

Sports



'Ice Prince' Hanyu defies injury to retain skate crown

Shoma Uno takes silver, Javier Fernandez bronze

GANGNEUNG: Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu disclosed he had never "fully healed" from the serious injury that almost scuppered his Olympics after clinching the first back-to-back men's figure skating title in more than six decades yesterday.

The 23-year-old cemented his status as the modern day 'ice prince' when overcoming a three-month injury hiatus to add Pyeongchang gold to his Sochi 2014 success and emulate American Dick Button, Olympic champion in 1948 and 1952.

"I'm not fully healed, I really pushed it hard and there were some jumps and elements that I could not perform, but I forced myself to do so," revealed Hanyu, who damaged ankle ligaments in a training accident in November.

"My injuries were more severe than I thought, but I've been fortunate to make it to the Olympics, and that I'm able to smile now explains what I'm feeling. "I've had a slew of injuries since Sochi, but I wanted to have the courage to be bold enough to challenge myself."

The charismatic skating icon had promised to reward his army of ardent supporters with "a dream performance" and he didn't let them down as he led a Japanese one-two with Shoma Uno taking silver, ahead of Spain's Javier Fernandez with bronze.

"I worried a lot of people as I could not practise because of my injury. So, there was stronger support than before." Hanyu's Sochi triumph had elevated him to cult status in Japan, and his exploits in South Korea will only serve to propel his standing even further.

After his not-quite-spotless free skate, which opened with a quickfire quad salchow and quad toe loop, he bowed to his fans as they in turn tossed his Winnie The Pooh stuffed toys, his mascot, onto the Gangneung Arena ice.

But this was no teddy bear's picnic for the two-time world champion, that was evident from his tears of relief after his score of 206.17 points came over the tannoy. He then had to sit and suffer as first six-time European champion Fernandez, and then Uno, attempted valiantly but in vain to topple the rink king.

He took the Pyeongchang plaudits with a combined score of 317.85 to give him a cushion of almost 11 points over 19-year-old Uno (306.90), with Fernandez (305.24) just behind.

REMARKABLE JOURNEY

For Fernandez, it was the best of his last Olympics, claiming Spain's first ever figure skating medal. "It was a good experience, I know I didn't do the perfect programme but I was satisfied with what I did and it got me an Olympic medal, that's all I've got to say.

"I've been dreaming about it and it's been a big goal for me. I knew it was going to be my last one (Olympics) so it's true that I was a little bit more nervous than yesterday."

Hanyu was visibly moved by his latest triumph in a remarkable journey from the day in 2011 he had to flee a Sendai ice rink when a devastating earthquake hit Japan.



GANGNEUNG: Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu competes in the men's single skating free skating of the figure skating event during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games at the Gangneung Ice Arena in Gangneung yesterday. — AFP

As well as claiming only the third ever skating title for Japan, his gold medal was also the 1,000th awarded in Winter Games history. Aside from Hanyu's heroics, the free skate was marked by the first ever routine featuring six quads from American teenager Nathan Chen, who scored an Olympic record of 215.08.

It was enough for fifth place for the 18-year-old, whose bid to upstage Hanyu had come unstuck when

he flopped in the short programme on Friday to leave him trailing in 17th.

Hanyu meanwhile, pushed by the likes of his training partner Fernandez, Uno, Chen and company, has pushed figure skating to new limits. The number of quads, skating's most difficult jump, executed in the free skate final topped the 50-mark - something that would have astounded Button. — AFP

Bjoergen makes history with Norway relay gold

PYEONGCHANG: Marit Bjoergen skied a triumphant final leg to write her name in the Olympic record books, delivering gold for Norway in the women's 4x5km relay yesterday and joining countryman Ole Einar Bjoerndalen as the most successful winter Olympian of all time on 13 medals.

Sweden took silver, two seconds behind, after powerful performances by Charlotte Kalla, Ebba Andersson and Stina Nilsson, while the Olympic Athletes from Russia came third to take the bronze, 43.3 seconds behind the winners.

Bjoergen got the glory but Norway's win was firmly rooted in a stunning third leg by Olympic 10km freestyle champion Ragnhild Haga, who erased a gap of almost half a minute to tee up Bjoergen for victory.

The Swedes also had to overcome a big gap to the leaders after a slow first leg by Anna Haag but Kalla, who took Olympic gold in the women's skiathlon, charged around her two laps to put them back in contention.

Led by superb runs from Natalia

Nepryaeva and Yulia Belorukova, Olympic Athletes of Russia made the early running but when the Nordic nations upped the tempo they gradually fell away and had to be content with a bronze medal.

Andersson managed to take the lead for the Swedes as the race reached its final leg but Haga's power, consistently applied over her two laps, left Bjoergen in a position to seal the victory. The 37-year-old accelerated up the first hill with Nilsson snapping at her heels at the front of the field but Olympic sprint champion Nilsson had no answer when Bjoergen rounded the final corner and sped over the line for victory.

"I have been nervous, I haven't been able to train for this," Bjoergen told Norwegian television. "But I just had to grind and wear out her (Nilsson's) legs, and I did that. She didn't manage the last turn and I'm surprised I managed it. She was on my heels in the last uphill," Bjoergen added.

Bjoergen received plenty of plaudits from her competitors following her historic achievement. "She is an absolute legend, it's really, really cool to see her race every single time, she just skis with absolute control," American racer Jessica Diggins told Reuters. The United States continue their wait for a first cross-country medal since 1976. Sophie Caldwell struggled on the first leg, leaving her team mates with too much to do and they eventually finished fifth behind Finland. — Reuters

Switzerland's Hoefflin wins slopestyle gold

PYEONGCHANG: Sarah Hoefflin claimed the Olympic gold medal in women's freestyle skiing slopestyle in a Swiss one-two at Pyeongchang's Phoenix Park yesterday. Compatriot Mathilde Gremaud won silver, while Britain's Isabel Atkin took the bronze in a final that had confounded many pre-competition predictions.

Sochi gold medallist Dara Howell was eliminated in qualifying, while none of the top-10 of the World Cup standings got on the podium. In glorious sunshine at Phoenix Snow Park, fans were treated to an entertaining final and it was Swiss pair Gremaud and Hoefflin who made the early running to lay down the two highest scores of the first round. Norway duo of Johanne Killi and Tiril Sjaaestad Christiansen both fell on the rails in first run. Sweden's Emma Dahlstrom, who qualified in first place with a 91.40 - the highest score of the day - also fell on the first kicker. Further falls for Sjaaestad Christiansen and Dahlstrom and a disappointing run for Killi in the second round meant the top three in the world were all struggling going into the final runs.

Hoefflin, currently 12 in the FIS World Cup, then raised the bar further as she improved her score to 91.20, taking the lead off her compatriot. Gremaud, who admitted afterwards she had been suffering from a head injury in the build-up to qualification, went for the switch double 1080 on the final kicker of her last run to take back the gold, but fell going for glory.

Britain's Atkins produced a clean third run to score 84.60 and move into third place. She then faced a nervous wait as the final three athletes took their final runs. After neither of the highly-touted Norwegians could break into the top three with their final attempts, it was down to world championship silver medallist Dahlstrom in the final run of the afternoon. However, the Swede couldn't deliver and Switzerland got their first freestyle skiing gold since Evelyn Leu won the aerials in 2006. "I think there were a lot of girls who could have won," Hoefflin told reporters afterwards.

"But one thing that is so great about women's free skiing is it really is anyone's to win." "But I was really lucky in the finals because I didn't have any wind in my runs, compared to some of the others. That helped me a lot."

Atkin, who is also a FIS World Championship bronze medallist, celebrated with friends and family after sealing the bronze medal. In doing so, Atkin won Britain's first Winter Olympic medal on skis.



PYEONGCHANG: Switzerland's Sarah Hoefflin falls during a run of the women's ski slopestyle final event during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games at the Phoenix Park in Pyeongchang yesterday. — AFP

"I wasn't aware that was the case until someone told me earlier in an interview," said the 19-year-old. "I was just stoked I got to ski with my team-mate Katie (Summerhayes) today." "I wasn't too concerned about the result (coming in the final) but I am so pleased to come away with the bronze."

It was a disappointing afternoon for many of the world's top skiers. Fifteen-year-old Jennie-Lee Burmannson, first in the world cup rankings, was aiming to become Sweden's youngest ever winter Olympic medallist but could only manage an eighth place finish.

Birthday girl and Sochi silver medallist Devin Logan couldn't repeat her feat from four years ago and finished in 10th. — Reuters

Kuzmina finally gets her gold in mass start

PYEONGCHANG: After two silver medal finishes in the pursuit and individual races, Slovakian biathlete Anastasiya Kuzmina finally got her gold at the Pyeongchang Olympics yesterday with a superb shooting performance in the women's 12.5km mass start.

The 33-year-old mother of two, who claimed back-to-back sprint titles in the 7.5km event at Vancouver and Sochi, became the first woman to clinch biathlete golds in three successive Games, winning with a time of 35 minutes 23 seconds.

Belarusian triple Olympic champion Darya Domracheva grabbed silver, 18.8 seconds behind Kuzmina, while Norway's Tiril Eckhoff took bronze. "I expected to have the best chance in the gold medal for sprint here," Kuzmina told reporters.

"When this didn't happen I was really sad and nervous before the next races. But it happened here ... A different event from Vancouver and Sochi, so it's an incredible feeling." With the 30 athletes split into 10

groups of three, Kuzmina started in the second row, battling for position all the way to the first shoot.

Her accuracy on the range laid the foundation for her victory, but despite showing nerves of steel on a chilly night, eventually even she got rattled. Having built up a considerable lead, Kuzmina arrived at the fourth shoot and made her first four shots before taking a very long pause and then missing her final effort as the rest of the field skied in towards the range.

"In my career I never shoot clean four times, and today after three times zero, I was reaching for my last shooting, and I was worried about it," she said. "I'm so happy that my ski time was good enough, and saved my position."

The miss meant she was diverted to ski a 150-metre penalty lap, but she remained in the lead and surged away to the finish, waving a Slovakian flag proudly as she crossed the line.

Germany's Laura Dahlmeier, who started the Games with golds in the sprint and pursuit races, struggled with the rifle, missing once in each of her first two shoots before finishing a disappointing 16th. Kuzmina's triumph equalled the Slovakian record held by twin brothers in canoe slalom, Pavol and Peter Hochschorner, of three gold medals at Summer and Winter Games. — Reuters

Suarez and Alba strikes give Barca win at Eibar

EIBAR: Barcelona got back to winning ways yesterday after two consecutive draws, with a 2-0 victory at Eibar, thanks to goals from Luis Suarez and Jordi Alba, to go 10 points clear at the top of the Liga standings.

Suarez latched on to a pass from Lionel Messi to dribble round the home side's goalkeeper and slot into an empty net in the 16th minute, while Messi hit the woodwork later in the game as did Eibar's Fabian Orellana, who was sent off with 25 minutes remaining for a second booking.

Eibar coach Jose Luis Mendilabar was also dismissed later for angry protests against referee Alejandro Hernandez Hernandez. Barca finally made the most of their extra man when Alba sidefooted into the near corner with his weaker right foot in the 88th minute to give his side a first win in three games after surprise successive draws against Espanyol and Getafe.

The hard-fought win takes Barca on to 62 points for the season, 10 above nearest challengers Atletico Madrid, who play Athletic Bilbao at home today. Champions Real visit Real Betis the same day. — Reuters



Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

SPANISH LEAGUE		
Real Sociedad v Levante	beIN SPORTS HD 3	14:00
Atletico de Madrid v Athletic de Bilbao	beIN SPORTS HD 3	18:15
Espanyol v Villarreal	beIN SPORTS HD 3	20:30
Real Betis v Real Madrid	beIN SPORTS HD 3	22:45
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE		
Torino v Juventus	beIN SPORTS HD 4	14:30
Bologna v Sassuolo Calcio	beIN SPORTS	17:00
Napoli v Spal	beIN SPORTS HD 4	17:00
Benevento v Crotone	beIN SPORTS	17:00
Atalanta v Fiorentina	beIN SPORTS HD 4	20:00
Milan v Sampdoria	beIN SPORTS HD 4	22:45
GERMAN BUNDESLIGA		
Augsburg v Stuttgart	beIN SPORTS HD 5	17:30
Borussia Monchengladbach v Borussia Dortmund	beIN SPORTS HD 5	20:00
FRENCH LEAGUE		
Nice v Nantes	beIN SPORTS HD 6	17:00
LOSC Lille v Olympique Lyonnais	beIN SPORTS HD 6	19:00
Olympique Marseille v Girondins de Bordeaux	beIN SPORTS HD 6	23:00