

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

Grand Prix Final features record-setting Asian talent

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

As in many other sports, figure skating has become dominated by athletes of Asian heritage, especially on the men's side. That dominance was on display at this year's Grand Prix Final in Barcelona, Spain, in December. Although one female Asian star failed to live up to expectations, a Japanese men's star set new records on the way to a three-peat victory. Plenty of others skated well, too, suggesting that figure-skating fans will continue to look east for years to come.

Atop this heap of young Asian stars is Yuzuru Hanyu, the 21-year-old Olympic champion from Japan. He broke his own records en route to his third straight Grand Prix Final championship, the first skater ever to do so. Hanyu emerged as a leading men's skater since winning the Junior Grand Prix Final in 2009. He followed it with a 2010 world junior championship and his 2014 Olympic gold medal in Sochi, the first ever by a Japanese men's skater.

At the NHK Trophy in November, Hanyu set new scoring records for the free skate (216.07) and in overall points (322.40). In the process, he became the first skater ever to notch at least 300 points overall and the first to earn 200 points in the free skate. Not content to rest on his newly earned laurels, Hanyu improved on those marks in Barcelona.

Landing three quadruple jumps and two triple Axels, he earned a score of 219.48, pushing his overall mark to 330.43. His 110.95 short-program score was also a new record. In addition, Hanyu's 37.48-point margin of victory set a record, not only in the Grand Prix but also in any international competition.

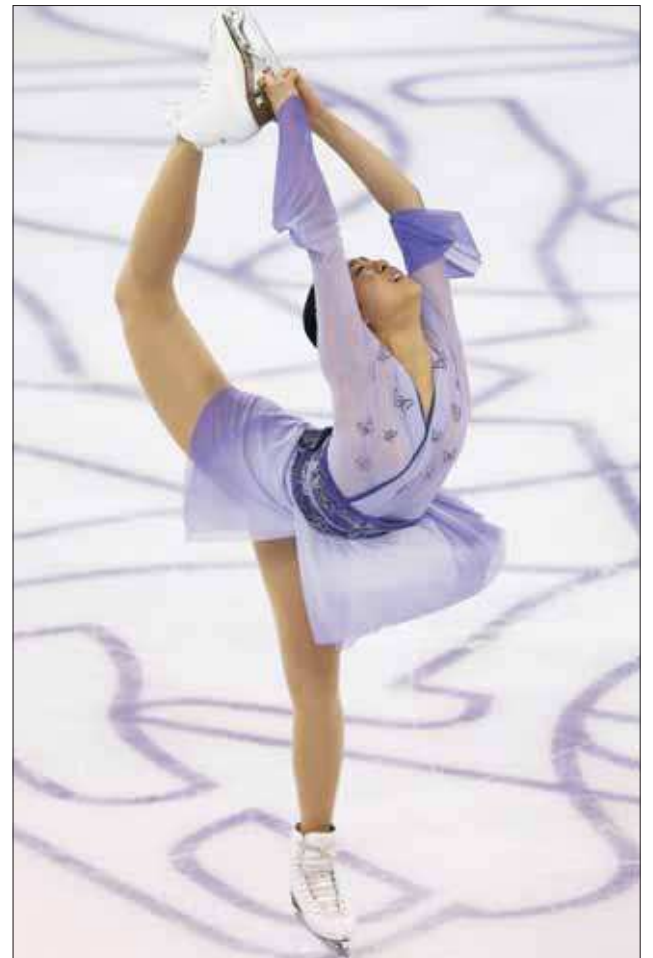
"People may think my scores are wonderful," Hanyu said after setting so many records in Barcelona. "But I feel more motivated when I hear people say they like my performance and they want to watch it again." Nonetheless, Hanyu will need to continue his hot scoring streak if he hopes to win at the World Championships in March and at the 2018 Olympics.

Hanyu's record-setting margin of victory at the Grand Prix Final put him ahead of Javier Fernandez of Spain for the second straight year. Third place went to 19-year-old Shoma Uno of Japan. Uno won last year's Junior Grand Prix Final and is the reigning junior world champion.

Following Uno were a trio of Asian skaters: Canadian Patrick Chan (who has Chinese roots), Boyang Jin of China, and Daisuke Murakami, who has represented both Japan and the United States in international competition. Nathan Chen, an American of Taiwanese descent, took the junior title, proving that there will be plenty of Asian male figure-skating talent in the pipeline.

On the women's side, much attention was focused on Japan's Mao Asada, who took a year off from competitive skating before returning earlier this year at the Cup of China. The three-time world champion and 2010 Olympic silver medalist won despite falling in the short program, but Asada slipped to third in the NHK Trophy a few weeks later. Unfortunately, this downward trajectory continued at the Grand Prix Finals.

After a short program performance that put her in third place, Asada stumbled through a lackluster free skate. She lacked confidence throughout and seemed to surrender after an error three-fourths of the way through



EXCEPTIONAL ICE SKATING. Yuzuru Hanyu (left photo) and Mao Asada (right photo) of Japan perform during the finals of the Grand Prix Final figure-skating competition in Barcelona, Spain. (AP Photos/Manu Fernandez)

her routine. She placed sixth, last place among the finalists. "I'm very disappointed I couldn't perform the way I wanted to," Asada said after the competition. "I had a lot of mistakes, I have to change my mindset, refocus, and do better at the next competition."

Any disappointment that Asian sports fans might have felt at Asada's performance was redeemed by Satoko Miyahara. The 17-year-old Japanese skater stands just 4'10", but she towered over the competition in the free skate.

Despite her strong performance, she finished 14 points

behind the winner, Evgenia Medvedeva of Russia. The silver medal capped off an excellent 2015 for Miyahara, who also placed second at the World Championships and won Japan's national championship.

All of these skaters, as well as their fans, have their eyes on the World Championships in Boston and the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang. Mao Asada will hope to regain her top form, while Yuzuru Hanyu will try to retain his. Whether they shine or stumble, they will see plenty of pressure from other Asian talent, keeping Asian-American sports fans happy well into the future.

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