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YUZURU HANYU COMPLETES THE GRAND SLAM

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PIPER & PAUL
GILLES
POIRIER

PERSEVERANCE
PAYS OFF

GRACIE GOLD
MAKES A
COURAGEOUS
RETURN

PRIME TIME
UPSETS & SURPRISES
AT NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIPS

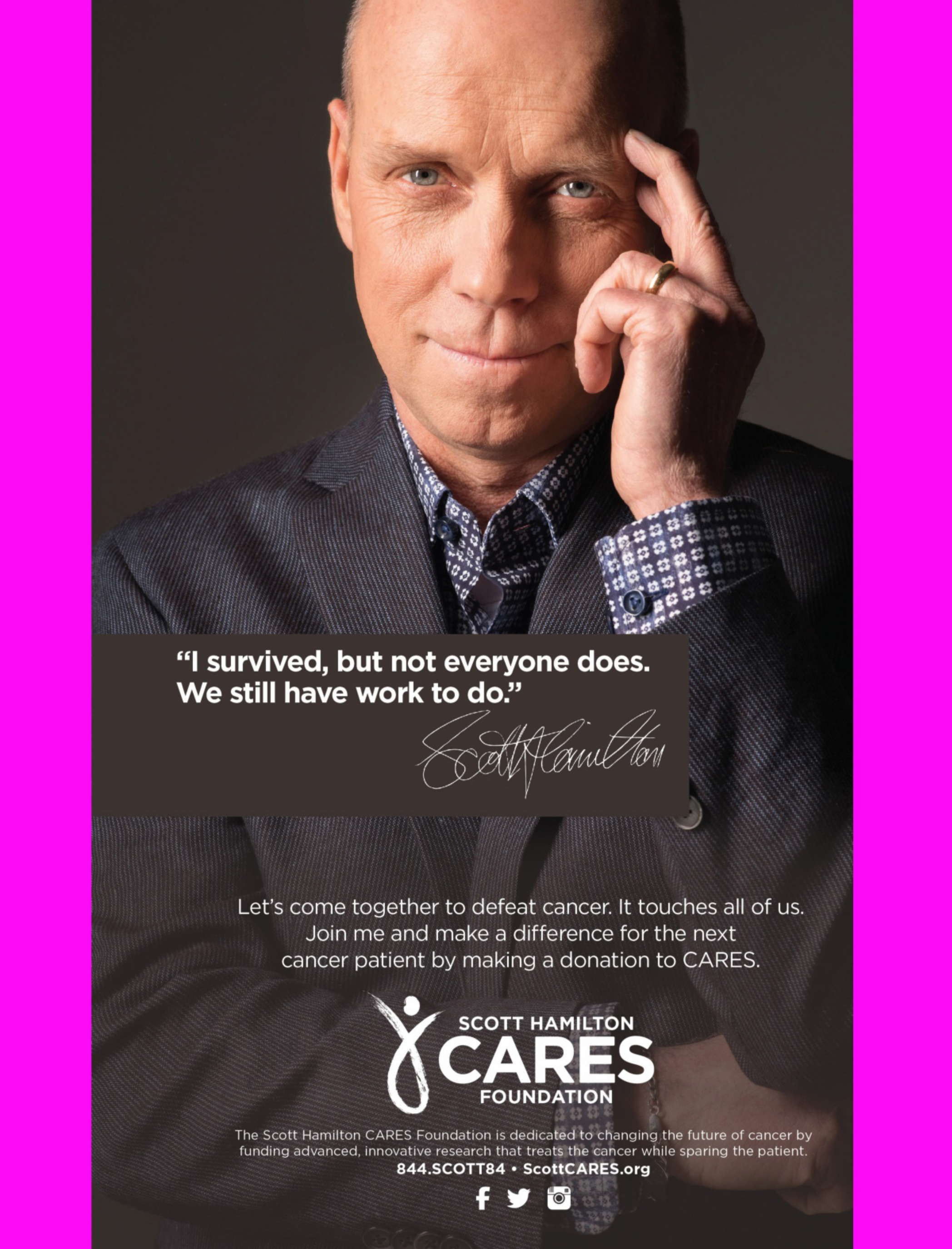
DROBIAZKO & VANAGAS
DANCING THROUGH
THE DECADES





Maxim Naumov, 18, captured the junior men's title at the 2020 U.S. Championships. He is coached by his famous parents, Evgenia Shiskova and Vadim Naumov, the 1994 World pairs champions.

Photo: Robin Ritoss

A close-up portrait of Scott Hamilton, a man with light blue eyes and a slight smile, resting his chin on his hand. He is wearing a dark blue pinstriped suit jacket over a blue and white patterned shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

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A New World Unfolds

from the *Editor*



With the 2020 World Championships just weeks away, one thing is certain — there are no defined frontrunners in three of the four disciplines, and that those who want to claim the titles in Montréal will truly have to fight for them.

At every level — international, Championship and domestic — this season has been a rollercoaster ride for skaters and fans. But, in my book, that will make for a very exciting week at the upcoming World Championships.

On the men's side, Nathan Chen has not lost a competition in two years, and many expect he will continue that golden run at Worlds. However, the top two Japanese men, Yuzuru Hanyu and Shoma Uno, will both be gunning for gold in Montréal.

At the European Championships, a rising Russian pairs duo defeated the veteran teams; Russian ice dancers claimed the crown, causing the first defeat

of the French team since February 2018.

Among the trio of Russian ladies who have dominated this season, there has been no absolute victor, with Alena Kostornaia and Anna Shcherbakova winning against and losing to each other. Shcherbakova narrowly lost to Kostornaia at Europeans, so she will be battling for top honors a few weeks from now at the World Championships.

The 2020 Canadian ice dance champions Piper Gilles and Paul Poirier grace our April cover. Theirs is a story of grit and determination, of overcoming disappointment and setbacks to rise to the top of the ice dance echelons.

The *IFS* team will be in Montréal covering the World Championships. For all the latest news, stay connected to us via social media or at ifsmagazine.com.

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PHOTO: ROBIN RITTOSS

A trio of happy men at the 2020 Four Continents Championships in Seoul, South Korea: Jason Brown finished second behind Yuzuru Hanyu, and rising Japanese star Yuma Kagiyama, 16, captured the bronze in his debut.

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South Korea was a lucky place for Yuzuru Hanyu in 2018, and almost two years to the day since he captured his second Olympic crown, he was back — this time in the hunt for a title that had thus far eluded him.

Hanyu arrived at the 2020 Four Continents Championships in Seoul in early February, armed with two tried and trusted programs (Chopin's "Ballade No. 1" and Shigeru Umebayashi's "Seimei"), two new costumes, but just one goal.

The programs, which took him to Olympic gold at the 2018 Winter Games in PyeongChang, were initially dedicated to two of his idols, Evgeni Plushenko and Johnny Weir. This time, Hanyu said, he was skating them for himself.

With the Four Continents title the only one missing from Hanyu's vast collection, the 25-year-old stated from the outset that he intended to give his best performances in order to achieve his goal of winning this crown.

Competing in his fourth Championships in 10 years, Hanyu opened his quest for gold with a mesmerizing short program performance that brought the house down. Clean, crisp jumps combined with engaging artistry were rewarded with 111.82 points, bettering the 110.53 World record he set at Rostelecom Cup in November 2018.

As Hanyu took his bows at the end of his routine, hundreds of Pooh Bears rained down from the stands. Exiting the ice, he saw the army of flower retrievers dashing around picking up the gifts. Hanyu halted his exit and also began gathering them up and tossing them over the boards. "I was happy to skate and to see many Poohs on the ice. So many skaters worked to collect the dolls and I really appreciated working with them," he said with a wide smile. "I was working as a flower kid in my hometown when I was 12 or 13 years old. It was a first experience for me today and I felt happy. I felt like a child again."

An obviously relieved Hanyu was also happy that all his jumps and spins were clean. "Today I was skating for myself and it was very delightful to end my program perfectly," the Sendai native said. "Also, I tried not to lose my flow till my final pose. Today's performance was the most perfect I've ever done. I think I skated with elegance and tried to express my music deeply with feeling. I could jump higher

YUZURU HANYU

Completes the Grand Slam

and with more perfection, so I am really satisfied. The more I skate the program, the better it gets.

“I became more confident as the program progressed because I felt so good while I skated. I just skated without thinking. Lately, I have been thinking a lot before jumping and that I should jump clean with an image in my mind. But I just skated without a lot of thoughts today. Therefore, I was so happy to finally produce a satisfactory result.”

When asked about his record score, Hanyu said that prior to the competition he had set a personal goal to earn more than 110 points.

Two days later the Japanese star took to the ice for the men’s free skate. Following the success of his short program — and with a 15.99-point lead — expectations were high that Hanyu would succeed in his quest to claim the title.

However, the long program was no walk in the park for the two-time Olympic champion.

Hanyu opened his “Seimei” program with a hand down on the opening quad Lutz. Unfazed, he moved on to a quad Salchow and a triple Axel. His next jump, a triple flip, received an edge call, and midway through the program he stumbled out of a three-jump combination (quad toe-Euler-triple Salchow) and then fell on a quad toe loop.

Despite the mistakes, Hanyu was still the class of the field. With 187.60 points for the segment and a combined total of 299.42 he fulfilled his goal of capturing his first Four Continents title and did so with a 24.60-point margin. With this victory, Hanyu has now won every major title in both the junior and senior ranks, the first man to ever accomplish this feat.

“To be honest, I was unusually nervous and it was difficult to concentrate. I can’t say I’m happy about my performance, but I really wanted to win this competition,” said Hanyu. “I tried my best and though I am disappointed with my mistakes, I will be able to prepare for the World Championships by analyzing them.”

“I feel a special moment for this long program because I won the Olympic Games with it. I think the fans really want to protect their memory of this program and I actually feel the same. I was afraid to do it again, but I feel totally different between PyeongChang and now. I haven’t yet perfected this routine. I have to put more time into it and I will continue to work on it. I just want to show something and this is important. I don’t care about ranking and points.”

Hanyu said he is constantly amazed by the warm support shown to him by the South Korean fans. “I am really thankful for their support even though I am Japanese. I am even more grateful because I know that such heartfelt and loud cheering from the Korean fans is something that transcends all relationships between Japan and Korea. So I want to say thank you very much to them.”

“I feel a little relaxed or relieved about winning this Championship because it was one of the first senior competitions I participated in, but I found it so difficult to win. My first Four Continents Championships was in 2011, just before the big earthquake in Japan ... so, to be honest, my memories are a bit shaky.” **IFS**



Alena Kostornaia



SHINES

in the

INTERNATIONAL SPOTLIGHT

BY TATJANA FLADE



She could not have written a better script for her debut on the senior circuit this season. Though no one knew it at the time, when Alena Kostornaia scored a runaway victory at Finlandia Trophy in early October, it was a sign of things to come.

A decisive win in her debut on the senior Grand Prix circuit at Internationaux de France was followed by a third consecutive victory at NHK Trophy three weeks later.

Kostornaia closed out 2019 by claiming the Grand Prix Final crown in Torino, Italy.

The 16-year-old opened 2020 with a second-place finish at the Russian Championships in late December, and a month later led a Russian sweep of the ladies podium at the European Championships in Graz, Austria.

What made all of this so surprising is that this season has been the opposite of what transpired throughout her junior career. Sitting in the shadows of Alexandra Trusova, Kostornaia won just one major competition (the 2018 Junior Grand Prix Final) over her training mates, Trusova and Anna Shcherbakova.

Kostornaia was scheduled to close out her junior career at the 2019 World Junior Championships but was forced to withdraw because of a leg injury. She turned her attention to preparing for her debut at the senior level this season, and though she was excited about making that leap, she admitted initially it was a little daunting.

At the Russian test skates in the fall of 2019, Kostornaia began questioning herself

and her abilities as both Shcherbakova and Trusova had quads in their arsenals and she did not. It seemed Kostornaia would not have the technical package to make a splash in her debut on the senior scene, as her teammates seemed set to do.

"I was upset because I didn't skate my program perfectly. I made errors and I was feeling down," Kostornaia recalled. "After the test skates I realized that I needed to change something and I decided to try the quad Salchow.

"I was upset because I didn't skate my program perfectly...and I was feeling down."

"I tried it for a few days and then Daria Pavliuchenko (a pairs skater who is her best friend) helped me a lot by telling me that I could do it. She said, 'you need to change something. You can do it. Everything will work out.'"

Kostornaia had learned the triple Axel in 2017 and was eager to include it in her

programs at that time, but a growth spurt caused her to lose the jump. "It took a long time to get the triple Axel and I did the element clean. It was upsetting because I learned it and then lost it and couldn't get it back," she explained, adding that the fear of getting injured also played a part. "When I returned to training, Sergei Rozanov (one of the coaches who works with Eteri Tutberidze) said, 'let's try the Axel again.'"

A month after the test skates, Kostornaia landed her first triple Axel in the free skate at Finlandia Trophy. It has ultimately become the weapon she needed in the battle with her teammates.

"The jump is still a bit difficult. Mentally it is harder to do, but physically it is easier," she said. "I cannot say that it is one that I can do with my eyes closed. It demands concentration and I need to pay attention to keep my edges right and to understand what I'm doing. When I go into a jump the correct way, especially the Axel, it always works.

"As for the other jumps that I have been doing for a long time in my programs, my muscles naturally know what to do and when I'm in the air, I'm resting."

But as we have seen this season, the Moscow teenager is about more than just jumps. She consistently earns high Grade of Execution scores for her skating skills, artistry, expression, and the interpretation of her well-choreographed programs. Many have described her as the "complete package."

Kostornaia's golden streak ended at the Russian Championships in late December

Alena Kostornaia mined gold in her debut at the 2020 European Championships.



when Shcherbakova narrowly defeated her.

That result made Kostornaia conscious of the fact that she needed to approach practice sessions with more attention, to train a little more seriously and be more disciplined. Kostornaia also understands the need to learn new elements, upgrade the difficulty of her programs and to skate clean.

In the early days of 2020, Kostornaia performed in a show in Italy, before taking a short vacation.

Her second-place finish at Russian nationals guaranteed her a trip to the European Championships, which took place in Austria in late January, and when Kostornaia returned to her training base in Moscow it was with renewed enthusiasm to prepare for this important competition.

“There is always a generation that will overtake the present one.”

As with all her senior events this season, Kostornaia was excited about the opportunity. “Everything was kind of new and I didn’t know what to expect,” she said. “It was a feeling of something unknown because I did not know how it would be and that made it twice as interesting.

“There is a big difference between what I did last season and this season. First of all, I was used to traveling in a team where everyone was about the same age as me. But now, most of the skaters are older than me and are more grown up.

“Last year I was watching these athletes on TV and now I am sitting with them in the same dressing room, and I am with them on the podium. Just to be with these high-level athletes is a joy.”

It was almost a given heading into Europeans that the “A Team” (Kostornaia, Shcherbakova and Trusova) would dominate the ladies field — but which one would emerge the victor was the question everyone was asking.

The trio of European debutantes lived up to their billing in Graz, placing top three in the short program led by Kostornaia — the only lady to attempt a triple Axel in the field of 35 — who soared to the top of the standings with a 6.97-point cushion heading into the free skate.

Although she landed all the elements in the short, Kostornaia was not satisfied with the performance. “I would love to improve with every competition but it seems I went down,” she said with respect to a score that was slightly lower than the one she achieved at the Grand Prix Final.

The last skater of the night, Kostornaia sailed through the program with ease until the final jumping pass at the end of the routine.

A slight hesitation heading into a triple Lutz caused a momentary loss of focus, and she tumbled to the ice. However, the artistic presentation that complemented every element Kostornaia executed — including the spins and footwork sequence — made that one mistake inconsequential.

She finished second in the free behind Shcherbakova but held on to win by a 3.05-point margin.

“I was just really happy that I was there at all and that I ended up on the podium,” said Kostornaia. “When I went to that competition, I didn’t think about my chances to win, I just wanted to give decent performances. It was a big honor for me to represent my country at the European

Championships in my first senior year. It was just great and I'm very happy about it."

Addressing the criticism some have expressed about the level of technical content the ladies are now including in their programs, Kostornaia said, "I think every athlete wants to be the best, to do something first. Anna and Sasha are competing to do 'firsts.' I just try to skate as clean as possible.

"Figure skating develops so fast now, and if previously the ladies were skating until 25 ... for sure now the younger girls are rising to the top. Unfortunately, the careers are shorter because of the elements that adults probably physically can't do. There is always a generation that will overtake the present one."

Training in what is probably the strongest, toughest group in the world is inspiring for Kostornaia, who said that watching Trusova land "three, four or five quads" is very motivating for her.

"I watch that from the boards and think, 'I do all the triples, but Sasha is jumping

and jumping and Anna is also jumping. Obviously, it is upsetting when everyone is doing that and you are not. So I'm trying to improve and perfect myself so that this difference is not that obvious."

Kostornaia said all three spend a lot of time together in training and at competitions and "hang out together sometimes off the ice. We can talk about all kinds of topics and one thing leads to the next. We can discuss figure skating and after three minutes we can talk about a new modern dance."

Coach Daniil Gleikhengauz said the next step for Kostornaia is the quad Salchow. She has attempted the jump in training but has yet to fully rotate and land one. "It is still a very raw jump that I needed to learn from scratch, but my trajectory is quite even, so there is a chance for me to do it," Kostornaia explained.

Like most teenagers, the many ideas and plans she has for her future frequently change.

At one point she said she indicated a desire to study neurosurgery, but she has

since abandoned the idea of studying medicine. "I realized that if I want to compete and to win it will be hard to combine that with studies. Therefore, I've put that aside for the moment. I'm actually interested in becoming a TV sports journalist now," she said.

Away from the ice, Kostornaia enjoys horseback riding, and during the off-season is learning dressage and show jumping. She spent her day off at the European Championships in Graz visiting a stud farm that breeds the famous Lipizzaner horses.

"During the summer, we went on vacation and chose a hotel where there was horse riding, but right now I'm not doing that as it is the time for serious competitions. It is dangerous after all.

"My aunt has a horse, so I can call her anytime and ask if I can come over. I'm doing more dressage for now — this is elementary — and I have been trying show jumping.

"It's like when you first learn to skate and then learn how to jump." **IFS**

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PRIME TIME

AT THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

The Canadian, Japanese, Russian and U.S. Championships produced some unexpected surprises and results.

With the 2022 Olympic Winter Games just two years away, it is now a game of strategy for the top skating nations in the world. The results of the 2020 World Championships will determine the number of skaters each country can field to Worlds in 2021, the competition where berths are set for the 2022 Games. In order to earn as many places as possible this year, some nations did not assign the winners or, in a couple of cases, the medalists, but selected those that have the greatest potential to.



CANADA

BY ROBERT BRODIE

The 2020 Canadian Championships left no doubt that Skate Canada needs to rebuild and to do so as quickly as possible. With many of the past champions absent from the rosters, the podiums had a very different look this year.

One of the hottest conversations in Mississauga was that — for the first time in decades — there is only one ticket available for a Canadian man at the upcoming 2020 World Championships in Montréal.

When it came to the senior men, the storyline seemed set in the weeks leading up to the competition. The general consensus was that either Nam Nguyen or Keegan Messing — best friends off the ice — would be battling it out for the title.

Apparently, nobody bothered to send Roman Sadovsky that script. The conversation took a very unexpected turn at the end of the men's free skate when the

two top guns found themselves relegated to the second and third steps of the podium. Instead, it was the young upstart Sadovsky who skated off with his first national title in a runaway victory.

Messing won the short program over Nguyen, who downgraded an opening quad-triple combination to a quad-double. That accounted for a good chunk of the gap between the two men on the score sheet. Sadovsky sat in third.

Skating first of the top three after the short, Sadovsky, 20, laid down a long program that he challenged Nguyen and Messing to match. Neither came close, and a shocked Sadovsky found himself the Canadian champion in a stunning finish. Though the audience was on its feet at the end of his program, Sadovsky was not quite as convinced that his performance was enough. However, his final tally of 260.57 put him far ahead of Nguyen

(243.51) and Messing (241.79) at the end of the competition.

Messing and Nguyen, the defending champion, perhaps fell victim to the hype that surrounded them heading into the competition, but both agreed Sadovsky was deserving of the title.

The ladies competition had more twists and turns than a mountain highway. Heading into nationals, there was no consensus about who would capture the crown. Gabrielle Daleman, the only returning medalist from the 2019 campaign, had an erratic first half of the season, dealing with illness and injuries. Given that history, she was essentially a long shot to win a third crown, but some still held out hope.

Alicia Pineault, 20, who was forced to withdraw last year with an injury, won the short program over senior debutante Madeline Schizas, 16, with the 22-year-old Daleman placing third.

The free skate reached a new level of unpredictability and, when the dust finally settled, a trio of teenage first-time senior medalists stood atop the podium.

Emily Bausback, a 17-year-old from Vancouver, sat in fourth after the short, 4.25 points out of the lead. However, she roared back in the free, winning the segment and snaring the title with 175.54 points in total. Bausback, who competed at the junior level in the first half of the season and had just one senior international under her belt, was 10th at this event a year ago. She rolled into Mississauga believing she was capable of a podium finish, but said the concept of winning the title was “almost unimaginable.”

Sitting in sixth after the short, Alison Schumacher, 17, who also competed on the junior circuit this season, finished second with a score of 168.94, almost seven points out of first place.

Nobody made a bigger leap in this competition than Schizas, who recalled being a “mid-range novice” at 2018 nationals. She claimed the bronze with a combined total of 168.07, missing the second step of the podium by 0.87 of a point.

Pineault had a rough free skate and slipped to fourth in the final standings with 165.77 points.

Canada has two places at the World Championships in Montréal, but at press time Skate Canada had not made a decision as to which ladies would be selected to fill them. Bausback did not have the minimum technical short program score required to compete at Worlds, but hoped to earn it at the Four Continents Championships in mid-February.

The ice dance title was Piper Gilles and Paul Poirier’s to lose — but there was no way they were going to let that happen. After amassing a collection of five silver and two bronze medals from

eight previous trips to Canadians (they finished fourth in 2014), the popular ice dancers now have the color of medal they have wanted for so long. And they earned it in record-breaking fashion. Few words have sounded better to Gilles and Poirier than “Canadian champion.”

Gilles’ hair became entangled in one of the buttons of Poirier’s shirt at the beginning of the routine. The duo recovered quickly and danced away with the lead. When they arrived to face the media, Gilles just shook her head and said, “there better be some good memes of that!”

With many family members and friends on hand to support them, the team not only captured the gold but also etched their name in the record books with a 225.62 overall total, a new Canadian record. Earning 19 perfect 10s for program components was the icing on the cake. It was a moment that Gilles said they would “remember for a long, long time.”

Marjorie Lajoie and Zachary Lagha, the reigning World Junior champions and winners of the junior title at the last three Canadian Championships, made a splash in their senior debut, finishing second with a combined total of 198.92 points.

Both teams have been assigned to the World Championships in March.

Carolane Soucisse and Shane Firus were chasing a second-place finish — and a potential trip to Worlds in their hometown — but had to settle for third with 190.29 points overall.

Their participation in Montréal is still a question mark as Skate Canada is waiting to see if Laurence Fournier Beaudry and Nikolaj Sørensén will be back in top form after Sørensén’s knee surgery in late 2019.

He was still on crutches in Mississauga and did not resume skating until mid-February.

The defending pairs champions were a little bit wobbly, the “newcomers” were



Roman Sadovsky

However, the rhythm dance turned out to be a somewhat hair-raising experience for the dynamic duo. Pretty much all the talk afterward was about the moment

elated, and a third entry picked just the right time to have their skate of the season.

These Championships were a little different for Kirsten Moore-Towers and Michael Marinaro who were chasing a second crown. This time, they were the ones with the targets on their backs.

Moore-Towers and Marinaro had one “glaring error” — to use her words — in the short program, but took the lead over Liubov Ilyushechkina and Charlie Bilodeau, and Evelyn Walsh and Trennt Michaud.

Speaking to the media backstage, Moore-Towers was still fretting about the step out on a triple toe, calling it a minor lack of focus.

The duo did not carry that mistake into the free skate and, aside from an early miscue on their side-by-side triple Salchows, cruised to their second straight Canadian pairs title. They handily won the long program with 141.94 points and

2020 World Championships:

Ladies: Alicia Pineault, TBD

Men: Nam Nguyen

Pairs: Kirsten Moore-Towers/
Michael Marinaro (one team TBD)

Ice Dance: Piper Gilles/Paul Poirier,
Marjorie Lajoie/Zachary Lagha (one
team TBD)

World Junior Championships:

Men: Stephen Gogolev, Joseph
Phan

Ladies: Kaiya Ruiter (one lady TBD)

Pairs: Patricia Andrew/Zachary
Daleman (one team TBD)

Ice Dance: Natalie D'Alessandro/
Bruce Waddell (two teams TBD)

posted a 215.67 overall total that was 19.38 points better than the rest of the field.

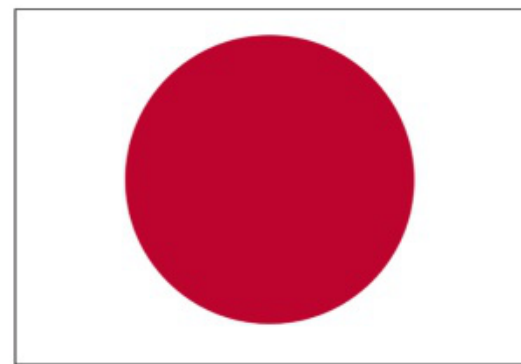
Walsh and Michaud, the 2019 silver medalists, had a rough start to the season but found their footing in the short program. They continued that momentum into the free skate and, with the second Canadian spot at Worlds on the line, stepped up when it mattered the most. The duo claimed a second straight silver with a combined total of 196.29 points.

Ilyushechkina and Bilodeau were excited to make their nationals debut as a team and were undeniably thrilled with their short program. However, they faltered in the free skate, producing an error-riddled performance that included falls on both throws. They finished a distant third with 186.71 points.

Moore-Towers and Marinaro were named to the World team, with the second spot to be assigned following Four Continents.



Rika Kihira



JAPAN

BY AKIKO TAMURA

The highly anticipated All Japan Championships, which took place in Tokyo in late December, held a number of surprises in the singles disciplines.

While a trio of teenage ladies overtook the veterans to claim the podium steps, it was Shoma Uno who caused the upset of the competition with his victory over Yuzuru Hanyu in the men's event.

With five ladies in the hunt for a podium finish and a trip to the 2020 World Championships on the line, the atmosphere inside Yoyogi Stadium was intense.

Though many stumbled and crumbled under the pressure, Rika Kihira, Wakaba Higuchi and the talented young junior,

Tomoe Kawabata, rose to the occasion.

Kihira set the pace, winning the short program by a 3.87-point margin over Satoko Miyahara, with Kaori Sakamoto skating into third place.

But challenges in the free skate left a number of the top contenders far below the result they were aiming to achieve. On a night when nerves and pressure took its toll on some, Kihira came out blazing in her long program, landing two clean triple Axels and capturing her first national title in a runaway victory.

"After the Grand Prix Final I had many sleepless nights, worrying about many things," said Kihira, 17, who earned 229.20 points in total. "I was surprised that I managed to skate so well despite the unsure feelings I had, and I am so happy I was finally able to win the Japanese title."

It has been a long road back to the top for Higuchi. Fourth after the short, the 19-year-old brought her A game on the night when it mattered most, sailing through a program that included five clean triple jumps. Higuchi moved up to second with an overall score of 206.61.

"The past two years were very hard for me. I missed the podium at nationals and I could not go to the World Championships," she explained, adding that she also had to deal with injuries. It was her third silver medal at the national championships in five years.

The biggest surprise of the night was Kawabata, who finished fifth at both her Junior Grand Prix events this season, but skated lights out in the long program. The 17-year-old made a quantum leap from seventh after the short to finish third with 193.96 points and capture her first medal at a senior national Championship.

For Miyahara, however, the competition did not play out as she had hoped. The 21-year-old, who is now coached by Lee Barkell in Toronto, Canada, received two under-rotation calls in the short and eight in the free. She still managed to finish fourth with a combined tally of 191.43. "I thought things were going upward, so this result is a little disappointing," she said. "I just don't understand why things went the way they did today. I can do better than this. My new environment will allow me to start from scratch."

Yuhana Yokoi finished fifth with 190.92 points. Sakamoto was haunted by technical problems in the free skate and dropped from third to finish a distant sixth with a 188.26 total. She attributed her lackluster performance to not having the motivation to train the way she needed to. "I was not pushing myself enough in practice. When I felt tired I just stopped and this is the result. I regret it now, but it's too late."

With Yuzuru Hanyu skating so well this season and Shoma Uno having struggled through the first half, the belief was that Hanyu would have no real competition in Tokyo.

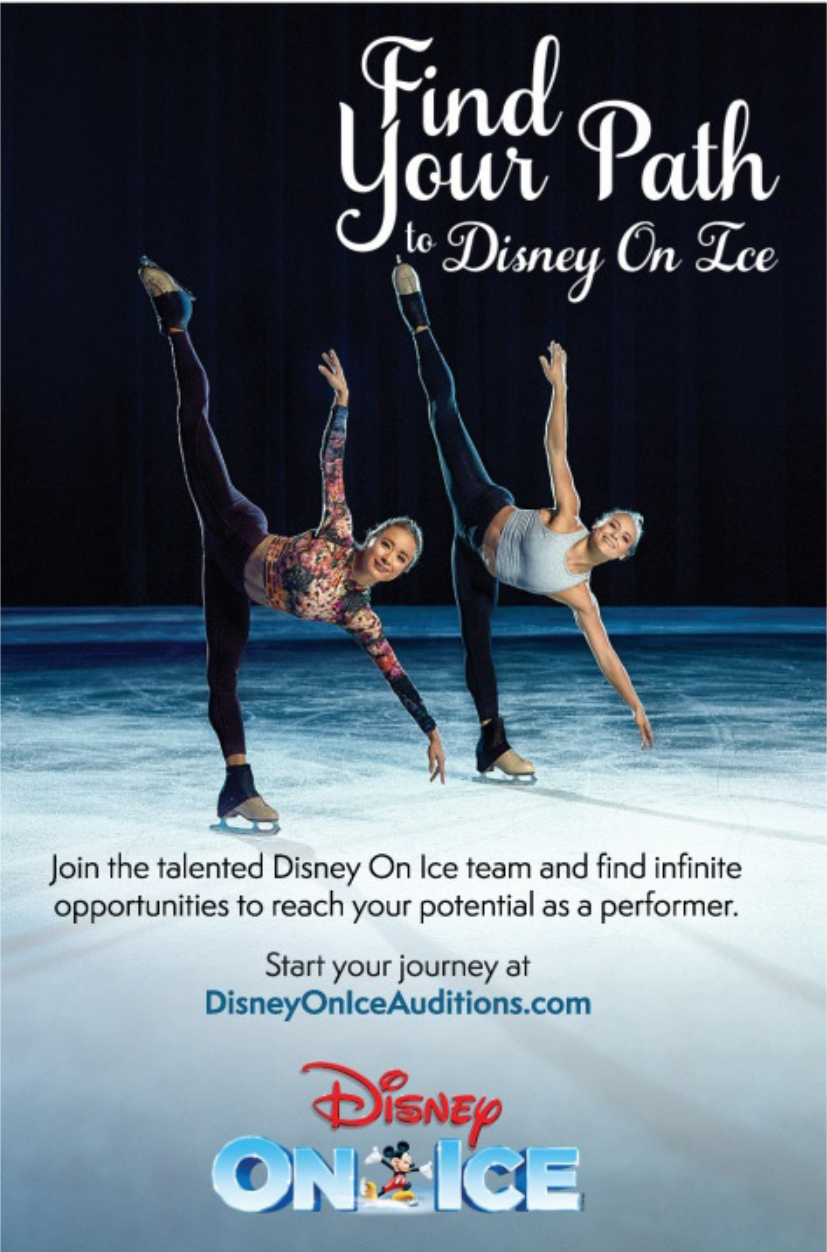
However, that perception was shattered the night of the free skate when Uno laid down a near-flawless performance to overtake his rival and claim the title.

Hanyu, competing in the event for the first time in four years, captured the lead in the short program earning a new national record score of 110.72. Backstage, he admitted he was so exhausted after the Grand Prix Final "I could not even condition myself properly for this. It was a slow process to recover."

Uno, who before this season had not missed a Grand Prix podium since his senior debut in 2015, struggled during the first half of the current campaign. He competed on the Grand Prix circuit without a coach, earning the worst scores and placements of his career.

Now training with Stéphane Lambiel in Switzerland, Uno laid down his first clean performance of the season in the short program and finished second with 105.71 points. "I realized I was expecting too much of myself before.

"At the (PyeongChang) Olympics, I got a better result than what



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I expected. It made me feel that I need to be strong all the time and then it became hard to enjoy skating,” he explained. “After two years I realized I needed to bring back joy to my skating. The long program at Internationaux de France (where he finished eighth) was the best thing that happened because after that I was able to drop all the baggage I was carrying.”

Though his free skate was not without error, it was nonetheless his best of the season, and Uno claimed the title with an overall score of 290.57 — which in the end gave him a winning margin of 7.80 points.

“I was a little more nervous than the short program, but my condition was pretty good,” the 22-year-old said. “Stéphane has helped me to bring back the joy to my everyday training. I wanted to skate well for him and go to the battle with him on my team.”

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the night of the long program might be one Hanyu would like to forget. Haunted by uncharacteristic technical problems in the free, the 25-year-old seemed unable to find his usual rhythm.

He doubled the Lutz, stepped out of a quad toe and, at the end of his routine, fell on a second triple Axel. His score of 172.95 for the segment was only third best of the night, but with a combined total of 282.77 points, Hanyu finished second overall.

Despite his disappointment, he was not interested in making excuses for his performance. “It felt like my mind and body were not together. I just don’t know what to say.

“Since before the short program, it felt like my body was deteriorating day by day. After missing the Lutz, I was thinking hard

2020 World Championships:

Men: Shoma Uno, Yuzuru Hanyu, Keiji Tanaka

Ladies: Rika Kihira, Wakaba Higuchi, Satoko Miyahara

Pairs: Riku Miura/Ryuichi Kihara

Ice Dance: Misato Komatsubara/Timothy Koleto

World Junior Championships:

Men: Yuma Kagiyama, Shun Sato

Ladies: Tomoe Kawabata, Mana Kawabe

Ice Dance: Utana Yoshida/Shingo Nishiyama

about where I could make it up, but I just did not have the physical strength to recover. This was all I could do at this time.”

Although Uno had claimed three previous national crowns, this was his first victory over Hanyu on home soil. “I know it was not his best skate, but to top him was one of my big goals in my skating life as I was always looking up to him,” said Uno. “This result may be just a coincidence, but still it means a lot to me.”

Yuma Kagiyama, a talented young junior, seemed unable to find his rhythm at the Junior Grand Prix Final two weeks earlier, but he was on top of his game on the most important night of his career.

Sitting in seventh after the short, the 16-year-old was near flawless in the free, executing two clean quad toes, one in combination, and two triple Axels. His combined total of 257.99 propelled him onto the third step of the podium.

“I was very happy about my score. My goal here was to attack everything,” Kagiyama said. “I discussed with my father (his coach) that even if I fail, I should challenge on new things. My Axels were not the best jumps, but I’m glad I was able to put in two here. I’m so happy to get a medal at these Championships, but at the same time I regret that I could not skate two clean programs.”

Keiji Tanaka finished fourth with 252.44 points. Shun Sato, the reigning Junior Grand Prix Final champion, dropped from third after the short to finish fifth (246.50) and Kazuki Tomono was sixth (244.69).

In his final singles appearance, Daisuke Takahashi struggled with the jumps in his long program. The 33-year-old ranked 10th in the free and finished 12th overall with a total of 204.31.

But no one in the sold-out Yoyogi Stadium cared about the results. As he bowed at the end of his free skate, the audience was on its feet, cheering and applauding, honoring a skater who is globally respected as the trailblazer for the Japanese men.

As he waited for his marks, the entire audience remained standing chanting his name. In the kiss and cry, Takahashi bowed and presented flowers to his longtime coach, Utako Nagamitsu.

Takahashi is transitioning into ice dance. He and his new partner, Kana Muramoto, are now training in Florida with Marina Zoueva.

Riku Miura and Ryuichi Kihara were the only team to contest the pairs event, and in ice dance Misato Komatsubara and Timothy Koleto claimed their second consecutive national title.



RUSSIA

BY TATJANA FLADE

The Russian Championships are an annual highlight around the globe. No other figure skating nation boasts the depth of talent in all disciplines, and fans worldwide tune in to watch this competition every year.

As expected, the ladies provided their own “Game of Thrones” episode, a cut-throat competition with only three survivors that made the team for Europeans and Worlds. Though there are many more talented skaters that are competitive at the international level and who, in any other

nation, would receive multiple international assignments. Not so in Russia.

The 2020 Championships took place in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia for the first time. The Platinum Arena, a new facility built for the 2019 Winter Universiade seats 7,500 people. The motto of the Universiade

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Anna Shcherbakova

was “Real Winter” — and real winter it was, with heavy snow and temperatures that often hovered around the minus 34 degrees Celsius (-29F) mark.

Krasnoyarsk is the hometown of Sofia Samodurova, the 2019 European champion, and two-time Olympic pairs champion Artur Dmitriev comes from Norilsk, a city further north in the region.

The rink in Krasnoyarsk was full every day and completely sold out for the ladies final. The national network, Channel 1, live streamed the event (and the ladies practice sessions) around the world for the first time with Canada’s Ted Barton, the commentator of the Junior Grand Prix Series, providing the English commentary.

TRIFECTA

The “A-Team” — Anna Shcherbakova, Alena Kostornaia, and Alexandra Trusova — ruled the ladies competition. Shcherbakova’s victory in 2018 came as a surprise, but a year later she was one of the favorites. The 15-year-old trailed Kostornaia by almost 10 points after the short program, but overtook the Grand Prix Final champion with an almost flawless free skate that featured two quad Lutz jumps. Shcherbakova attempted a quad flip for the first time in competition but stepped out of it. Her overall score of 261.87 would have been enough to win the men’s event, even with the lower program component scores factored in.

Kostornaia’s short program was a highlight, a combination of solid technique and strong skating skills. She earned a new national record score of 89.86. Though national scores tend to be inflated, her performance would probably have received a comparable mark at an international competition. The 16-year-old hit two triple Axels in her long program, but the triple flip-triple toe and the double Axel were a bit shaky and she did not earn as many Grade of Execution points. In Russia, that could cost you a title and this time, it did. Kostornaia slipped to second.

Trusova played it safe in the short program and did not go for a triple Axel, a jump she only recently learned but which is not yet consistent. The two-time World Junior champion went for four quads in the free but landed only one — a quad toe-Euler-triple Salchow combination. She fell on the Lutz and flip (both were under-rotated) and doubled the first quad toe. It was still enough for bronze for the fearless princess Daenerys (the character from “Game of Thrones” she portrays in her long program).

Elizaveta Tuktamysheva proved once again that at age 23, she is still a factor in this sport. Her short program was clean but she was a bit tight on the jumps. Tuktamysheva risked attempting a quad toe in the free — a jump she only started landing recently in practice — but missed it. The triple Axel and triple loop were both unsteady and under-rotated. She finished fourth.

Kseniia Sinitsyna, a student of Svetlana Panova and a 2019 Junior Grand Prix finalist, had a messy short, but rose from 13th to fifth in the final standings. Another junior, Anna Frolova, shone in the free and finished sixth. Samodurova and Stanislava Konstantinova, fourth at 2019 Europeans, did not stand a chance in this field. Both struggled with under-rotations and finished ninth and 13th, respectively.

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

The pairs event was also at a very high level. Russia has many young, talented teams, including Aleksandra Boikova and Dmitrii Kozlovskii who overcame their woes at the Grand Prix Final to deliver two clean programs. They were a close second in the short behind Evgenia Tarasova and Vladimir Morozov, who were also much improved

over their Grand Prix Final outing, and were on fire in their “Bolero” routine. However, Tarasova doubled a toe loop in the free and that was enough to give “James Bond” (Kozlovskii) and his “Bond Girl” (Boikova) the edge. But it was close, with the young team winning by 0.47 of a point to ascend the Russian pairs throne for the first time.

The bronze, and the third spot at the European Championships, went to Daria Pavliuchenko and Denis Khodykin. The usually consistent Anastasia Mishina and Aleksandr Galliamov struggled in the short but rallied in the free and moved up from eighth to finish fourth.

Alina Pepeleva and Roman Pleshkov, fifth at the 2019 Junior Grand Prix Final, were a surprising fifth. Perhaps the fact that they were wearing Tatiana Volosozhar and Maxim Trankov’s costumes from the 2010–2011 season brought them good luck.

The reigning Junior Grand Prix Final champions, Apollinariia Panfilova and Dmitry Rylov, finished sixth.

Ksenia Stolbova and Andrei Novoselov did not compete, officially due to him having an injury. However, there are questions about whether Stolbova wants to continue.

The last time Russia won a World pairs title was in 2013, but it seems it is now in a good position to regain its dominance. With the competitive future of France’s Vanessa James and Morgan Ciprès uncertain at this time, there are currently only two Chinese teams that will challenge the Russians for global supremacy.

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

It has been 11 years since Oksana Domnina and Maxim Shabalin claimed the country’s last World title (2009). Russian nationals showed there are now three teams at a high competitive level, but after them there is a huge gap.

Victoria Sinitsina and Nikita Katsalapov bounced back from a disappointing sixth-place finish at the 2019 Grand Prix Final. They earned high levels in Krasnoyarsk, but overall, their free dance, set to Dvořák’s romantic “Songs My Mother Told Me,” is not as captivating as other programs.

Alexandra Stepanova and Ivan Bukin, who earned the same levels in the free dance, displayed more passion and power. They edged Sinitsina and Katsalapov in that segment, but overall remained in second place by a slim 1.02-point margin. Both teams look good for medals at the World Championships, but the competition will

2020 World Championships:

Ladies: Alena Kostornaia, Anna Shcherbakova, Alexandra Trusova

Men: Dmitri Aliev, Artur Danielian

Pairs: Aleksandra Boikova/Dmitrii Kozlovskii, Tatiana Tarasova/Vladimir Morozov, Daria Pavliuchenko/Denis Khodykin

Ice Dance: Victoria Sinitsina/Nikita Katsalapov, Alexandra Stepanova/Ivan Bukin, Tiffani Zahorski/Jonathan Guerreiro

World Junior Championships:

Men: Petr Gumennik, Andrei Mozalev, Daniil Samsonov

Ladies: Maya Khromykh, Daria Usacheva, Kamila Valieva

Pairs: Apollinariia Panfilova/Dmitry Rylova, Ksenia Akhanteva/Valerii Kolesov, Julia Artemeva/Mikhail Nazarychev

Ice Dance: Elizaveta Shanaeva/Devid Naryzhnyy, Arina Ushakova/Maxim Nekrasov, Diana Davis/Gleb Smolkin

be extremely tough and they will need to fight for podium spots.

After a seventh-place finish last year, Tiffani Zagorski and Jonathan Guerreiro worked their way back up to capture the bronze, earning the highest technical element score for their dynamic free dance to “Survivor.”

Annabelle Morozov (the daughter of coach Nikolai Morozov) and Andrei Bagin finished fourth. They are not yet at the level of the top teams. That also goes for 2018 World Junior champions Anastasia Skoptcova and Kirill Aleshin, 2019 World Junior bronze medalists Sofia Shevchenko and Igor Eremenko, and the third team of Ksenia Konkina and Pavel Drozd. All have potential, but need time to grow.

PLAYING CATCH UP

The Russian men still lag behind the other disciplines. They are only consistent in their inconsistency, which was proven once again with a lot of shuffling in the final standings. Not one of the top three after the short won a medal in the end, but on the flip side, there are some promising young guns.

Alexander Samarin was favored to win the title, but he fell on a quad flip and

stepped out of a quad Lutz in the short. He also missed a quad flip and a triple Axel in the long, but somehow managed to move up from eighth to finish third.

Artur Danielian sat in 13th after the short program, but just days after he turned 16, put out the best free skating performance of the day — and the best of his career so far — to capture the silver medal in his debut at senior nationals.

Dmitri Aliev lost points for the triple Axel in both programs. Fourth after the short, he skated well in the free — other than a crash on the first quad toe and again in the footwork — and skated into first place overall, capturing his first senior national title.

Makar Ignatov won the short, but slipped to fourth after making errors in the free. Andrei Mozalev, the 2019 Junior Grand Prix silver medalist, finished second in the short, but technical errors in the free dropped him to fifth place overall.

Petr Gumennik overslept and missed the morning practice for the free. He did not seem fully awake in the long program, and dropped from third to seventh after making mistakes.

Veteran Sergei Voronov, 32, did not have a good competition, finishing in ninth place. He has made no decision on whether he will continue his competitive career. Andrei Lazukin faded from fifth to 12th in the end. Leonid Sviridenko finished 13th but became the first Russian man to land a quad loop in competition.

MEDVEDEVA WITHDRAWAL

Evgenia Medvedeva was in good shape heading into nationals, but the day before the short program her right skating boot broke during a practice session.

The two-time World champion secured it with tape and laces and competed, ranking fifth in the short. Things didn’t look so bad at that point, but at practice the following morning nothing really worked. Medvedeva left the session early and shortly afterward withdrew from the competition.

Though it is understandable that she was wary of getting injured or completely messing up her long program, not everyone believed the story. However, if she didn’t want to compete at nationals, she could have withdrawn beforehand, citing illness or injury.

Her coach, Brian Orser, said this was the third time one of his skaters had a boot break just before or during a major event.



UNITED STATES

BY ELVIN WALKER

The U.S. Championships played out in Greensboro, North Carolina, for the third time in 10 years. Former champions claimed all four podiums, with some retaining their titles and others returning to the top after a long absence.

Though Nathan Chen arrived at the competition acknowledging he was the least prepared he has ever been for a national championship, he had no difficulty capturing his fourth consecutive title — his fourth runaway victory in the four competitions he has contested this season. With this win, he joined an elite group of U.S. men, all former Olympic champions: Dick Button, Hayes Jenkins, David Jenkins, Scott Hamilton and Brian Boitano, the last man to capture a fourth consecutive title 32 years ago.

It is the consistency Chen has exhibited this season that has truly set him apart. At every competition, the 20-year-old has included multiple quads in his programs and has not once faltered or fallen, and to date has not received an edge call or under-rotation deduction for a jump. His technical abilities are superior to any of his competitors anywhere in the world, and it was a given he would have no rivals on home soil.

Though Chen's programs looked effortless, both lacked the usual attack. While the score of 114.13 for the short was almost three points higher than his Grand Prix Final tally (110.38), his free skate total in Greensboro (216.04) was



Jason Brown

more than eight points lower than what the international panel had awarded him in Torino (224.92).

For Jason Brown, this competition was about redemption. The 25-year-old headed

into the Championships armed with a new confidence and a solid technical arsenal that propelled him into second place in both segments and ultimately, to a silver-medal finish. It was his best result at nationals since winning the U.S. title in 2015 in this same arena.

Brown earned a career-high 100.99 points for the short program, which he saw as a validation of his hard work after a rough start to the first half of the season. Though he did not include a quad jump in his short, the four triples he landed, combined with high program component scores, were enough to keep him in the mix. That has become a tried and trusted strategy for Brown, who has become an expert in exploiting the second mark.

He earned a slightly higher program component score (0.11 of a point) than Chen in the short and was just 1.48 points behind his rival in the second mark in the free. Brown attempted a quad toe in the long program for the first time, but two-footed the landing. His combined score of 292.88 was a personal best by 29.46 points over the previous high he earned at Golden Spin of Zagreb in 2018.

Reigning World Junior champion Tomoki Hiwatashi also came to this competition armed with a technical arsenal that included two quads and two triple

Axels in the free. Hiwatashi does not have the artistic skills at this point to challenge the more seasoned veterans, but that will no doubt be at the top of his list in the off-season. Nonetheless, he moved up from fifth after the short to finish third with a career best 278.08 and captured his first national medal at the senior level.

Vincent Zhou, the 2019 World bronze medalist, returned to competition after skipping the Grand Prix season to focus on his first semester at Brown University. Unable to find training ice, Zhou has taken a gap year to focus on skating. Now coached by Lee Barkell in Toronto, he finished in fourth place (275.23), skating far better than expected with only one month of training.

Andrew Torgashev was the surprise of the competition. Third after the short program, the 18-year-old finished fifth with 260.64 points.

It was no surprise that Alysa Liu, the defending ladies champion, claimed her second title in Greensboro. This year, however, it was an exciting fight to the finish. Liu came out on top in record-breaking form but had to stave off a career-best challenge from Mariah Bell, the eventual silver medalist, who brought down the house with an outstanding display of technique and artistry.

Liu has demonstrated all season that she is not fazed by what anyone else does and she showed that again when she took to the ice as the last skater of the competition. As the audience was still celebrating Bell's triumphant program, Liu seemed oblivious to the record-breaking score Bell posted.

If there were still any lingering doubts about Liu's ability to handle pressure, they were erased after she nailed her opening triple Axel-double toe combination, which set the tone for the rest of her program. With a record-breaking score of 235.52, Liu captured her second consecutive title in a runaway victory.

Though she falls short on the artistic side, Liu, 14, showed improvement in Greensboro. Speed and connection to her music are areas she will have to work on going forward to make herself competitive with the young Russian Kamila Valieva, the reigning Junior Grand Prix Final champion.

Bell, on the other hand, produced a brilliant blend of technique and artistry, and her long program performance to k.d. lang's haunting version of "Hallelujah" was a revelation to all. As she closed out her routine, she was rewarded with the

2020 World Championships:

Ladies: Mariah Bell, Bradie Tennell

Men: Jason Brown, Nathan Chen, Vincent Zhou

Pairs: Ashley Cain-Gribble/Timothy LeDuc, Alexa Knierim/Christopher Knierim

Ice Dance: Madison Chock/Evan Bates, Madison Hubbell/Zachary Donohue, Kaitlin Hawayek/Jean-Luc Baker

World Junior Championships:

Men: Ilia Malinin, Maxim Naumov, Andrew Torgashev,

Ladies: Starr Andrews, Alysa Liu, Lindsay Thorngren

Pairs: Winter Deardorff/Mikhail Johnson, Kate Finster/Balazs Nagy Anastasiia Smirnova/Danil Siianytsia

Ice Dance: Oona Brown/Gage Brown, Avonley Nguyen/Vadym Kolesnik, Katarina Wolfkostin/Jeffrey Chen

loudest and longest standing ovation of the competition. Her coach, Rafael Arutyunyan, maintained his usual cool despite his obvious pride at her accomplishment, but Adam Rippon — whom Bell credits for much of her success this season — was unable to hide his excitement. Her combined score of 225.21, the second best in U.S. Championships history, probably would have been enough to win the title in any other year.

Bradie Tennell topped the short program, but technical problems in the free dropped her to third in the final standings. She revealed she had been dealing with a recurring elbow injury that flared up the week of nationals and admitted it had taken a toll on her preparation. Tennell finished with 220.86 points in total.

Karen Chen, the 2017 champion, finished in fourth place with 193.85 points, while Amber Glenn placed fifth with 186.58.

Alexa Knierim and Christopher Knierim finished seventh at the 2019 Championships, and their results on the Grand Prix circuit in the first half of this season gave no indication that this pairs team would come out on top in Greensboro.

However, the couple surprised everyone, laying down a solid short program performance that put them into first place.

Though they struggled in the free skate, the Knierims held on to win (on the strength of the short) and captured a third title — albeit by a very slim margin — with a U.S. Championships record of 216.15 points.

Jessica Calalang and Brian Johnson were the standout team in this discipline. Fourth after the short, the duo seemed to come out of nowhere, winning the free skate with a record-high 146.01 points and, with a combined total of 213.57, captured the second step of the podium.

Tarah Kayne and Danny O'Shea, the 2016 champions, dropped from second after the short to finish third with 204.07 points. Defending champions Ashley Cain-Gribble and Timothy LeDuc experienced technical difficulties in both segments and landed in fourth with a total tally of 197.12. The woes continue for Haven Denney and Brandon Frazier, the 2017 champions, who finished fifth with 186.25 points.

Greensboro was once again a lucky place for ice dancers Madison Chock and Evan Bates. It was in this same arena five years earlier that they won their first and only national title.

In a field of just nine teams, Chock and Bates kicked off the 2020 campaign by winning the rhythm dance. Last to take the ice in the free, the duo laid down an entrancing performance of their Egyptian Snake Dance — a routine that blurs the line between art and sport — which has been a hit with judges and fans all season. They closed out the competition with 221.86 points overall. Chock and Bates set new records for the rhythm dance, free dance, and combined total in U.S. Championships history.

Problems in both segments of the competition left Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue, the two-time and defending champions, in second place overall. Somehow, the duo exited the first spin in the free dance in the opposite direction to what they planned, and were forced to execute the next four elements facing the wrong way. Hubbell was able to get the team back on track for the choreographic elements. They captured silver with 217.19 points.

Kaitlin Hawayek and Jean-Luc Baker claimed a second consecutive bronze medal with 201.16 points. Christina Carreira and Anthony Ponomarenko finished in fourth place with a 194.16 total, ahead of Caroline Green and Michael Parsons, who placed fifth (180.25). **IFS**

HONORABLE INDUCTIONS



PHOTO: JAY ADEFF/U.S. FIGURE SKATING

Charlie White, Meryl Davis and Kimmie Meissner were inducted into the U.S. Hall of Fame at the U.S. Championships. Damon Allen accepted the award on behalf of renowned coach Kathy Casey, who passed away in September 2019.

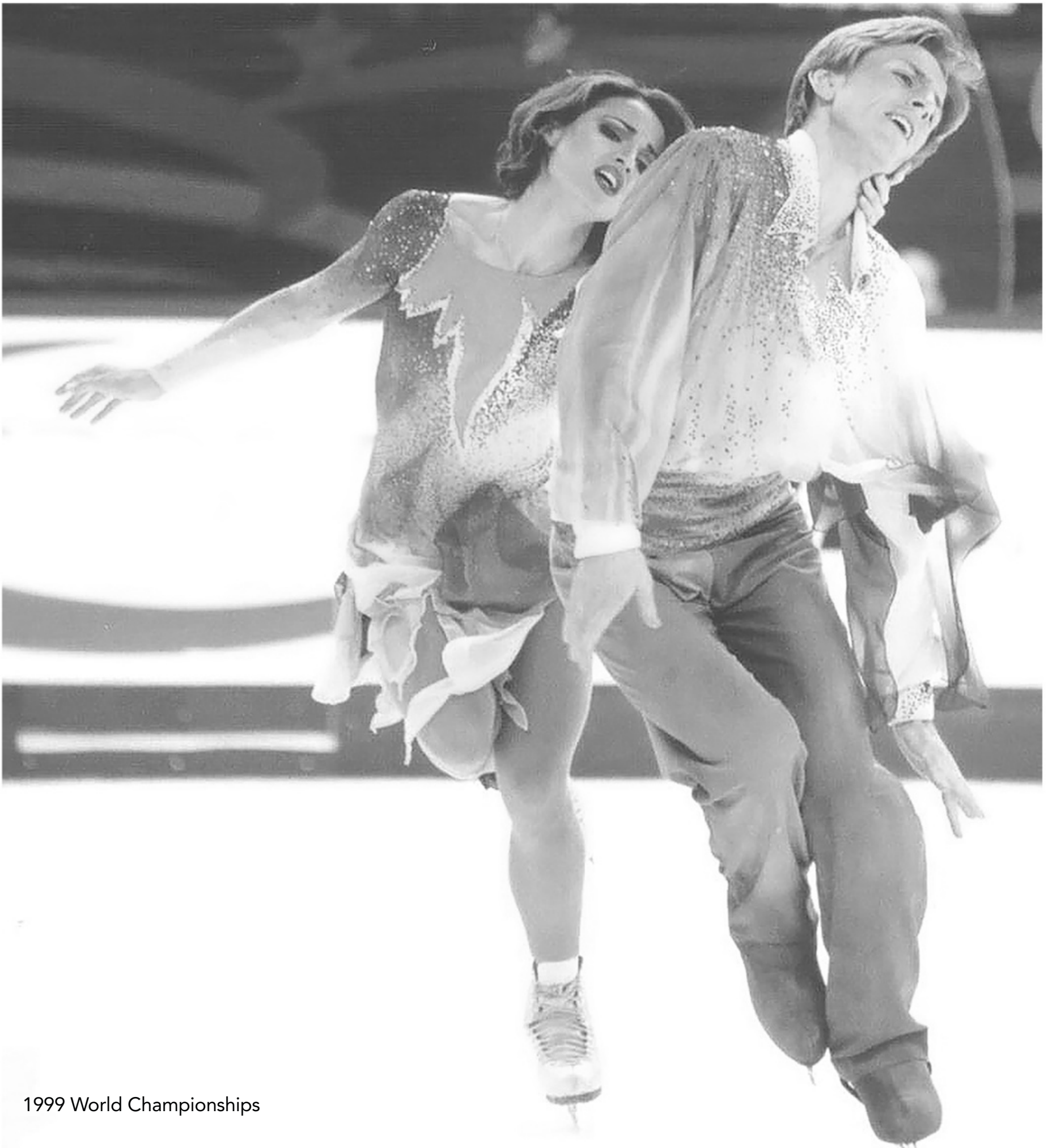


Six-time Canadian champion Jennifer Robinson and veteran journalist Steve Milton were inducted into the Skate Canada Hall of Fame in a gala ceremony at the Canadian Championships.



PHOTOS: GREG KOLZ/SKATE CANADA

Margarita Drobiazko & Povilas Vanagas



1999 World Championships

PHOTO: SUSAN D. RUSSELL

DANCING *Through* The Decades

BY TATJANA FLADE

IT WAS ALL SUPPOSED TO BE TEMPORARY. When Margarita Drobiazko and Povilas Vanagas teamed up in 1989, it was understood that they would compete for a couple of seasons and then move on with their respective lives. In 2019, the couple celebrated three decades on the ice – and their 19th wedding anniversary.

Margarita Drobiazko and Povilas Vanagas hold a special place in Lithuanian skating history. The first skaters from that nation to ever compete at an Olympic Winter Games, decades later they remain the only ones to ever medal at a European or World Championships in any discipline.

Born in Moscow in the then Soviet Union, Drobiazko became interested in skating after watching a television program that featured 10-time World pairs champion Irina Rodnina.

Drobiazko began skating singles as a 6-year-old, but at age 12 she switched to ice dance. Initially coached by Natalia Linichuk and then Natalia Dubova, Drobiazko found no success with her first partner, Oleg Granionov.

Vanagas grew up in a skating household in Kaunas, Lithuania. His mother, Lilija Vanagiene, was a 10-time national singles champion who went on to become the national coach and the president of the Lithuanian Figure Skating Federation.

Vanagas won six national singles titles before being drafted into the Soviet Army at age 18. Offered the choice of becoming a soldier or skating, he opted to take up ice dancing.

He began training with Tatiana Tarasova. In 1989, she paired him with 16-year-old Drobiazko. When the Soviet Union began to collapse, the duo left Moscow and moved to Lithuania.

Drobiazko and Vanagas made their international debut at the 1992 European Championships. The possibility of competing at the Olympic Winter Games that year was the only reason Vanagas had continued to skate. “Lithuania had declared independence and the opportunity to compete for my home country at the Games was a big motivation for me,” he recalled.

They finished 17th at the 1992 Olympic Winter Games in Albertville, France, climbing to 12th two years later in Lillehammer, Norway.

The following season (1994-1995) the team captured two silver medals on the Grand Prix circuit, but another four years would pass before they would repeat that result.

In the mid-1990s, Drobiazko and Vanagas spent two years in England working with British ice dance legends Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean. They returned to Russia to train with Elena Tchaikovskaya, who guided them to an eighth-place finish at the 1998 Winter Games in Nagano, Japan, in their third Olympic appearance.

Drobiazko and Vanagas finally found success during the 1999-2000 season, winning Skate Canada and finishing third at NHK Trophy and the Grand Prix Final. They backed that up by capturing bronze medals at the European and World Championships. The government of Lithuania rewarded their achievements by bestowing the Order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas on them.

In their fourth Olympic appearance in Salt Lake City in 2002, Drobiazko and Vanagas finished fifth.

They retired following the World Championships after a controversial fourth-place finish behind the Israeli team of Galit Chait and Sergei Sakhnovski. The result caused an outrage, with fans, coaches and even some judges voicing their anger at the result.

The day after the free skate, Bulgarian ice dancer Albenia Denkova submitted a petition to the ice dance referee, Courtney Jones of Great Britain, on behalf of herself and 38 other ice dance competitors, demanding the International Skating Union award the bronze medal to the Lithuanian team. Jones dismissed the petition.

Though the finale of their career left a bitter taste, Drobiazko and Vanagas moved on and began touring the world on the professional show circuit.

Four years later, they returned to the competitive arena with one goal in mind: to claim an Olympic medal at the 2006 Games in Torino, Italy. The duo began their comeback by capturing bronze at the European Championships, which they hoped was an omen of things to come.

"We were surprised at Europeans that we were second after the compulsory dance," Drobiazko recalled. "The last time, years earlier, we were fourth. We proved to everyone that nothing is impossible. I think we showed other skaters that if they have to take some time off for their health, they can still come back."

However, the duo's medal hopes were dashed with a disappointing seventh-place finish at their fifth and final Olympic appearance. "It was a terrible competition for us," said Vanagas. "We didn't skate our best, and it didn't help that there was no Lithuanian judge on the panel. In practice, nobody was watching us. We felt disadvantaged from the start. It was a new system, but the same old politics."

The first figure skaters to compete at five Olympics, Drobiazko and Vanagas left the competitive circuit following a fourth-place finish at the 2006 World Championships.

"I basically wanted to stop two years after the 1992 Olympic Games. Rita knew when we teamed up that it was supposed to be temporary — but we're still skating together. So there is nothing steadier in this life than what is temporary," Vanagas said with a smile.

REFLECTIONS

Looking back on their long and distinguished career, Drobiazko and Vanagas recalled "many highlights and many special memories."

"The happiest moments were obviously our first podium finishes at Europeans in Vienna and then Worlds in Nice," said Drobiazko. "Also, of course, when we came back in 2006 and got a medal at the European Championships. To return was a serious decision for us."

"We didn't know what to expect because the judging system had changed — everything had changed and nobody was really supporting us. We could have been 15th or 20th. We worked for half a year and we didn't know what awaited us. We won medals so we didn't return in vain. For Lithuania, that was big because we don't know when Lithuania will again have

“We are very lucky that we get so many interesting offers.”

—Margarita Drobiazko

skaters that will win medals."

"That was something special in our life, the medals we won and the programs we had," Vanagas added. "The first memory that stands out for me is probably our first Olympic Games in 1992. I had a lot of patriotic feelings back then."

Unlike many others, their transition to the professional ranks was not a difficult one. "It was a bit nerve-racking when we first retired in 2002, as we didn't know if we would get invited to shows or not," Drobiazko explained.

"But we were lucky because in the three years before our comeback, we had a lot of work. In 2006 we were not worried anymore that we would not get work. We knew that we would perform in shows again."

Shortly after retiring, Drobiazko and Vanagas returned to the professional circuit in Europe and Japan, and performed on the Torvill and Dean farewell tour.

Ilia Averbukh and his former ice dance partner, Irina Lobacheva, were strong rivals of the Lithuanians in their era, but once Averbukh started developing his television

and show projects — which would ultimately take skating to another level in Russia — Drobiazko and Vanagas became an integral part of his shows and ice-musical tours. They also choreographed the programs for the participants in Averbukh's television project "Ice Age. Children." Both said they really enjoyed the experience.

Drobiazko, 48, and Vanagas, 49, who also produce their own skating show in Lithuania every year, never expected to still be skating 14 years after their final amateur outing and estimate they currently perform in about 150 shows annually. "We thought that we'll skate for two or three years in shows after our competitive career and that's it," Drobiazko said with a laugh.

"I also thought it would be hard to skate once you're past 30, and then past 40 you won't be able to get out of bed in the morning. But thank God that didn't happen."

"Also, we thought that people would forget us with time and we would not get invited to shows anymore, so we would just do our own show in Lithuania. But instead, there are more and more offers."

In 2019, Drobiazko had the lead role in Averbukh's "Carmen on Ice" and she and Vanagas also starred in his production of "Romeo and Juliet."

"You know, sometimes, when I'm home I think I'd like to do something else, but then I am offered another interesting role and I want to do it," Drobiazko said. "We are very lucky that we get so many interesting offers. Sometimes I think, 'I'll do that show, and after that probably I won't get any more interesting offers,' but then another one comes up."

"I like our show career more than our competitive career," Vanagas added. "You can express yourself more and it is easier on the nerves. There is a better connection with the audience and for me it is more interesting to watch shows than competitions."

"When I watch a competition, I see that white light, the tension, the nerves everyone has, and I start to feel uncomfortable. I wish the atmosphere was more sympathetic so that it does not feel like some dreadful exam."

Nonetheless, they still follow competitive skating and are interested in the current development of the sport. "On one hand, I don't really like all the rules that there are now because I'm fed up watching all these same lifts, step sequences and twizzles," Vanagas explained.

"I'm longing for programs like those

performed by Torvill and Dean, Marina Klimova and Sergei Ponomarenko and Isabelle and Paul Duchesnay. Then I saw something new every year.”

Drobiazko agreed. “Now, if I see something new, it is just one small thing and then I’ll see again these twizzles. However, there are couples like Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron ... this is just something unearthly. In spite of all the rules, it is like they don’t care that they have to do these twizzles and step sequences. They are unique.

“Now, Victoria Sinitsina and Nikita Katsalapov are up there with them, which makes me very happy because I really like this team. I was afraid that these rules would make everyone the same and there would not be any individuality anymore. Thank God, there are couples that are still pushing ice dance and have their own style even with these rules.”

Vanagas believes the new judging system brought more positives than negatives in ice dance. He feels that the programs have become more complex and that many new acrobatic lifts are being developed, though he is concerned about the health of ice dancers doing all the complicated elements. But he also feels that many teams do not have artistic programs because there are so many elements and transitions that need to be done.

“The acting skills and the touching nature of the programs are mostly gone,” he said. “Only a few can keep that — the very best in the world that have the technical basis and skills.”

Though they know they will not be able to skate forever, they are enjoying their extended career and have made no decision about when they will hang up their skates. “Why stop the car when it is driving? When a wheel comes off, we can then think about which service station to go to, or if we have to change the car,” said Vanagas with a wide smile.

“We’ve been skating for so long in shows that a lot of the things that I like to do have changed,” Drobiazko added. “I wanted to be an interior designer, then a designer of sports clothes. Then we thought about producing shows. Everything depends on our financial situation after we retire from show skating.”

Though they have no children Drobiazko and Vanagas have a lot of pets, most of which were adopted from the streets of Moscow. “Honestly, I’d just take care of homeless cats and dogs, if I didn’t have to earn money,” Drobiazko said with a laugh. **IFS**



Margarita Drobiazko and Povilas Vanagas performed in Ilia Averbuk's production of "Camen" in 2019.

Gracie Gold

Makes a Courageous Comeback

BY ELVIN WALKER



When Gracie Gold arrived in Greensboro, North Carolina for the 2020 U.S. Championships, nobody — including herself — knew what to expect. It had been three years since the former two-time champion had competed at the national level, and she had been to hell and back in the interim.

Gold's journey back to the U.S. Championships has been one of grit and determination. Her well-publicized battle with mental health issues and an eating disorder dominated the news for a long time, and it seemed her once promising career had come to an end.

Her 12th place finish in Greensboro was irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. Just to have made it back to the national stage was accomplishment enough for the 24-year-old.

At one point, Gold felt that returning to competition was unattainable and recalled thinking “we’re just going to have to pull the plug on this operation.” Mentally she had moved on. Her skating gear and costumes had been shipped home, and Gold had accepted full-time employment as a coach at a rink in Scottsdale, Arizona.

But after attending the 2018 U.S. Championships as a spectator, Gold had a change of heart. “I was watching the junior ladies competition in front of a curtain with some officials. I was not ready to be out in front of that curtain because I didn’t want people to see me,” Gold recalled. “Then one of the officials said, ‘I want you to meet someone,’ and pulled Vincent (Restencourt) and Pasha (Filchenkov) from behind the curtain.

“After we were introduced, the official said she thought I should go and work at their rink. I was like, ‘Yeah, great,’ and stood there for an awkward second.”

The trio ultimately traded contact information. When Gold paid a visit to their rink on the outskirts of Philadelphia, they pitched the idea of her returning to competitive skating. She decided to give it a try.

Gold understood she would have to work on her fitness and, given her prior unhealthy

PHOTO: ROBIN RITTOSS

relationship with food, also knew she had to be smart about how she approached that aspect of her comeback.

"I thoroughly enjoyed my retirement. I was very out of shape and this was documented by photographic evidence. I was not in shape to be an athlete let alone a figure skater," Gold explained. "That part was tricky because it required the most patience. There's no magic formula for weight loss. Someone would have found it already if there were. It's just day in and day out. You can't be too crazy, and you can't be too gentle because either way it can lead down a different road than the one you want to take.

"It was hard at first, but once I got into a consistent rhythm and I was hitting my stride and could get some traction — good days, good weeks, good months — the progress really started to show. I don't weigh myself anymore because that was even more of a thing then — how I actually looked or felt. I don't get into those numbers because that's really none of my business."

In the late spring of 2018, Gold began off-ice workouts and began lifting weights. "That is a little off-brand because I don't look like I would be into that but I got super into leg day and back day," she said. "I was even in the squat rack — a part of the gym that I had never really ventured into before.

"I was really strong, but the look really wasn't streamlined for skating. Muscles are heavy and although I could do a short program run through, I started to wear down as the day progressed. So, we made a shift in how I trained. We kept grinding on with the programs and we kept up with cardio, but shifted more into plyometrics in the weight room."

Once a solid routine was in place, Gold began to notice things were changing for her on the ice. Because her body was responding so quickly to her training regime, she admitted that finding the necessary sweet spot was tricky. "It was the combination of being lighter but stronger," she explained. "If I threw a bowling ball, suddenly my arm got stronger and then I tried to throw a softball. It was kind of like that.

"Back in April, it was very stressful for me to do a triple toe in a two-minute ice show. I didn't even do a double Axel because I was not that courageous yet. All of a sudden I am doing quads in the pole harness, and the goal then became qualifying for nationals. That quickly evolved into skating well at nationals with a triple-triple.

"The bar kind of went up so fast that I couldn't really get a grip on what was realistic and what was not. As I lost weight but got stronger my timing kept changing, and it felt like every two or three weeks I was in a new body. That was not a bad thing, but it was an adjustment period."

Gold had to work her way through the qualifying system to earn a ticket to Greensboro. Her performance at the South Atlantic Regional Championships was good enough to advance to Eastern Sectionals in November. She finished in third place there and earned one of the four berths available at the 2020 U.S. Championships.

She and Restencourt parted ways in the fall, but Gold said it was a seamless transition because she had been working with Filchenkov and Alex Zahradnicek almost full time.

Gold turned to her 2014 Olympic teammate, Jeremy Abbott, to help choreograph her programs. He selected the Annie Lennox version of "I Put A Spell on You" for the short program, and Sara Bareilles's "She Used to Be Mine" (from the Broadway musical "Waitress") proved to be the perfect choice for Gold's return to competitive ice.

"When Jeremy and I first heard this music, we knew that it was it. I don't think we even listened to other music. Once we heard this, we knew that this was the piece, no questions asked," Gold said. "The lyrics really hit home in so many ways, and we choreographed it before I had seen the show because I knew that the way it is portrayed in the musical was not my story. We didn't want that story to infringe on our moment."

At the close of her long program in Greensboro, the audience rose to its feet in a standing ovation while Gold dropped to the ice on one knee, taking a few moments to reflect on what she had just accomplished.

"I felt a mix of things. Like with all competitions, I felt a bit of relief, to be honest. I was excited but I was relieved. Really truly, I was almost overwhelmed that I was very much existing in the moment because I could not exist anywhere else.

"It felt really important to me because that doesn't happen so often in skating. I think that's also why it meant a lot," said Gold of the standing ovation. "I'm not from Greensboro, I don't have any ties with this area, and I've never won here. I hadn't skated well anytime that I had been here, so the fact that all those people gave me a standing ovation for a program ... the elements did

not ask for it, but the moment asked for it. It's one of those moments that is bigger than you."

Gold said she plans to continue competing for at least one more year and has "bought in for at least an off-season and the summer. Obviously, in the dream world everything keeps getting better and I have these amazing programs and end up doing some internationals. Maybe the Grand Prix, or maybe I'm on the national podium and go to the World Championships or World Team event. These are all things that would build me back to the very top elite level."

But she is quick to temper those expectations, pointing out it was miraculous that she has made it this far.

"In October it was a feat that I landed a plain triple Lutz in my program at regionals. That was a huge accomplishment. And now the expectations have gotten so much bigger," she said.

"We're trying not to get too far ahead of our skis and focusing on things like the 2022 Olympic Games or winning nationals again.

"Those are all of our ultimate goals, but I have a tendency to dream too big too fast. I have no patience for anything at all, which is cool because I demand things now. Sometimes I get them, but occasionally run into issues. Those are the goals, but to get there we just have to keep laying each building block so that we can construct the whole building."

Gold will leave the music selections to Abbott for next season. "I'm not great at creating things. I can copy and learn, but it's not in my nature like it is in Jeremy's," she explained.

"Creative artists can hear a piece of music, watch you stroke around the rink, and just put two and two together. I leave that part to the creative genius.

"Moving forward, it will be very different in terms of how we select music because we've already told the story. There are only so many songs that are like 'She Used to Be Mine' and we don't want to be beating a dead horse. If I oversaturate everything that I've done with my mental health or if I only share the dark stuff, it's a lot of emotion. I'm excited to work with Jeremy to explore new options because he is a very creative, artistic soul."

For Gold, the beauty in all of this was not knowing where she was going to end up. "I didn't need to know. I just needed time to see where my second chance would lead me." 

PIPER GILLES + PAUL POIRIER

PERSEVERANCE PAYS OFF

BY ROBERT BRODIE

It has been a long and sometimes rocky road for Piper Gilles and Paul Poirier as they made the slow climb to the top of the ice dance ladder. But the results this season have boosted the confidence of this dynamic duo, who now believe they have the right plan and the competitive mindset to challenge the best.

As Canada's Piper Gilles and Paul Poirier drew ever closer to the summit of the ice dance world, they could see themselves on the same level as the sport's best — but there was still something missing, something they felt was holding them back.

It was certainly not the material they were bringing to the ice — their programs remain among the most innovative on the circuit — or their drive to be the best at what they do. Surely, that is a desire that has never been lacking in either of them.

But there is one element that beats strongly in the heart and especially in the mind of any champion. And that is the unassailable belief that it *can* happen, that you belong in any discussion of the very best in your sport. And when that moment presents itself, you seize upon it and make it yours.

Slowly but surely, Gilles and Poirier are getting to that point. There have been certain signposts along the way this season that have proven significant in building that sense of self-belief. Their first Grand Prix triumph, a return to the Grand Prix Final for the first time in five years, and the long-awaited Canadian title that had eluded them ... each and every one of those moments have contributed to a confidence level that grows with each passing day.

And so, there was an understandable excitement — and perhaps a little relief — in the moments after their victory at the 2020 Canadian Championships in January. After all, Gilles and Poirier

“It’s a very true thing: you have to skate like a champion to be a champion. That’s what they did.”

—Carol Lane



“To me, every year, they are the best...they got IOs (at nationals) in components and that is a big step for them.”

—Juris Razgulajevs



Piper Gilles and Paul Poirier celebrated their first Grand Prix victory at 2019 Skate Canada.

had played the bridesmaids for far too long, with a collection of medals that include five silver and two bronze. Finally, with this triumph, there was a golden moment to celebrate.

Gilles and Poirier are very much aware of the history of ice dance in their country, and the Olympic and World champions that preceded them.

They feel honored to be in such company. "There's such a beautiful history of ice dance in Canada and to be part of that book of Canadian ice dance champions is definitely an exciting thing. It's something that we really wanted," said Poirier.

Carol Lane, the team's long-time coach, along with Juris Razgulajevs and Jon Lane, touched on the importance of that very subject as she assessed Gilles and Poirier's winning performance — and how it can benefit them further at the upcoming World Championships, which will be held on home soil in Montréal.

"They have to keep pushing themselves. They have to keep extending everything they do to the max — and they are," said Lane. "They have to believe in themselves. What this weekend has done for them is that they understand now they can do it. This was a huge boost for them confidence wise.

"It's a very true thing: you have to skate like a champion before you can be a champion. That's what they did."

Razgulajevs took it one step further, producing another 'seeing is believing' moment that he thought was critical. He pointed to the program components section of the judges' scoresheet for their free dance, which contained 19 perfect 10.0s, with one judge giving them a full set across the board.

That was done, like many things this season, with a definite intention, and it had its effect on Gilles and Poirier. "To me, every year they are the best," said Razgulajevs. "I showed them they got 10s in components. That's a big step for them. They were like 'Oh, OK, I guess we are good.' It showed the world where they are at the moment."

"Their scores were substantial ...

there's a message in that, and in ice dance that's very important," Lane added.

LEARNING CURVES

All of that provided further reinforcement to the biggest takeaway Gilles and Poirier were left with following the 2019 World Championships in Japan. Having brought home a medal from every competition they entered last season, the duo went to Saitama with high hopes. A seventh-place finish was not what they had in mind but, on reflection, they now know where and why they faltered.

"We learned that we needed to believe in ourselves a little more," said Gilles, 28. "There were times last year where we were totally prepared, and we let ourselves overdo it and did not skate to our ability.

"We took that as a learning experience and we have gone in to every competition so far this season and said, 'OK, this is the program we are going to skate today. No more, no less,' and I think we now expect that from ourselves. But you can't learn that stuff until things go wrong."

Both skaters expressed the belief that last year they "over-trained" in the weeks between the Four Continents and World Championships, and that led to a feeling of exhaustion when it came to the free dance. It also led them to take what Poirier called a more "intentional" approach to their training this season.

"We really focused a lot of attention on that," said Poirier, 28. "We set up our fall season so that we would have five weeks between our first Challenger Series event (Autumn Classic International) and Skate Canada, which is the exact same frame of time between Four Continents and Worlds.

"That way, we sort of practice, 'what is that five weeks of training going to look like, and how do we feel after it?' We felt really good at Skate Canada and we performed really well at that competition, so we feel really confident in that plan.

"It has been really intentional about having the right preparation so that we are well set up for success. That served us well through the Grand Prix season. We had solid performances, we were very consistent and that's been a really important thing for us."

Lane believes it just might be the training plan that can carry them all the way to the 2022 Olympic Winter Games in Beijing,

China, where Gilles and Poirier are targeting a podium finish — at the very least.

"What they have done really well this year is stick to the plan," said Lane. "We have worked to a specific plan and they have been able to stick to it. We've been lucky — touch wood — that they have been healthy pretty much all the way through. So now we are putting that training method in place for the Olympics.

"If we follow it through and it works, we're hopeful it will take us through the next two seasons. We have really identified that as a key area and we want to do it that way. That is what has worked really well for them so far."

PROGRAMS FOR THE PEOPLE

Another challenge Gilles and Poirier faced this season — at least from an outsider's perspective — was how to follow up on "Vincent," the immensely popular free dance the duo presented during the 2018-2019 campaign.

“We want to do programs that people can connect with, that sort of have these universal themes and are very easily accessible.”

—Paul Poirier

It was perhaps the signature program of their career to date, and a year later it is one that has stuck with many of their fans. Gilles and Poirier are using it as their exhibition program this season and have received numerous messages of gratitude from fans for doing so.

And so it seemed that their current free dance — "Both Sides Now," by Canadian music legend Joni Mitchell — was almost a natural next step. With Worlds being in Montréal, Gilles and Poirier had decided they wanted to use music from a Canadian artist.

Lane's suggestion of "Both Sides Now" touched a nerve with them almost immediately.

"They loved it. As soon as we took the music to them, they were like 'Oh, we're good with that,'" said Lane, adding she sees the Mitchell piece as the right evolution for her students, a step they could not have taken without succeeding with "Vincent."

"It's a funny thing to say, but it actually wasn't a challenge," said Lane with respect to the signature program. "I just didn't want to get bogged down in 'Oh, you'll never top 'Vincent'; nothing will ever be as good as that. Nothing will ever have as special a place in my heart as that because it really showed what they could do, and it showed us a whole other side of them. Without having done that program, they could never have done this one the way that they are doing it."

"I thought myself I would never love anything as much as 'Vincent,' but they're living inside this one, almost more than they did with that program. Just that whole new level of confidence has taken the 'Both Sides Now' program and made it a stunning vehicle for them."

Gilles and Poirier both say the emotional investment that was required to pull off "Vincent" has helped them see every side of their current free dance.

"We asked ourselves, 'what do we want to do now?' And what we wanted to do this season was a Canadian program in Canada. That's really all we took into consideration," Poirier recalled.

"We just did the program we wanted to do this season, and that allowed us to explore the emotions and the themes we wanted to explore. I think, generally, what 'Vincent' did teach us was that we need to create programs that allow people to believe in what we are doing. That is sort of why we have had this theme 'programs for the people' for the free dances this quad.

"We want to do programs that people can connect with, that sort of have these universal themes and are very easily accessible. We thought Joni's music was good for that, for having lyrics that talk about life and about experiences that we all have."

If Gilles and Poirier needed validation for their music choices — their rhythm dance is set to another classic piece, "Mack and Mabel" — and their new approach to

training, they got it at Skate Canada last October. There, they produced personal best scores across the board, including a 209.01 total that gave them their first gold medal at a Grand Prix competition. Find a video clip of the scene in the kiss and cry when the final marks were posted, and the look on Gilles' face will tell you all you need to know about the importance of that triumph.

Winning the free dance pushed Gilles and Poirier past Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue, the 2019 World bronze medalists, in the final standings. While the Canadians had beaten their American rivals at Four Continents a year ago, where Gilles and Poirier got a big assist from a major mistake on a lift by the U.S. team, this time, it was a straight-up win.

"It really did feel like an attainable goal for us to win a Grand Prix event," said Poirier. "We wanted to win, we wanted to be at the Final. We want to be winning everything. That's how we need to approach our competitions now if we hope to get the results that we want. It was a really big milestone for us to have a Grand Prix title."

Gilles said she and Poirier knew they were capable of beating the American team, "but at the end of the day we had to beat ourselves mentally. We always need to be in that right mind frame."

"We are very, very proud of the work that we have done — and we know the work we've done. Now it is time to show everyone."

"This sport is all about timing, and we're at the point in our career where we are not going to just sit back and let everyone say, 'Oh, good program' and we say, 'Oh, go ahead, beat us, please.' We have a couple of more years, hopefully, and we don't want to be the team where people say, 'good programs, but no results.' We want to have those results and we want to be on top of the podium, or else there is no point in it for us. We are older and we know that there are a lot of younger teams coming up. We want to have those medals and we want to be the ones on the podiums."

Gilles and Poirier followed up their Skate Canada victory with a second-place finish at Rostelecom Cup in Moscow, behind Russia's Victoria Sinitsina and Nikita Katsalapov, the 2019 World silver medalists. But, with the margin between the two teams less than five points, it proved to Gilles and Poirier that their win in Canada was not merely a home-country fluke.

"The judges saw that we did it, that we are capable of being on top of the podium. That helped us to ride that momentum going into that next competition," Gilles explained. "Then it was, 'OK, they had an amazing skate at Skate Canada ... let's see if they can do it again.' And then we did it again. We have been constantly gaining momentum, which happens with a lot of teams. Once you've proven yourself, you keep moving forward because you've shown that consistency, that drive and that momentum."

OLYMPIC GOALS

Their placements at those two competitions ensured Gilles and Poirier a return to the Grand Prix Final for the first time since 2014.

Though they finished fifth in a field of six in Torino, Italy — ahead of the Russian team that had beaten them three weeks earlier — they returned home with an important realization, one that should hold them in good stead at Worlds in Montréal.

“Once you’ve
proven yourself,
you keep moving
forward because
you’ve shown that
consistency, that
drive and that
momentum.”

—Piper Gilles

"It was the best thing for our confidence," said Gilles of making the cut for the Final. "We have been kind of fighting that little monkey for a long time, trying to get back there for five years. It was just nice to be amongst the top competitors and we are all so, so close in points. It's kind of cool to watch ice dance and not know what is going to happen, which is not something you normally see. It's actually very exciting

to be in that group. We finally feel like we belong and it puts us in a great position going into the World Championships."

"We took a step back after the Final and looked at our programs. We made some changes and improvements after that, and we have continued moving onward and upward since that competition."

Gilles and Poirier were no doubt watching closely when Sinitsina and Katsalapov — the team they finished ahead of at the Final by a scant 0.11 points — pulled off the upset of the season by beating France's Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron at the European Championships in late January. It was the first time since the 2018 Olympic Winter Games that the French team, who have won four of the last five World titles, did not stand on the top step of a podium.

"A lot of the teams are very close, and that's exciting for us in one way, in that we feel we are right there and we are part of that," said Poirier.

That feeling has been reinforced virtually every time they have stepped onto the ice this season. Gilles and Poirier have shared practice ice with each and every one of their rivals at some point and have not felt out of place among the world's best.

"We definitely feel like we are among the right crowd and we are capable of beating them," said Gilles, adding that the programs they will present at the World Championships have had new "layers" added to them (particularly the free dance) to make them even better. "We needed those layers and now we have them. When we get to Worlds we will have even more, which will help us stand alongside the best."

Is a medal possible in Montréal? Gilles and Poirier see no reason to not think so. "We are right there," said Poirier. "We know it will really require our best to get there, so it's up to us to bring our best performances to Worlds. We feel like it is possible and we feel like there is an opportunity. It's really ours for the taking and we have to take it."

The 2020 World Championships also mark the halfway point on the road to the 2022 Winter Olympics in China. If Gilles and Poirier hope to stand on the podium there — and they believe that is eminently possible — they need to start building toward that moment now.

"Every year, you are taking a little step forward toward the Olympics," said Gilles. "We need to strike right now and set



ourselves up to be right there (in Beijing). A lot of teams have had a couple of great years, and that has set them up to be in the right position to be on top of the Olympic podium. The work starts now, and I think we are ready for it.”

Poirier agreed, adding “we need to set ourselves up as contenders so that when we get to the Games, everyone thinks of us as contenders.

“That needs to be on people’s minds. We are aware of that and we know we need to make that statement beforehand because that is what it takes.

“It takes being consistently at the top for a long time for people to really get behind you and believe in you, and that’s what we want to do. So, we know we have an

opportunity this year to take that step and we are excited about it.”

They also know it will take just the right vehicles to get them there, and Lane admits she is already pondering ideas for the Olympic season. Surely, Gilles and Poirier do not want a repeat of the run-up to the 2018 Games in South Korea, when they changed the free dance halfway through the season because their original choice, Poirier said, “was just not working for us.” They wound up eighth in PyeongChang.

If Beijing is indeed the finish line for them — and Gilles and Poirier are far from making that call just yet — they want to leave the sport on just the right note. It is something that is vitally important to both of them.

“We have some ideas about the kind of statement we want to make at the Olympics, but of course, over the next two years we are going to change as people, we are going to change as performers.

“Our lives are going to change and we might find new things and that is part of it,” said Poirier. “We are not locked into anything, necessarily, and we are always thinking and always listening for ideas. As we get closer to the end of our career we are always reflecting.

“We have to think about our body of work and what kind of impact we want to leave on this sport. As we do our last few programs, we are really thinking about what it is we still want to do and share with everyone. **IFS**”

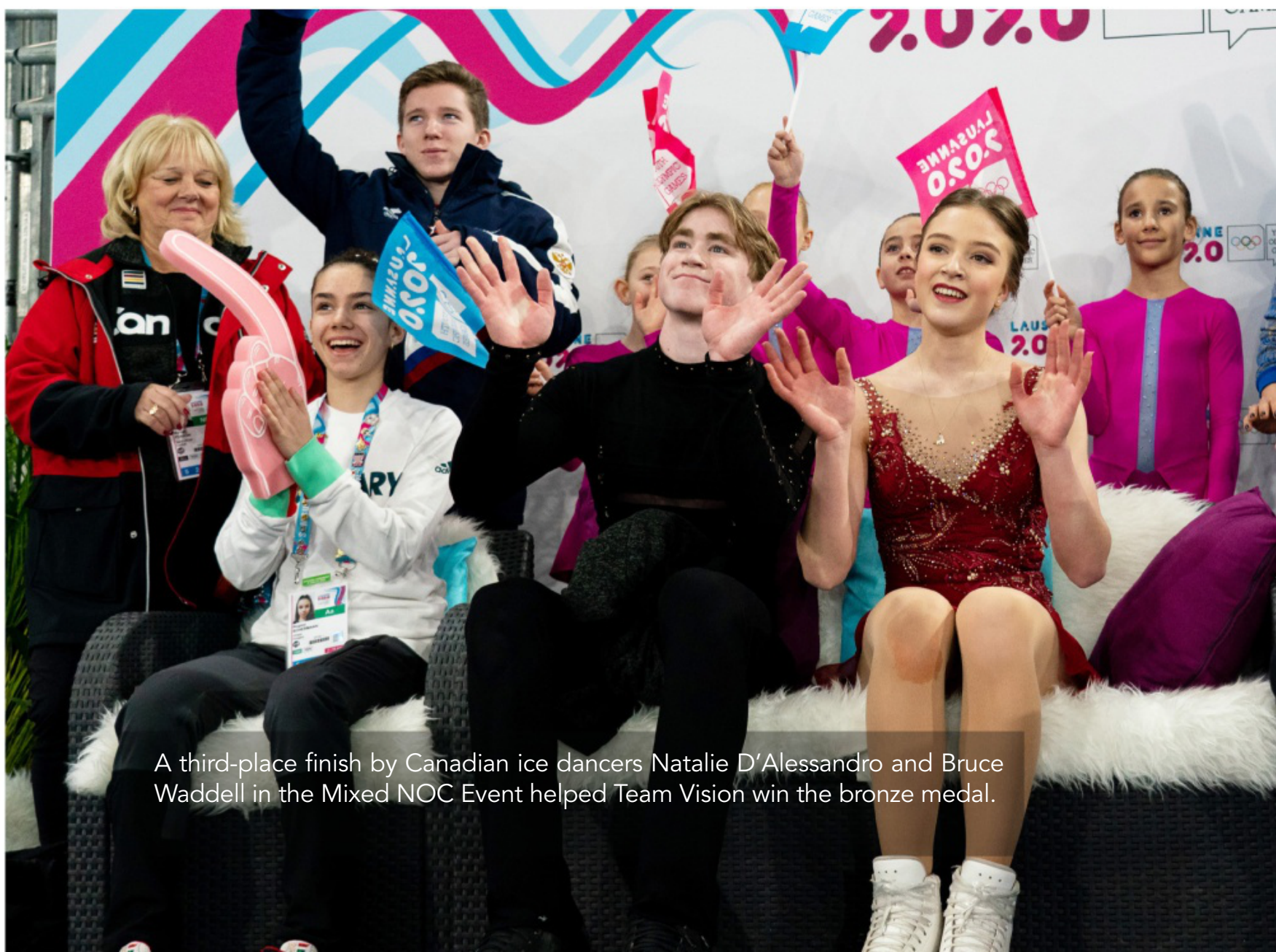
PHOTO: ROBIN RITTOSS

2020 YOUTH OLYMPIC GAMES



South Korea's Young You and her coach Mie Hamada were delighted with her gold medal performances in the ladies singles competition.

PHOTOS: OIS/JED LEICESTER



A third-place finish by Canadian ice dancers Natalie D'Alessandro and Bruce Waddell in the Mixed NOC Event helped Team Vision win the bronze medal.



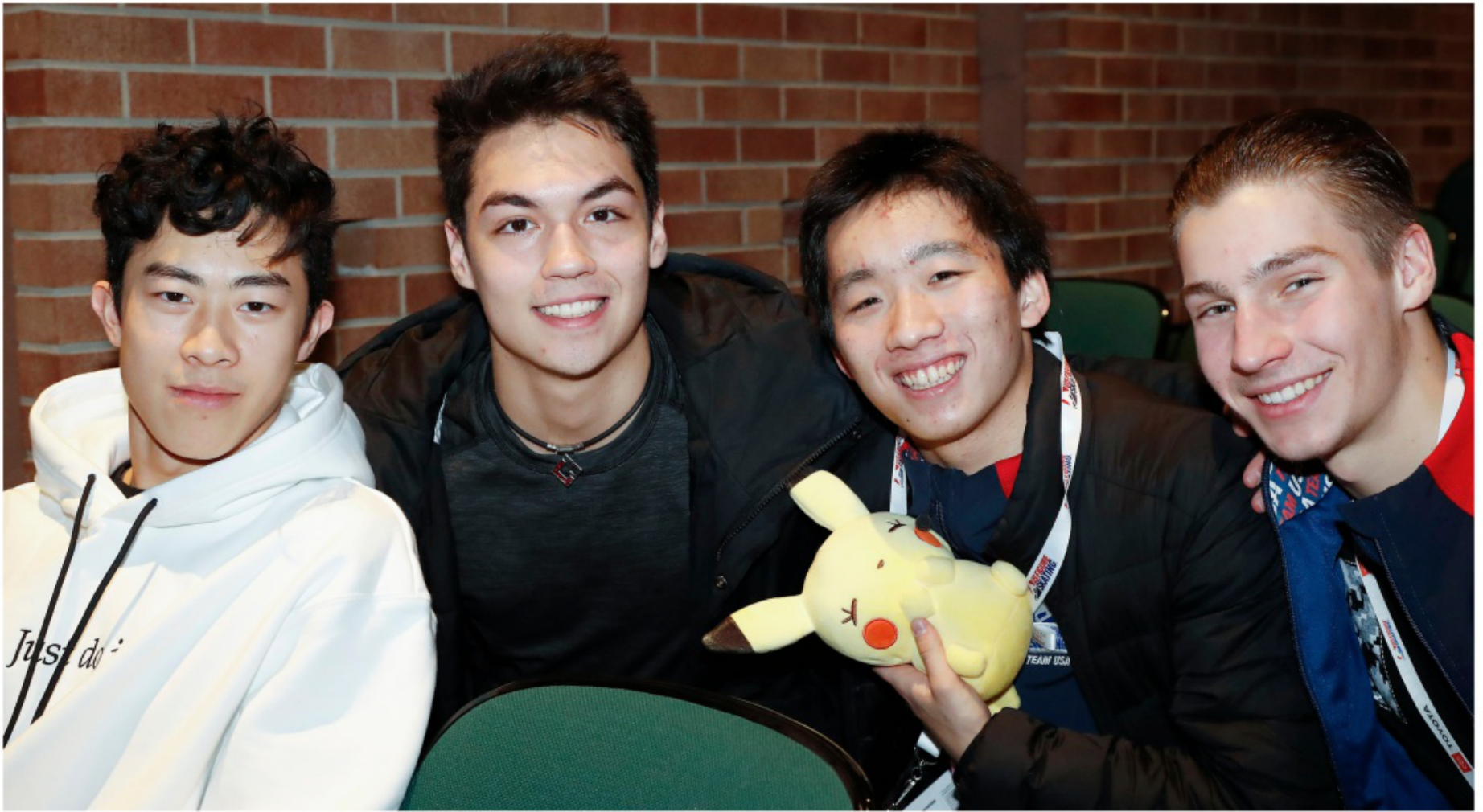
Team Courage captured the gold medal in the Mixed NOC Team Event (left to right): Arlet Levandi (Estonia), Kseniia Sinitsyna (Russia), Alina Butaeva and Luka Berulava (Georgia), and Utana Yoshida and Shingo Nishiyama (Japan)



Japan's Yuma Kagiyama and his choreographer, Misao Sato, celebrated his first-place finish in the men's event.

BACKSTAGE PASS





OPPOSITE PAGE:

■ China's Wenjing Sui and Cong Han were congratulated by one of their coaches, Jinlin Guan, following the team's victory in the pairs event at the 2019 Grand Prix Final.
Photo: Susan D. Russell

■ Italy's Daniel Grassl, Alessia Tornaghi, and Gabriele Frangipani were a stylish trio at the 2020 European Championships banquet.
Photo: Tatjana Flade

THIS PAGE:

■ Nathan Chen, Camden Pulkinen, Tomoki Hiwatashi and Andrew Torgashev caught up in the media room while they waited for the men's free skate draw to take place at 2020 U.S. nationals.
Photo: Robin Ritoss

■ James Min was promoting his Australian homeland at 2020 Four Continents and said he is excited that the 2021 Four Continents Championships will take place in Sydney next February.
Photo: Robin Ritoss





OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE:

- Mariah Bell, Alysia Liu and Bradie Tennell struck a “Charlie’s Angels” pose at the press conference following the ladies’ free skate at the 2020 U.S. Championships.
Photo: Robin Ritoss

- Evgenia Medvedeva joined the rising pairs team of Aleksandra Boikova and Dmitrii Kozlovskii at the draw for the short programs at 2020 Russian nationals.
Photo: Tatjana Flade

THIS PAGE:

- Russia’s Victoria Sinitsina and Nikita Katsalapov celebrated at the closing banquet following their win in the ice dance competition at the 2020 European Championships.
Photo: Tatjana Flade
- China’s Boyang Jin congratulated Kévin Aymoz of France on his third-place finish at the Grand Prix Final in Torino, Italy. Jin finished fifth.
Photo: Susan D. Russell







OPPOSITE PAGE:

- Australian ice dancers Andrew Dodds, Chantelle Kerry (back), Matilda Friend and William Badaoui and South Korea's Yura Min and Daniel Eaton were all smiles the draw for the free dance at 2020 Four Continents.

Photo: Robin Ritoss

- Canadian coach Bruno Marcotte took his pairs team of Kirsten Moore-Towers and Michael Marinaro to their first Grand Prix Final in 2019.

Photo: Susan D. Russell

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE:

- Michael Parsons, Jimmy Ma, and Amber Glenn had some fun at the end of the 2020 U.S. Championships.

Photo: Elvin Walker

- Ice dancers Tiffani Zagorski and Jonathan Guerreiro, and Elizaveta Tuktamysheva showed their unique styles at the 2020 Russian Championships exhibition gala. *Photo: Tatjana Flade*





OPPOSITE PAGE:

■ Russian coach Nikolai Morozov was particularly invested in the free dance performance of his daughter Annabelle and her ice dance partner at the 2020 Russian Championships.
Photo: Tatjana Flade

■ British pairs skaters Zoe Jones and Christopher Boyadji showed their glam side at the 2020 Europeans banquet.
Photo: Tatjana Flade

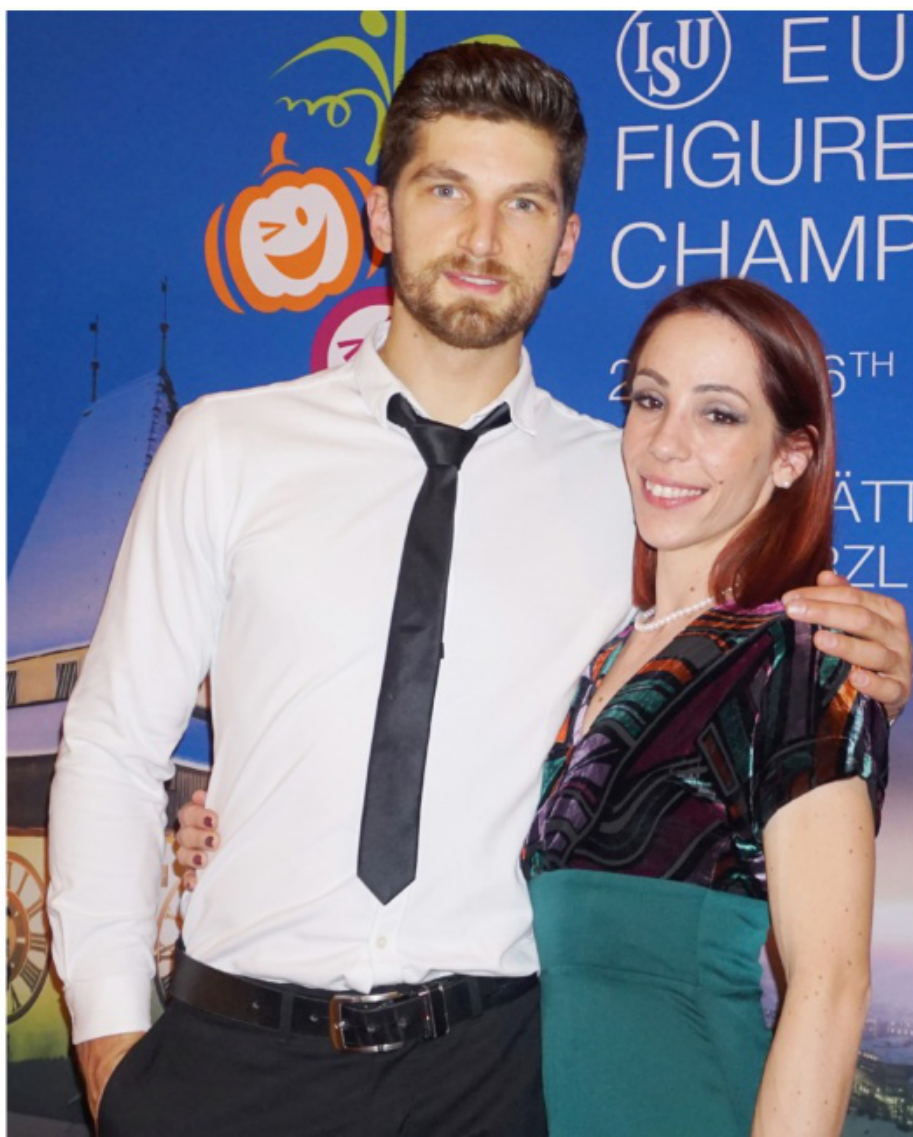
■ Kamila Valieva of Russia claimed the Junior Grand Prix Final title in her debut in Italy.
Photo: Susan D. Russell

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE:

■ Evan Bates and Madison Chock danced to a silver-medal finish at the Grand Prix Final and a month later claimed their second U.S. title.
Photo: Susan D. Russell

■ Yaroslav Paniot, who formerly represented Ukraine, now hopes to represent the U.S. He is coached by Viacheslav Zagorodniuk, the 1996 European champion.
Photo: Robin Ritoss

■ Italy's top pairs team Nicole Della Monica and Matteo Guarise twirled into fourth place at the 2020 European Championships.
Photo: Tatjana Flade



Quicksteps

► ON THE MEND



Canadian ice dancer **Nikolaj Sørensen** was sidelined in the late fall of 2019 after dealing with a knee problem that had been bothering him since last May. "I was able to keep it at bay until the Grand Prix season was over, but with the amount of pain during our second Grand Prix I knew it had to be addressed," said Sørensen who underwent surgery for a cartilage graft and a meniscotomy on Dec. 16.

The injury forced Sørensen and his ice dance partner **Laurence Fournier Beaudry** to miss the 2020 Canadian Championships.

Just days after leaving the hospital following surgery to remove a tumor from one of her kidneys, **Maia Shibutani** confirmed the tumor was malignant. "This wasn't the news I was hoping for, but I am beyond thankful that it was detected early and that my surgery went well," the 25-year-old revealed in an Instagram post.

► FAKE MAGIC

Russia's **Adelina Sotnikova**, the 2014 Olympic champion, was defrauded of two million rubles (US\$32,000) by a group of fake fortune-tellers who convinced her they could woo her ex-boyfriend back.

However, once the money was received from Sotnikova, the magus magically disappeared, prompting the 23-year-old to report the matter to the authorities.



Following an investigation, two of the swindlers were captured and detained by Russian police. The leader of the gang — who claimed to have been gifted with extrasensory abilities and had offered these "magic services" to Sotnikova — reportedly fled Moscow and is now in Ukraine.

► HONORABLE AWARD

The Governor General of Canada, Julie Payette, has honored **Joyce Hisey**, an icon in Canadian and international figure skating circles, for her invaluable contributions to figure skating.



Payette will award Hisey a Member of the Order of Canada medal later this year in acknowledgement of her dedication and commitment to developing and furthering the sport in a volunteer career that spanned more than five decades.

Among her many accomplishments, Hisey served as an ISU judge and an ice dance referee for 40 years, was the figure skating chairperson for the 1988 Olympic Winter Games and a team leader at many international competitions, including the 1984 Olympic Winter Games in Sarajevo.

► ALPINE MOVE

After much deliberation, Japan's **Shoma Uno** finally settled on a coach in late December and a few weeks later moved to Switzerland to train with **Stéphane Lambiel** at his skating school in Champéry.

"From the beginning of the new year I have settled into a new

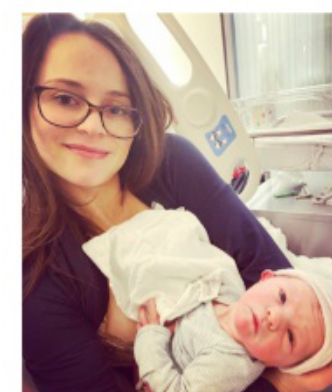
environment, and am working on improving my jump accuracy for the World Championships," said Uno who opted not to compete at Four Continents in February.

► BABY MAKES THREE

Former Swiss champion **Sarah van Berkel** (née Meier) and her husband Jan van Berkel welcomed their first child, a son Tim, on Jan. 3, 2020.



Sasha Cohen and her fiancé Geoff Lieberthal became the proud parents of a son, Dashiell Lev Lieberthal, on Jan. 17.



► COURT BATTLE

Oksana Ten, the mother of **Denis Ten**, is attempting to have a new court case instituted with respect to the murder of her son.

Ten's parents, among others, have never accepted that his was a random killing, but rather one

that was ordered by persons unknown.

Three people were convicted and imprisoned in the original case.

However, following Ten's death, his mother began her own investigation and discovered that the family of one of the convicted killers had suddenly had an upswing in good fortune.

On Jan. 13, the court rejected the criminal suit Ten had filed against the police officers involved in the case. Her lawyer now plans to appeal that decision to Kazakhstan's Supreme Court.

► DRIVING IN STYLE



Bruno Massot's 15-month-old son, Louka, tested out the new toy Porsche convertible he received from Aljona Savchenko and her husband Liam Cross during a visit to Oberstdorf in January.

► LAST CALL?

Czech star **Michal Březina** claimed top spot in the men's short program at 2020 Europeans but a problematic free skate dropped him to seventh overall. Following the competition, Březina posted a cryptic message on his Instagram page:

"That's all she wrote ... I hoped to end on a better note but that's life and life has something more important in store for me now!"

One of those "somethings" was the birth of his first child, a daughter, in early February.

► VIVA LAS VEGAS



On the heels of a wildly successful event in 2019, U.S. Figure Skating announced in early January that it is returning to Las Vegas for 2020 Skate America.

U.S. figure skating officials said it received an overwhelmingly positive response from skaters and fans with respect to their experience at 2019 Skate America.

► LET'S TWIST AGAIN

Four months after the birth of her daughter **Aljona Savchenko** and **Bruno Massot** have returned to the show circuit.

The duo is currently performing in Europe with *Holiday on Ice*.

In an interview with a German newspaper in January, Savchenko said that she and Massot are discussing making a return to competition. "We are at the

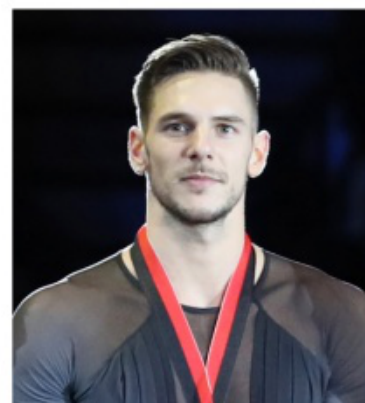
very beginning of the decision. We really don't know yet how and whether we will continue," she said.

"I hurt my head and my body a lot to reach our goal," Massot added. "I love my new life in Switzerland, my small family and the work as a coach there. But, we're thinking about coming back. We'll decide together."

► FRENCH WOES

The French federation has been in damage control mode the past few months with two of its skaters making headlines around the globe, and not for the right reasons.

In January, French news agencies reported that **Laurine Lecavelier** tested positive for cocaine at an in-competition doping test at Masters de Patinage last September. She could be facing a four-year ban.



Meanwhile, pairs skater **Morgan Ciprès** has been accused of sending lewd photos to a minor in the U.S. in 2018 and is currently under investigation by SafeSport.

But the federation itself has even bigger woes. In a recently released book "Such a Long Silence,"

former pairs skater **Sarah Abitbol** revealed a coach had sexually abused her when she was a teenager, but that the federation and the then-sports minister had turned a blind eye to it.

"Basically, everyone said to me, 'Take your meds and be quiet!' I took my meds and I fell silent," recalled Abitbol, 44.

Didier Gailhaguet, the president of the French federation for almost two decades, was summoned by the sports minister Roxana Mărcăineanu on Feb. 3 to discuss a spate of abuse accusations. She told Gailhaguet that he must resign his position.

"Didier Gailhaguet cannot absolve himself of his moral and personal responsibility, so I have asked him to assume all his responsibilities and resign," Mărcăineanu said.

The public prosecutor opened a criminal investigation later that week.

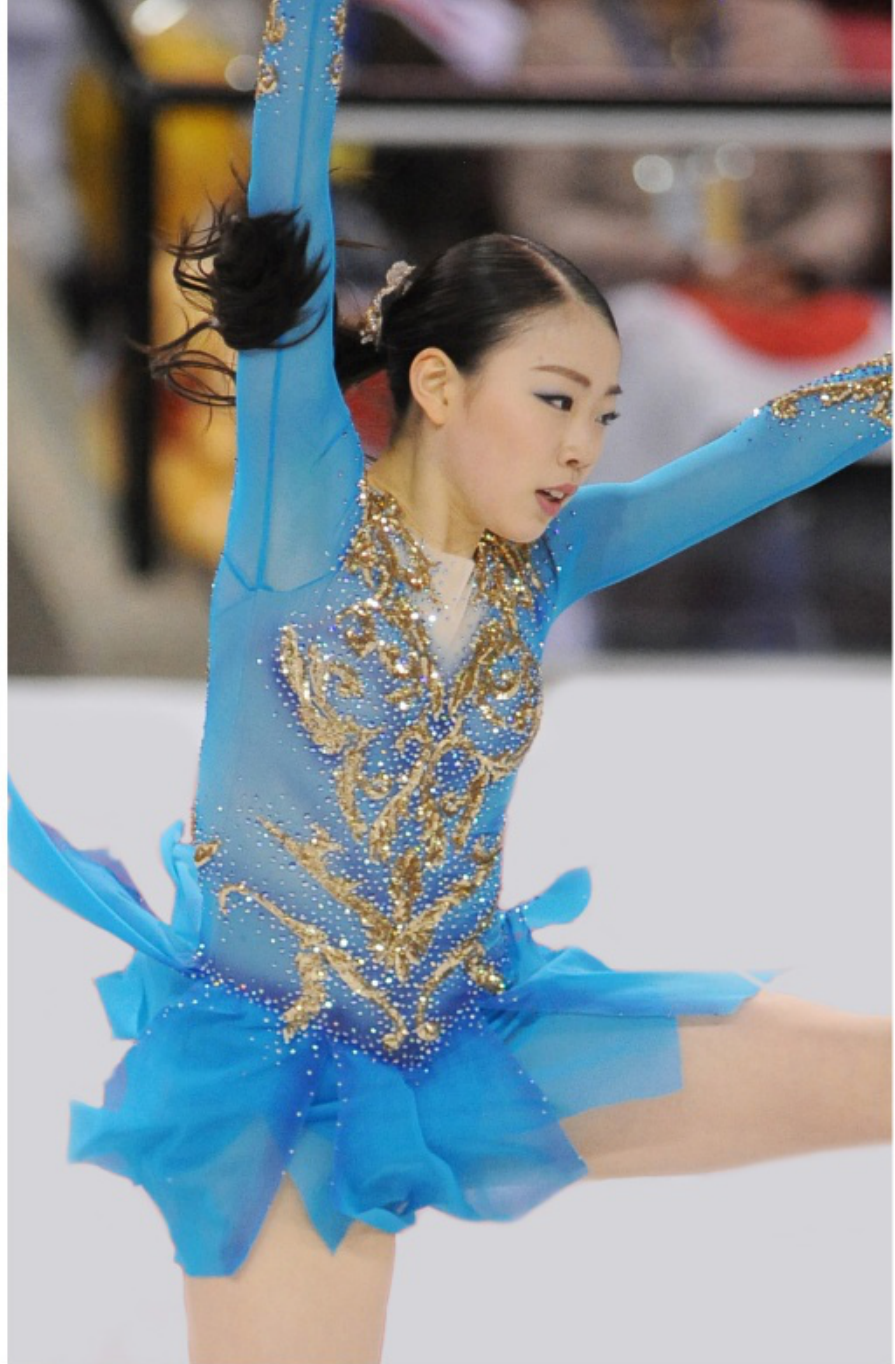
Initially, Gailhaguet made a limited apology, saying he "made mistakes, not errors" but would not resign.

However, on Feb. 8 he was forced out following a meeting of the French federation. "I have taken this decision with composure, with dignity, but without any bitterness before this injustice," a defiant Gailhaguet said.

"It's a big step forward in trying to resolve the problems at the French federation," said former ice dance champion Olivier Schoenfelder.

Elegant Affairs *Fashion*

S|C|O|R|E



OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE:

- Rika Kihira
- Jean-Luc Baker
- Alexandra Stepanova



THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE:

- Madison Chock
- Marin Honda



They Said It.



I was quite nervous but I think we said something like 'It's been a long time.' He has a special aura around him as a skater. —Yuzuru Hanyu on reconnecting with Daisuke Takahashi at the 2019 Japanese Championships

We can't always win and we accept that. It's a lesson for us that we probably needed. —Gabriella Papadakis, on finishing second at Europeans

Ladies skating is really moving forward. It's super cool to be included in that. —Mariah Bell

I know it is only the Youth Olympics, but I am still so happy I was able to grab this once in a lifetime opportunity to represent Japan and have this result. —Yuma Kagiyama on his victory in Lausanne, Switzerland

Figure skating for me is to share the emotion and to fight. —Kévin Aymoz

I'm thrilled that I was able to stay on my feet for all of the jumps. —Nathan Chen on his free skate at 2020 U.S. nationals

I was training so hard to the point I thought I would die. —Wakaba Higuchi, on preparing for the 2019 Japanese Championships

I would like to compete with the men because it would be interesting to compete with skaters that do many quads in their programs. —Alexandra Trusova

We worked, so so hard for this competition, and to be taken down by a death spiral? It is a shock and a disappointment. —Timothy LeDuc on receiving no points for the element in the free at the 2020 U.S. Championships

I am a bit surprised that I could be on the podium with triple jumps. I came here like a rookie skater. —Han Yan, on winning silver at 2019 Cup of China

I was realistic. No one can beat the Russians. This was the best result I could have hoped for.

—Switzerland's Alexia Paganini, on finishing fourth at Europeans

We are not robots. Even machines sometimes have a mishap. —Russia's Alexander Galliamov on a subpar short program at the 2020 Russian Championships

When you have been doing one thing for so long and given your life to it, it is very scary to think what will happen next.

—Elizaveta Tuktamysheva

It's top 10 again this year – for the 11th time. Who else can say that? —Michal Březina, on finishing seventh at Europeans

Everyone wants to win. Those who don't, don't come. —Victoria Sinitsina



Yuma Kagiya claimed the 2020 Youth Olympic title in Lausanne, Switzerland, in early January. Russia's Andrei Mozalev (right) captured the silver and Danill Samsonov mined bronze.

Photo: Courtesy IOS/Joe Toth