

Viktor Byrtus in action
en route to the European
U19 Championship final

EUROPEAN BREAKTHROUGHS

The recent European Junior Championships saw first successes for the Czech Republic and Poland in the individual events. Simon Redfern speaks to the winners, Viktor Byrtus and Karina Tyma

Viktor Byrtus believes the Czech Republic are now among the top three European junior nations, after he became the first Czech to win the continental men's under-19 title and then was a member of their bronze medal-winning team.

The 18-year-old from Ostrava responded to enthusiastic home support from the Prague crowd in April by winning 12 successive matches in the two competitions.

"Playing in front of my friends and in my country was amazing," he said. "I really enjoyed the feedback from everyone. It means a lot actually.

"Czech squash has shown in the last 3-4 years that we are, for sure, in the top three in Europe for juniors, which is really promising for the future."

Byrtus started playing squash when he was five, as his mother used to work at a squash club in his then home town of Trinec. "I played just with a racket and ball for the whole time I was there," he recalled.

He was then spotted by local coach Jan Mutina, who was dating his mother, and Mutina is still coaching him to this day, although now at the Corkers Ostrava Squash club.

"It all worked out really well," said Byrtus. "I'm training pretty much every day, playing pro and trying to achieve the most I can. I do pretty much everything with him."

Byrtus trains with Jakub Solnický, runner-up in the 2017 Czech Nationals, and world no.136 Michaela Cepová among others. "It's a really amazing club for training," Byrtus commented. "We even have the best players from Poland coming quite frequently."

The teenager now aims to finish his high school education there before deciding what to do next – whether to go to university or to turn professional full-time.

Before then, though, he has a "busy" few months – including "loads" of league play-offs with the likes of Paderborn in the Bundesliga and Bytom in the Polish League, followed by the World Junior Championships in Malaysia at the end of July and beginning of August.

TYMA'S SWITCH PAYS OFF

Newly-crowned European junior women's champion Karina Tyma has not looked back since switching her allegiance from England to Poland.

Disillusioned by Brexit and with England Squash after representing England U13s and U15s, the Bristol-based 19-year-old signed up for the country of her birth in 2015 and won six big junior events before her surprise continental triumph in Prague in April.

The 5/8 seed commented: "This title meant a lot to me, as it was my last chance to grab it. I wasn't a favourite at all, so for me to be able to sing my anthem at the closing ceremony for the individuals was truly unforgettable.

"It is a huge achievement, especially as it is the first medal Poland has had in the junior individual championships. The reaction from the whole Polish squash community has been overwhelming and emotional."

Tyma did not feel that was the case with England Squash, after she was passed over for the U17 European Team Championship in 2015, even though she was runner-up in the English Closed Championship that year.



Karina Tyma

"I knew I wanted to play squash and I had people around me who believed I could be one of the top players," said the world no.126, who came to England aged six. "Therefore, being Polish, it made sense to make the switch, even if it meant that I had to have a three-year period where I wasn't able to play in the European or World [Team] Championships. It was an extremely frustrating period in my squash career."

Now the youngest ever Polish national champion, who is coached by Millfield School's Ian Thomas and trains with the ElShorbagy brothers and New Zealander Joelle King at Workout Harbourside, wants to break into the world top 100.

"In the long term, my goal is to reach at least the top 10 if not better," said the teenager, who starts at Drexel University in Philadelphia in September.