



WORLD FIGURE SKATING CHAMPIONSHIPS BOSTON



U.S. hopes to make Hubbub

Ladies home in on podium

By KAT HASENAUER CORNETTA

When Americans Ashley Wagner, Gracie Gold and Mirai Nagasu take the ice for their World Championships ladies program this afternoon at TD Garden, they will be taking the first steps toward getting the host nation back on the podium at figure skating's premiere event.

An American skater has won the world title 26 times since the ladies' field was added to the world championships 110 years ago, but an American has not been on the medal stand since 2006, when Maryland's Kimme Meissner won the title in Calgary.

Why is it that an American woman hasn't taken home a medal in nine years? It is not due to lack of talent, but it may be because two other national powers have caught up.

For decades, the Soviet Union and Russia emphasized success in pairs skating and ice dance as opposed to the ladies. The Olympics of the 1980s and 1990s were dominated by Soviets and Russians in those events, while their ladies competitors were also rans.

That all changed in the mid-'90s, with the rise of Russians Irina Slutskaya and Maria Butyrskaya. Both were major rivals for World Figure Skating Hall of Famer Michelle Kwan, who won five world titles and four other world medals for the U.S. in her career. With the Russian women finally equaling their nation's success in other disciplines, the tradition became important to Russia to maintain. This week at the Garden, while Russia brings three athletes capable of making the ladies podium, it had the luxury of leaving reigning Olympic gold medalist Adelina Sotnikova and reigning world champion Elizaveta Tuktamysheva at home.

Japan's climb up the international ladder has been similar. It had '90s success with world champions Midori Ito and Yuka Sato, and that parlayed into the rise of Mao Asada, one of the sport's best balanced skaters over the past decade. With a triple Axel in her arsenal, Asada continues to be one of the sport's most beloved and competitive skaters. While Asada might not be a favorite to clinch a fourth world title this week, her teammate, Satoko Miyahara, could earn her first. The 18-year-old Miyahara has been hitting her mark all season.

Hitting when it counts is something the U.S. has been lacking. Wagner and Gold have the jumps, but struggle to perform in the clutch. Wagner masters long programs that wow crowds and earn superb scores, but that's often after she has dug a hole in the short program. Gold has also struggled internationally, and their reputation with judges has suffered because of it.

"They have made mistakes internationally and are not sort of held to the same level internationally," NBC analyst Johnny Weir said last week.

The drought very well could be broken by someone improving their standing in the eyes of the judges all season. Last-minute addition Californian Nagasu has been on a roll this season, putting together performances at competitions big and small.

A World Championships competition on home soil is a different matter, and it could be the impetus for one of the three Americans to break that decade-long ladies drought.

Said Weir: "Should one of these skaters, one of these ladies, really skate perfectly and blow the roof off the building, the judges will be kind of hard pressed to go against the wishes of such a pro-American audience."



STAFF PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER EVANS
COLD WAR: With patriotic fans cheering him on, American Grant Hochstein (left) competes in the men's short program of the World Figure Skating Championships last night at the Garden. Above, Russian Mikhail Kolyada celebrates the scores for his routine.

In short, France tops

By KAT HASENAUER CORNETTA

Buoyed by a boisterous crowd, the American ice dance and men's competitors recorded solid finishes in the first day of competition of the World Figure Skating Championships yesterday at the Garden.

Maia and Alex Shibutani and Madison Chock and Evan Bates finished second and third, respectively, in the afternoon's short dance, which was won by France's Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron. Adam Rippon led the U.S. men, finishing seventh in the short program, while teammate Max Aaron was eighth.

"Everyone saw how enthusiastic the crowd was," said Alex Shibutani. "It is just a tremendous stage for us all to be skating on."

The Shibutani siblings started the final group of dancers with a spot-on performance of their Coppelia waltz, complete with their customary flashy twizzle sequence. The crowd roared its approval at each completed element. The reigning U.S. champions scored a season-best 74.70.

"It was our strongest performance of the year, and the score was also nice," said Alex Shibutani. "We were just excited to carry the momentum all the

American duos dance to 2nd, 3rd

way through this entire program from Nationals all the way through to the World Championships."

Skating a foxtrot to the music of Andrea Bocelli, Chock and Bates only had the slightest of bobbles — Bates' small miscue on a twizzle — but recovered nicely to slide right behind the Shibutanis with a score of 72.46.

"A silly mistake on my second twizzle that cost us a level," said Bates. "At this event, with so many good teams, you just can't afford that."

Skating last, reigning world champions Papadakis and Cizeron used recent changes to their short dance to elevate themselves to first with a score of 76.29.

"The music changed a little bit, the choreography changed and the costumes," said Cizeron. "We are so happy tonight that all of those changes were appreciated."

Third U.S. couple Madison Hubbell and Zach Donahue finished seventh with a 68.44.

In the nightcap, Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu won the men's short program, landing a quadruple Salchow and a quadruple toe loop-triple toe loop combination for a score of 110.56. The score was just four-tenths off the world record he set in December. Reigning world champion Javier Fernandez of Spain finished second.

Newly crowned U.S. national champion Rippon clearly landed all of the jumps in his "Who Wants to Live Forever" routine, earning a 85.72 and a standing ovation.

"My goal coming in was just to skate a clean and solid program and that is what I did," said Rippon.

Just two skaters later, Aaron put his hand down on an opening quadruple Salchow combination, but snuck the requirement in later. His 81.28 gave him solid footing going into tomorrow's free program.

U.S. alternate Grant Hochstein fell on his opening quadruple jump, but otherwise was clean to finish 16th. For the 25-year-old, just taking the ice at the World Championships was worth the wait.

"It's something I have worked for my whole life, and something for a really long time I thought I wouldn't achieve," said Hochstein.