



## Pitchford and Ho are the champions!

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Liam Pitchford won his fourth men's singles title and Tin-Tin Ho completed a hat-trick of women's singles crowns on the final day of the PG Mutual National Championships.

Pitchford defeated Sam Walker, while Ho prevailed once again against Kelly Sibley.

The two winners had earlier combined to take the Mixed Doubles – Pitchford's first success in that event – at the Copper Box Arena.

The Men's Doubles saw Paul Drinkhall & David McBeath beat their England colleagues Pitchford & Walker, while Sibley teamed up with Maria Tsapsinos to defeat Ho & Denise Payet in the Women's Doubles.

Once again, the full day's play was shown live on the BBC website, as it had been on Saturday.

[Click here for all the results from the PG Mutual Nationals](#)

## Men's Singles



Liam Pitchford celebrates winning his semi-final (picture by Alan Man)

Liam Pitchford has enjoyed a simply outstanding time at the Copper Box in the last couple of weeks, with victories over the world No 11 and No 16 and a titanic battle against world No 2 Fan Zhendong at the Team World Cup, a win for England against Bosnia-Herzegovina and now a fourth national Men's Singles title.

He was the form player coming in and looked every inch the best player in England currently, imposing his game on opponents, quickly banishing any minor setbacks and playing the big points well.

He had to recover from losing the first game to Sam Walker in the final, but blazing through the second from 1-1 to 6-1 and then 10-2, seemingly in the blink of an eye, got him back on track.

It was 11-4 in the third as well, a savage forehand completing the game, and he was 6-0 up in the fourth and flying when he suddenly hit turbulence.

Pitchford ended up 9-7 down as Walker took seven in a row from 2-7. But the rally and winner to pull it back to 9-9 was a real 'wow' moment and two points later Pitchford had the game – bellowing his celebration as he realised what a key period of play that had been.

Walker was not about to hand Pitchford the title, but his cry of exasperation at going 8-5 down suggested the beginning of the end in the fifth.

Pitchford brought up five match points with yet another howitzer of a forehand and though Walker saved one, a dead net cord ended the match – a horrible way to clinch it, but no one could say the title wasn't thoroughly deserved.

Pitchford said: "I came off the back of last week and I came here to win. I think I did a professional job and brought probably my best table tennis of the tournament to the final.

"I had a bit of a wobble at 6-0 up in the fourth but I trusted my game and played the right way and it paid off – which I always knew it would."

Walker not surprisingly cut a dejected figure afterwards after a third successive final defeat, this time to Pitchford after Paul Drinkhall got the better of him in 2016 and 2017.

His stark assessment was: "He played good, I played bad, I'll try again next year.

"I don't know what changed after the first game, I just don't know. I thought I'd processed losing in the final the last two years – maybe I don't deserve it yet and I just have to work harder and try again."

In the semis, Walker got the better of David McBeath, who had knocked out six-time champion Paul Drinkhall in the quarter-finals and was looking to book a place in his first senior Nationals final.

He started well, taking the first to eight, but Walker hit back, ending the second 11-7 on an edge ball that was perilously close to hitting side rather than top of table. With both players unsure, there was a pause of a few seconds and umpire Kim Mudge confirmed her decision – which TV replays proved correct.

It was 11-7 to Walker again in the third, making the fourth the pivotal game. They matched each other shot for shot, point for point to 9-9. Walker missed his first game point, but took his second with a forehand drive out of McBeath's reach, his opponent slamming his bat into the floor and earning a yellow card.

The fifth progressed to 6-6 and Walker then applied the final few nails with four points in a row. He netted a serve and then sent a forehand long, but the third match point was taken as a McBeath shot flicked off the net and went long.

Pitchford had to earn his place in the final against Tom Jarvis, admitting his 18-year-old opponent had forced him to up his game after taking the first 11-5.

Pitchford responded in kind, and the third and fourth were to shape the destiny of the match. Jarvis won four points from 10-7 down in the third, but Pitchford stayed strong to take the next three.

Jarvis again held a game point in the fourth at 10-9 up, but once again Pitchford won the big points.

With a two-game cushion, Pitchford opened up and put away some contemptuous winners off both flanks in the fifth, romping away to 6-0 and then 10-4 up.

Jarvis clawed back two match points but not the third and Pitchford was in his first final since 2015 – though Jarvis has again closed the gap between him and the big guns.

## Women's Singles



Another national title for Tin-Tin Ho (picture by Alan Man)

Tin-Tin Ho retained her recent stranglehold over the women's final and opponent Kelly Sibley in a high-class final characterised by plenty of superb exchanges.

Meeting in the final for the fourth successive year, it was a third win in a row for the Londoner.

Sibley attempted to move Ho around the court and power winners past her, but Ho was at her relentless best for much of the match, getting ball after ball back on the table and forcing errors as well as hitting winners of her own.

So quick was she around the court that Sibley lamented afterwards that Ho was like a whippet.

Sibley did make a good start, winning the first, and she continued to play well and to go for her shots.

Ho feels she has benefited from playing in Austria for the Linz club as she takes a gap year before university,

She said: "I've been in Austria almost a year and I feel my game is coming on and I'm more confident and relaxed on the table.

"I think all the finals have been equally as hard but this time Kelly was setting herself up in rallies and I was missing a few shots. But I started getting more back on the table and I'm really happy with how I played in the end."

Sibley said: "I'd rather lose going for it. I feel I'm playing really well and that showed in the quarter-finals and semis. I felt really strong and I was timing the ball well.

"I always knew the final was going to be tough but I went in for the first time in a lot of years feeling that the pressure wasn't on me in the final.

"Hats off to her, she coped really well with that pressure. I'm disappointed, but I'm feeling very positive about my game and that my table tennis is going in the right direction for Gold Coast."

Earlier on the final day, Sibley got off to a flying start in the first semi-final against Maria Tsaptsinos, taking the opening two 11-5 and 11-3 in a match characterised by some dynamic forehand exchanges.

When she trailed 3-8 in the third, it seemed as if a battle might develop, but Sibley worked her way back to lead 10-9. Tsaptsinos won the next two to hold a game point, but Sibley saved it with the aid of a net cord and forced her opponent into two mistakes on the next two points.

Sibley's fist pump and 'Cho' at the end of the game showed how important it was, but it was not yet won and lost. The fourth was tight as Tsaptsinos, at times frustrated with herself, fought for every ball. She held game points at 10-9 and 11-10 in that one, but again Sibley saved them and two netted returns by Tsaptsinos concluded the match.

The other semi-final saw Ho fired up and too powerful for Karina Le Fevre, who battled gamely but just didn't have the weaponry to land enough blows on a consistent basis.

Le Fevre got to 9-9 and 10-10 in the fourth, saving a match point but a backhand drifted long to present Ho with her second chance to win it. We were made to wait as Charles Ho called a time-out to settle any possible nerves, and a netted return by Le Fevre settled the issue.

## Mixed Doubles



Liam Pitchford & Tin-Tin Ho celebrate winning the mixed doubles (picture by Michael Loveder)

Big points bring big players to the fore, they say. And with the greatest respect to Kelly Sibley and David McBeath, they were on the receiving end of that maxim as Liam Pitchford and Tin-Tin Ho saved four match points to claim the title.

Ho is no stranger to Mixed Doubles gold here, but it was a first Mixed title for Pitchford, who doesn't normally play that event.

It is with more than one eye on the Commonwealth Games that he and Ho are back together, having taken silver behind Paul and Jo Drinkhall last time in Glasgow. And it is also with Gold Coast in mind that Sibley and McBeath are forging their partnership.

Who knows, perhaps they can meet in a medal match in Australia next month, but for now they served up a thrilling confrontation.

The 'senior' pair took the first, but McBeath & Sibley made crucial moves in the next two games to win them both – a five-point burst to 8-3 up in the second and three points from 7-7 in the third giving them the cushions they needed.

Another run of three points at the end of the fourth put McBeath & Sibley 11-10 for their first match point, but Pitchford belted a forehand cross-court winner to save that.

Pitchford and Ho then saw the dearest of dead net cords by Sibley save a game point to make it 12-12, but Sibley went long and Pitchford belted a backhand down the line to win the game.

The greatest drama came in the decider as McBeath & Sibley pulled out to 10-7 up and three match points.



Mascots escorted the players out before each match (picture by Alan Man)

They did nothing wrong as a pair over the course of the next few points, but three superb Pitchford forehands proved unreturnable and he followed up with a backhand down the line that was equally ruthless. That brought up a match point for Ho & Pitchford and it was all over when McBeath sent a backhand long.

Pitchford said: "10-7 down and five points in a row, we played four or five points which we hadn't really shown during that match. They didn't miss a lot, we just played some really good points.

"I thought Kelly and David played really well, we just had to find a way. I'm happy to win my first Mixed Doubles title. We're gearing up for Gold Coast and this is a good start."

Ho added: "It was a really tough match but we managed to play good points when it mattered. In the end, we just had to relax and play."

## Men's Doubles



The Men's Doubles podium (picture by Alan Man)

Liam Pitchford and Paul Drinkhall on opposite sides of the net; Sam Walker and David McBeath on the 'wrong' teams. Do not adjust your sets, this was all as planned.

It is with an eye on the Commonwealth Games team competition and the quest for gold that the partnerships lined up as Pitchford & Walker vs Drinkhall & McBeath – something led by the players themselves as they prepare for the team competition up first in Australia.

And for McBeath there was a happy ending – and a popular one with the crowd – as he was on the winning side to claim his first Senior Nationals title.

He and Drinkhall got on the front foot early on and won the first two games, but Pitchford & Walker came back with the third.

At 4-1 down, Pitchford & Walker took their timeout in the fourth, but it's fair to say it didn't have the desired effect as the other pair won every point for the rest of the match.

As well as McBeath's first senior title – and he earned a round of applause from the crowd after stating that in on-court interview – it was Drinkhall's 10<sup>th</sup> in this event.

McBeath said : "Obviously, I'm really happy. I had three match points earlier to try to win the mixed doubles, but Liam and Tin-Tin played really well.

"Paul was a big help in the men's. For him to win his 10<sup>th</sup> title shows he's got a lot of experience of winning at the Nationals.

"I wouldn't say I'm a doubles specialist, it's something I quite enjoy and I've got strengths in singles which are easy to apply in doubles, like my backhand flick."

Drinkhall, the defending singles champion who was knocked out in the quarter-finals by his doubles partner, said: "Obviously, I came to win both titles – last year I won three – but David played a good match in the singles

and I wasn't at my best, and that happens.

"It's good to win the doubles, I'm happy to get that again. It was good to mix up the partnerships and good that as a team we are thinking about it.

"All the team events in the future are going to have doubles, so it's important for us to find the right partnerships."

It was something McBeath agreed with, as he added: "It's not just about this tournament, we've got the Commonwealths coming up and it's about trying out different pairs to see what's best for the team."

## Women's Doubles



Kelly Sibley and Maria Tsaptsinos celebrate their victory (picture by Alan Man)

It was another case of 'musical chairs' in this event – Maria Tsaptsinos and Tin-Tin Ho splitting up their winning pair of the last three years.

Tsaptsinos lined up with Kelly Sibley, while Ho partnered Denise Payet as the four-member Commonwealth Games squad worked out the possible permutations for Gold Coast.

With two new partnerships, it was the older pair who have gelled quickest, and they were never really threatened as they won in three straight (4, 6, 7).

So for Tsaptsinos, the first title with a partner other than Ho and for Sibley too a new experience – her first doubles title without Jo Drinkhall.

Tsaptsinos joked: "My first women's doubles title without Tin-Tin – I guess she's sacked now!"

"I do miss her really, but I'm very happy. With me and Kelly, our games suit each other and so do our personalities and this is good for the Commonwealth Games.

"We've been practising a lot together and maybe they (Ho & Payet) haven't been able to do as much as a pair and that was something we maybe used to our advantage."

Sibley added: "It's a lot different from playing with Jo. Doubles was a very good performance from us, me and Maria seem to gel well as a pair. Again, feeling very positive for the Commonwealths."



Charlotte Bardsley received the Swaythling Club International Fair Play Award from Alan Ransome OBE (picture by Alan Man)

## Results

### Men's Singles

#### Semi-finals

Liam Pitchford bt Tom Jarvis 4-1 (5-11, 11-5, 13-11, 12-10, 11-6)

Sam Walker bt David McBeath 4-1 (8-11, 11-7, 11-7, 12-10, 11-8)

#### Final

Pitchford bt Walker 4-1 (8-11, 11-4, 11-4, 11-9, 11-6)

### Women's Singles

#### Semi-finals

Kelly Sibley bt Maria Tsaptsinos 4-0 (11-5, 11-3, 13-11, 13-11)

Tin-Tin Ho bt Karina Le Fevre 4-0 (11-5, 11-6, 11-1, 12-10)

#### Final

Ho bt Sibley 4-1 (6-11, 11-8, 12-10, 11-8, 11-8)

### Mixed Doubles

#### Final

Liam Pitchford & Tin-Tin Hob t David McBeath & Kelly Sibley 3-2 (11-9, 6-11, 8-11, 14-12, 12-10)

**Women's Doubles****Final**

Kelly Sibley & Maria Tsaptsinos bt Tin-Tin Ho & Denise Payet 3-0 (11-4, 11-6, 11-7)

**Men's Doubles****Final**

Paul Drinkhall & David McBeath bt Liam Pitchford & Sam Walker 3-1 (11-8, 11-6, 6-11, 11-1)

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