubles

Two potential Commonwealth Games pairs will meet in the final after taking care of business in the semis.

Kelly Sibley & Maria Tsapsinos knocked out Emily Bolton & Mollie Patterson 6, 7, 6 and it was just as symmetrical, though even more emphatic as Tin-Tin Ho & Denise Payet registered a 4, 3, 4 scoreline over Evie Collier & Kate Hughes.

The first round saw Ho & Payet in charge after laying down a first-game marker against Charlotte Bardsley & Megan Gidney, going on to win 3-0 (11-3, 11-9, 11-9).

The other match to be played (Bolton & Patterson advanced by walkover) featured one remarkable game as Emma Torkington & Kate Cheer took a time-out at 1-5 in the fourth, trailing 2-1 in games, and went on to take the next 10 points in a row. However, their opponents Collier & Hughes recovered their composure and completed a 3-2 (11-13, 11-5, 11-7, 5-11, 11-5) triumph.

Mixed Doubles



Liam Pitchford & Tin-Tin Ho (picture by Alan Man)

Commonwealth Games preparation in the semi-finals, with three of the four pairs lining up as they will in Gold Coast next month.

Liam Pitchford & Tin-Tin Ho, the more established partnership and the silver medal winners in Glasgow four years ago, saw off Tom Jarvis & Maria Tsapsinos in four (11-3, 9-11, 12-10, 11-5).

And it was three straight for Kelly Sibley & David McBeath in the all-Commonwealth semi-final, and in fine style as they defeated Sam Walker & Denise Payet 7, 5, 2.

This tournament is the first time McBeath and Sibley have played as a partnership and Sibley said: "We've never played before and obviously the reason we're playing together is the Commonwealths. I think we gelled and played really well.

"We were a bit unsure how we would work together as a pairing but I feel both our games suit each other – he takes a step back and I can try to stay closer to the table. We've got a clear understanding of what each other's doing."

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