

Sports



Czech snowboarder Ledecker stuns Alpine world with super-G gold

Veith takes silver, Weirather bronze

PYEONGCHANG: Czech snowboarder Ester Ledecker produced one of the biggest shocks in the history of the Winter Olympics when she tore down Jeongseon slope in bib number 26 to win the women's Alpine skiing super-G yesterday.

The 22-year-old rank outsider-rated 43rd in the World Cup standings in super-G-was thought to have a much better chance of gold in the snowboarding events she will also contest in Pyeongchang, an unprecedented doubling up.

Bib 26 was the starting position for a racer with only the slimmest chance of getting near the podium, and the top contenders clearly thought the medals had been sewn up by skiers in the top 20 spots.

When Ledecker started her run, Austrian Anna Veith was at the bottom of the slope already taking phone calls and receiving the congratulations of her rivals for becoming the first woman to win back-to-back titles in the Olympic super-G.

Even a smiling International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach seemed to be congratulating her. Clearly, nobody had accounted for Ledecker's near-miraculous performance. Indeed, the Czech's run had appeared on a par with her starting position until halfway down the course but she simply carved up the bottom of the run to clock one minute 21.11 seconds.

Ledecker could barely believe it herself when the green light indicated she had

bumped Veith out of the gold-medal position by one hundredth of a second to give her country its first Alpine skiing gold medal. "I was wondering what just happened. Is this a kind of mistake?", she said.

"I was thinking okay, they're going to change the time, I'm going to wait for a little bit and they're going to switch and put some seconds on. "I was just staring at the board and nothing was happening and everybody was screaming. I just started to think okay, this is weird."

Veith's time of 1:21.12 was only enough

congratulate her because the Olympics is so special and anything can happen. It was so tight."

Weirather's bronze enabled her to join her mother Hanni Wenzel and uncle Andreas Wenzel as an Olympic medallist with the family now having contributed seven of the 10 won by athletes from the tiny principality.

The 28-year-old said Ledecker's win was "amazing" and credited her own medal-winning performance to a lot of hard work and a little bit of luck. "There were plenty of racers who had no chance because of the wind," she said.

"It's difficult when it's at the Olympics and you want a really fair race; today you needed the luck for sure. I wasn't really lucky this season with that, but today I was." Swiss racer Michelle Gisin dismissed the idea that the design of the course could have contributed to Ledecker's shock win. "We have an amazing slope and we have an amazing course and it's really fair," said Gisin, who went out just behind Veith and finished ninth. "We have fair chances from bib one to bib 50, the slope is so good."

BIG CROWD

Despite a delay of an hour because of high winds, the race got underway under bright blue skies with a big crowd packed into the stands at the Jeongseon Alpine Centre. Lindsey Vonn went out first but



American star Lindsey Vonn finishes sixth

for silver, while Liechtenstein's Tina Weirather claimed bronze in 1:21.22 after earlier bumping Swiss World Cup leader Lara Gut off the top of the timesheets by the slenderest of margins.

"I thought I had gold," Veith said. "For me it was a big surprise that she could do this. At first I thought 'is this possible?' "She did a really good run and I want to



PYEONGCHANG: (L-R) Austria's silver medallist Anna Fenninger Veith, Czech Republic's gold medallist Ester Ledecker and Liechtenstein's bronze medallist Tina Weirather pose on the podium during the medal ceremony for the alpine skiing women's Super-G. — AFP

made a mistake before the final jump and skied into soft snow, getting a time that was good enough only for sixth. The 33-year-old American, who will have another chance to become the oldest female medallist in Olympic Alpine skiing in her favoured downhill on the same mountain next week, was as surprised as anyone by Ledecker's win.

"It's definitely shocking, in the Olympics a lot of weird things happen," said Vonn, the downhill champion in Vancouver eight years ago. "Different people can jump in there

that maybe wouldn't be in there before."

While Vonn is the second most decorated woman on the Alpine World Cup circuit with 81 victories, Ledecker has never graced the podium on the circuit as she has spent her time with her snowboarding career.

World champion in the parallel giant slalom snowboarding and a former world champion in the parallel slalom, she could yet enjoy unprecedented medal success in the two separate snow sports in Pyeongchang. — Reuters

Russians blank US in intense Olympic hockey showdown

GANGNEUNG: Ilya Kovalchuk and Nikolai Prokhorin each scored two goals and the Olympic Athletes from Russia blanked arch-rival United States 4-0 in an electric atmosphere yesterday at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic men's hockey tournament.

Russia has not won Olympic hockey gold since 1992 but an all-star OAR lineup from the country's two top clubs showed the skill and tenacity that made them 2018 favourites, securing a quarter-final berth with the win.

Slovakia, which upset the Russians 3-2 in their opener, faced Slovenia in a later match, but the emotional and hard-hitting USA-Russia showdown was the day's marquee event. The political rivals stirred passions long before players began warming up as rowdy fans waved Russian and US flags with chants of "U-S-A" and "Russ-i-a" — screaming that only grew louder as the game unfolded in an intense setting.

While US coach Tony Granato played down any "Miracle on Ice" repeat talk, there were echoes of the 1980 Lake Placid Olympic upset of the Soviet Union by a collection of US amateurs. With NHL talent absent for the first time since 1994 over money issues and injury fears, a young US squad with four college stars and mostly Europe-based talent faced an all-star lineup from Russia's two best clubs, including five-time Olympians and ex-NHL stars Kovalchuk and Pavel Datsyuk. But these Americans found no goals, much less miracles. Bobby Sanguinetti and Datsyuk traded early hits against the boards to set a physical tone, with rock music during breaks and crowd noise feeding into the game's quick-pace tempo.

Two shove-filled melees exchanged near the



GANGNEUNG: Russia's Andrei Zubarev and US Brian O'Neill vie for the puck in the men's ice hockey preliminary round group B game between the Olympic Athletes from Russia and the United States during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games at the Gangneung Hockey Centre in Gangneung. — AFP

Russian goal heated player emotions until they boiled over 91 seconds before the end of the second period.

US forward Chris Bourque, the smallest man on the ice, answered a takedown by going after Prokhorin, who responded in kind as both were sent off for roughing. The Russians were already leading 2-0 by then thanks to a Prokhorin brace.

Kovalchuk blasted a shot past US goaltender Ryan Zapolski from the right faceoff circle with 0.2sec remaining in the period, boosting their lead to 3-0. Kovalchuk struck again 28 seconds into the third period, zipping a laser shot from the opposite circle for a 4-0 Russian edge.

Russian goaltender Vasili Koshechkin made 29 saves in the shutout. The red-clad Russians opened the scoring 7:21 into the game, the unguarded Prokhorin at the crease tapped in Sergei Mozyakin's pass.

Prokhorin rifled a slapshot from the top of the left faceoff circle past Zapolski 2:14 into the second period to double the Russians' lead.

CZECHS EDGE CANADA

Jan Kovar and Petr Koukal scored in a penalty shootout to lift the Czech Republic to a 3-2 win over defending champion Canada 3-2. Canada could still qualify directly for the quarter-finals by beating South Korea today.

"We have to keep our heads up and come in tomorrow confident. We can't dwell on it," said Canada's Maxim Noreau, whose final shootout effort clanked off the left post to seal the Czech triumph. "It was a good game for us," Canada coach Willie Desjardins said. "We created lots of chances. Now we move ahead. We know we have to get better." The Czechs would clinch a quarter-final spot Sunday by beating Switzerland, which routed South Korea 8-0. — AFP

Korean teen Choi triumphs in 1,500m short track

PYEONGCHANG: South Korea's world record-holder Choi Minjeong shed tears of joy as she seized her first Olympic title in the women's 1,500m short track yesterday, making up for her disqualification in the 500m final.

Choi, 19, eased to the front with two laps to go and she glided well clear of the field to win in 2min 24.948sec, more than a second faster than China's Li Jinyu. Choi threw her arms into the air as she did a lap of honour for the ecstatic 12,000-capacity crowd, and the tears flowed as she hugged her coach.

Kim Boutin of Canada, who received abuse on social media over Choi's disqualification in the 500m, grabbed her second bronze medal of the Games. But the agony continued for British world champion Elise Christie, who was stretchered away and taken to hospital after she crashed out painfully in the semi-finals.

Christie was also a crash casualty in the women's 500m final and at Sochi 2014, she went home empty-handed after being penalised in all three of her events. "It's too early to tell anything, we'll have some scans and find out exactly what the story is," said Mike Hay, Team GB



GANGNEUNG: South Korea's Choi Minjeong celebrates winning the gold medal in the women's 1,500m short track speed skating. — AFP

chef de mission.

"It's tough. But right now it's about Elise's health. She was in a great form and I saw her a couple of times and she was in a great place, it's just incredibly unfortunate." — AFP

Russians romp into women's s-finals with Swiss rout

GANGNEUNG: The Olympic Athletes from Russia team trounced Switzerland 6-2 in an entertaining clash at the Kwandong Hockey Centre yesterday to book a spot in the semi-finals of the women's Olympic ice hockey tournament.

The Russians will take on four-times defending champions and heavy favourites Canada on Monday for a place in the final. The Canadians beat the Russians 5-0 in the group stages today. Anna Shokhina capitalised on Lara Stalder's mistake to give the Russians an unlikely lead seven minutes into the first period after the Swiss forward took a fraction too long to control a routine pass.

The Russians were shorthanded by two when Shokhina pounced on Stalder to force a turnover before bearing down on the Swiss goal and scooping a wrist shot high into the net.

The Swiss equalised with less than 10 seconds played in the second period after Alina Muller collected a Christine Meier pass and wove her way past three defenders before flick-

ing a backhanded shot over Russian goaltender Nadezhda Alexandrova.

"We had a big goal of winning a medal here," said the disappointed Muller, who was in tears after the defeat. "We started well, we kept going, we were one-nothing behind but didn't stop fighting. I am proud of my team."

Muller is the tournament's top scorer with seven goals, but the personal milestone was overshadowed by the exit of her team, who won bronze at the Sochi Games four years ago. "Now it's not worth anything," she added. "I am happy about that but at the moment it's hard to be happy about anything. Maybe in some days I can look back and be proud of my team and maybe we can regret nothing."

Stalder made amends when she put the Swiss ahead on the powerplay with a classy shot into the top corner, but the Russians were back on level terms minutes later when Viktoriya Kulishova tucked home a rebound.

Liana Ganeyeva took advantage of a powerplay for the Russians to extend the lead with just over a minute left in the second period by directing Shokhina's powerful shot from just inside the blue line past Swiss goaltender Florence Schelling.

Shokhina scored again in the final period and Olga Sosina added a sixth late on to put the finishing touches on the rout. Switzerland will play the unified Korean team, who they beat 8-0 earlier in the tournament, in a classification game today. — Reuters

Champion Kushnir fails to qualify for aerials final

PYEONGCHANG: There was a shock during qualifying for the final of the men's aerials yesterday night when defending Olympic champion Anton Kushnir of Belarus failed to qualify. The top six men from the first round of qualifying progressed automatically to today's final, with the remaining athletes moving into a second qualifying round. The top six after the second round also progressed to the final.

However, after a first round score of 120.80 failed to seal qualification for the final, the pressure was on Kushnir to reach the final with the last jump of the second round. Needing to beat the score of 121.72, set by Mischa Gasser of Switzerland, to qualify in the top six of the second round, the Sochi gold medal-

ist fell just short, scoring 121.27 to miss out by 0.45 points.

Kushnir's absence will be felt strongly in the final and as his result was read out, shock spread across the faces of his team mates, coaches and rivals. The 33-year-old, competing in his fourth Olympics, was hoping to defend his title and continue Belarus's dominance of the sport. The country has had a man on the aerials podium at the last four Olympics, winning gold in both Vancouver and Sochi. Now, the baton passes to Stanislav Hladchenko, who is the only Belarusian representative in the final, after world number four Maxim Gustik also failed to qualify.

American Jonathon Lillis top-scored with 127.44 and the world champion will be joined in Sunday's final by Sochi silver medallist David Morris. The Australian needed a second jump but delivered to qualify in second place from round two.

It was a good night for the Chinese, who had three athletes progress as they look to get revenge for the result in the women's final on Friday. Hanna Huskova of Belarus edged China's Zhang Xin and Kong Fanyu into second and third respectively. — Reuters