

Sports



Gold for Kim, Hirscher as first doping case rocks Olympics

Canada beat Switzerland to win mixed doubles curling

PYEONGCHANG: American teenager Chloe Kim and Austrian ski ace Marcel Hirscher lit up the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics yesterday on a day of drama that included the first doping scandal of the Games. Snowboarder Kim, 17, snatched the first of the day's eight gold medals in the women's halfpipe, while World Cup maestro Hirscher ended his long wait for a debut Olympic title.

But Japan's short-track speed skater Kei Saito, 21, was at the centre of the first doping scandal in Pyeongchang after testing positive for a banned diuretic. Saito, who has left the athletes' village, was provisionally suspended pending an investigation. He protested his innocence and vowed to clear his name.

"I want to fight to prove my innocence because I don't remember (taking the drug) and it's incomprehensible," he said in a statement. While Kim's brilliant run in the halfpipe stole the show, gold medals also went to Sweden and Norway in cross country skiing, and Italy in short-track speedskating.

Canada beat Switzerland to win the mixed doubles curling, while the Dutch maintained their perfect record in speedskating with a double in the men's 1,500m.

On the slopes, Austrian star Hirscher cemented his legacy as the best skier of his generation with victory in the combined event. Hirscher, 28, has been the outstanding skier in his slalom speciality for years, with 55 career World Cup wins.

But one prize had always eluded him—an Olympic gold medal. His previous best was a slalom silver from Sochi four years ago. After playing down his chances ahead of the race at blustery freezing Pyeongchang, this time he nailed it.

"All the people expected me to win a gold medal, especially in Austria, my home country, where skiing is big," he said. "Everyone is saying, 'Nice career, but an Olympic gold medal is still missing'. This is perfect, unbelievable."

'THIS ONE'S FOR GRAMS!'

For Kim, her debut Olympics turned golden as she romped to snowboarding halfpipe victory. Born in the United States to Korean parents, Kim burst into tears as the enormity of her achievement sunk in. The teenager, who has melted the hearts of home fans in Pyeongchang, justified her status as the hot favourite with an eye-popping top score of 98.25.

Pumping her fists after finishing with back-to-back 1080 spins, Kim revealed that her number one fan—her Seoul-based grandmother—had been in the crowd cheering her on.

"I actually only found out my grandma was at the bottom before my second run," she said. "So I thought 'this one's for Grams!'" Also celebrating gold was Stina Nilsson, who won the women's cross country sprint classic for Sweden. In the men's event, Johannes Klaebo of Norway won gold on his Olympic debut.

“This is perfect, unbelievable”



PYEONGCHANG: USA's gold medalist Chloe Kim poses on the podium during the medal ceremony for the snowboard women's Halfpipe at the Pyeongchang Medals Plaza during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang. — AFP

Italy got their first gold of the Games through Arianna Fontana in the 500m women's short-track speed skating. South Korean multi-medal hope Choi Min-jeong finished second but was disqualified. In speed skating, the Dutch claimed their fourth gold

medal with a one-two in the men's 1,500m through Kjeld Nuis and Patrick Roest. In curling, Canada's Kaitlyn Lawes and John Morris danced with delight after hammering Switzerland 10-3 to take the inaugural Olympic mixed doubles title. — AFP

Russian, American skeleton racers refuse to break the ice

PYEONGCHANG: Russian and American skeleton racers are refusing to speak to each other at the Pyeongchang winter Games in a spat that centres on allegations of widespread Russian doping. In a squabble contrasting with an Olympics detente between old enemies North and South Korea, Russians and Americans at the sliding track on Tuesday were in no mood to make up.

Speaking to Reuters after training runs on Tuesday, two athletes from Russia and an American skeleton racer said there was no contact between them, mostly because of the underlying tensions surrounding Russian athletes' presence at the Games.

"Obviously there is some language barrier that exists between all nations," said US skeleton athlete Matt Antoine, who won bronze at the 2014 Sochi Olympics. But he added: "Do I believe they've competed fairly? No, and I've been very vocal about that. So I don't really have a need to have a conversation with those athletes."

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) last year banned Russian athletes from competing formally from these Games over what it called the "systematic manipulation" of doping tests at the 2014 winter Games in Sochi, Russia.

Instead, it has allowed Russians with no history of doping to compete at the Games as neutral athletes, at its invitation. Russian skeleton racer Nikita Tregubov said his American rivals did not speak to him or compatriot Vladislav Marchenkov, creating an unpleasant atmosphere around the track.

"They scold us without evidence," Tregubov said. "We weren't the ones who started it. It wasn't us. I didn't start anything. It's up to them to start over for there to be a good atmosphere."

UNFAIR COMPETITION

With relations strained over the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine and American allegations of Russian meddling in the 2016 US president election, something Moscow denies, Russian-US ties have plummeted to a post-Cold War low.

Russia's foreign minister said last week the Olympic ban stemmed from a US attempt to weaken the competition. Tregubov also accused British skeleton racers of having joined the Americans in snubbing them.

"They were drawn into this," he said. "We used to get along great. People have changed abruptly." When questioned by Reuters yesterday, British skeleton racers Jerry Rice and Dom Parsons said a language barrier had limited the interaction between them and the Russians.

"I'm friendly with everyone around the track," Rice said. "There's always the language barrier with obviously some nations. I don't speak Russian, they don't speak English." Parsons said athletes were also focused on the competition, not each other. "I think when we're at the track all of us are very focused on what we are doing anyway," he said.

Last week, the chief of mission for the group of Russian athletes, Stanislav Pozdnyakov, said a member of the Canadian delegation in Pyeongchang had mistreated a Russian coach, Pozdnyakov, who did not disclose the nature of the incident nor the identities of those involved, said the Canadian Olympic Committee had apologised. — Reuters

Fifth time lucky? Olympic gold beckons for Savchenko

GANGNEUNG: Germany's celebrated pairs skater Aljona Savchenko is in Pyeongchang on a hunt for an elusive Olympic title at her fifth attempt. The Ukrainian born 34-year-old has a mantlepiece straining under the weight of awards earned from a sparkling career in the rink. And with partner Bruno Massot she will start as one of the favourites in the 2018 competition which gets underway with the short programme yesterday. But there are some sizeable obstacles blocking their path. China's Sui Wenjing and Han Cong have every right to believe they can add this to their world championship title in Helsinki last year with Savchenko and Massot runners-up. Then there's Meagan Duhamel and Eric Radford, the Canadian team gold medalists.

Radford is on a high after becoming the first openly gay Olympic champion. And two time European champions Evgenia Tarasova and Vladimir Morozov representing Olympic Athletes from Russia hope to have a say in the outcome too.

A couple on and off the ice, they successfully defended their European crown in mid-January in Moscow before winning the pairs short programme segment of the team event in South Korea. Skating for honour rather than for medals, are the North Korean pair Ryom Tae-Ok and Kim Ju-Sik, among 22 athletes from north of the border taking part amid an inter-Korean reconciliation drive.

Savchenko and Massot turned up in Pyeongchang in superb shape after establishing a new pairs free skate record en route to Grand Prix Final success at Nagoya in Japan in December. "We did a very good free in Japan, but I think we still can do better than that," said Massot. "The goal is to skate clean at first, then the result will come," said his experienced partner. "We want to bring art on to the ice and combine pair skating



GANGNEUNG: Germany's Aljona Savchenko (bottom) and Germany's Bruno Massot compete in the figure skating team event pair skating short program during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games at the Gangneung Ice Arena in Gangneung. — AFP

and ice dance so that it becomes one." Savchenko represented her country of birth in her first Olympics in Salt Lake City in 2002.

She teamed up with Robin Szolkowy to represent Germany for the last three Games, coming away with bronze from Vancouver and Sochi, and the not inconsiderable feat of five world titles. With Szolkowy leaving the stage she turned to French born Massot, who moved to Germany and received German citizenship last November.

STRONG FIELD

With multiple world and European podiums together this could well be their time to strike it big. They tuned up in the team event won by Canada on Monday, with not everything going to plan as Savchenko took a fall. "With a fall, you cannot be satisfied. But this is why we

have that kind of rehearsal," she shrugged.

Massot was unhappy over the morning scheduling for the figure skating at the Gangneung Ice Arena. "It is always more difficult when you have an early morning practice and then the competition takes place two hours later. Maybe that schedule is good for the TV, but not for the athletes."

Ryom and Kim meanwhile are the only North Koreans competing at the Games who met the Olympic qualifying standards. "They're not here to win a medal, let's be honest, they're ranked 15th in the world. It's a really strong field," said their coaching consultant Bruno Marcotte last week.

"They were 15th at the world championships in Helsinki, if they come top 12 we'd be ecstatic. "Their main focus and mine with them is to help them improve their personal best score." — AFP

Stina takes sprint gold for Sweden

PYEONGCHANG: Stina Nilsson swept aside the field in the Olympic women's sprint classic final yesterday, powering to victory in a time of 3:03.8 to secure Sweden's second cross-country gold of the Games.

Maiken Caspersen Falla of Norway, who won the event in Sochi four years ago, took the silver medal and Yulia Belorukova, representing the Olympic Athletes of Russia, claimed the bronze.

Strong winds again whipped up the snow on the course as the field was whittled down from 68 starters to the six who contested the final. The 24-year-old Nilsson, who has a superb sprinting pedigree, took control early in each of her races and the final was no different as she sped away up the first hill.

The sprint around the 1,176-metre course requires maximum effort and leaves no margin for error, but Nilsson barely had to look over her shoulder as she glided across the line, arms aloft, to claim victory just over three seconds ahead of Falla.

The Norwegian was locked in a furious battle for second with the 24-year-old Belorukova, and she had to call on every ounce of her experience to hold off the challenge of the Russian in a sprint finish, sliding a ski over the line to claim the silver. With Charlotte Kalla winning the skiathlon, Nilsson's gold was the second for Sweden's women in Pyeongchang.

"I had a really good day, felt strong already in the prologue, I felt strong in quarters, and in semi I felt like



PYEONGCHANG: Gold medalist Sweden's Stina Nilsson reacts on the podium during the victory ceremony in the women's cross-country individual sprint classic final at the Alpensia cross country ski centre. — AFP

I had some energy saved for the final." Nilsson told a news conference. "I wanted to cross the finish line totally tired, so I just went for it in the last uphill."

Sochi champion Falla said she struggled in the conditions. "The course I think it was hard, especially on

the downhill, a little bit different from the last day. It was very difficult to ski down," she told reporters.

"The whole race, I think there as a lot of wind and cold temperatures. Not the easiest conditions, but it was nearly the same for everybody." — Reuters