

# INTERNATIONAL SKATING UNION

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## **ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating: Smart Ones Skate America** **Day Three**

Smart Ones Skate America continued Saturday in Reading, Pennsylvania (USA) with the Free Dance, the Ladies' and Pairs Free Programs.

### **Ice Dancing, Free Dance**

The Ice Dancing event concluded with the Free Dance. Tanith Belbin/Benjamin Agosto of the USA defended their overnight lead and upset last year's champions Elena Grushina/Ruslan Goncharov (UKR) to win the event for the first time. It was also the first time that an American dance team has won Skate America since Elizabeth Punsalan/Jerod Swallow won in 1997. The bronze medal went to France's Isabelle Delobel/Olivier Schoenfelder.

Grushina/Goncharov skated first in the last group. The husband-and-wife team had chosen a dramatic theme of war and peace. Grushina wore a white dress with a dove motif on it while her partner was dressed in a ragged military outfit. The couple performed interesting lifts and demanding twizzles, but they appeared to hold back somewhat in their circular footwork. The judges' awarded a technical score of 36.40 and a program component score of 64.16.

"Yesterday, we felt how the system works", Goncharov said. "Today, we skated well and had just a few little mistakes."

Belbin/Agosto put out a lively program to "West Side Story" that featured intricate steps and two strong dance spins. The audience cheered for the 2002 World Junior Champions who expressed the mood of the different pieces of music well. Their performance was rewarded with 42.90 points for the elements and with 67.89 for program components. "We're very proud, this is our first senior title", Belbin said. "Elizabeth Punsalan/Jerod Swallow were the last US ice dance couple to win Skate America, and it's an honor to be in their shoes. We feel confident going into our next event and know what we have to work on."

Delobel/Schoenfelder, who had won yesterday's Original Dance and stood in second heading into the final portion of the dance event skated to a lyrical piece called "Merlin". The French Champions produced innovative and difficult lifts and strong backwards twizzles, but were out of synch in the second twizzle series. The couple scored 98.77 points for their Free Dance and dropped to third. "We made three mistakes, and it was reflected immediately in the marks", Schoenfelder commented. "We still received good marks, and we think when we do everything correctly in our dance, our marks will be even better", his partner added.

Belbin/Agosto and Grushina/Goncharov skated for points at Skate America. They are now heading the standings with 12 and 9 points respectively.

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## **Ladies, Free Program**

Then it was time for the Ladies. Sasha Cohen (USA) put out an excellent performance to “Swan Lake” and made herself an early present the night before her 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. She opened her program with a triple Lutz-double toeloop and a triple flip-double toeloop combination. Three more clean triple jumps and a double Axel followed, the only glitch was a two-footed triple flip. The crowd cheered for every element and especially for Cohen’s fast spins in impressive positions. The American scored 130.89 points for her Free Program (62.01 technical score/68.58 program component score) and won the competition clearly with an overall event score of 197.35 points. “It’s really great to start the season with two titles, but I’m more proud of the how my training has been going. I’m enjoying myself every time I go out to compete. I want to give a performance to the audience every time”, Cohen commented.

Her teammate Jennifer Kirk produced another highlight of the Ladies’ event. Skating to “Die Fledermaus” by Johann Strauss, the 2002 Four Continents Champion landed seven triple jumps including a triple-triple toeloop combination, but her spiral was a bit slow. Kirk’s score for the Free Skating went up to 120.09 points and she captured the silver medal, the second Grand Prix medal of her career since she won the bronze at Trophee Lalique in Paris in 2000. “This was my best long program since I won Junior Worlds (in 2000)”, a smiling Jennifer Kirk told the media. “My triple Lutz wasn’t so good in the warm up, but once my music started, I went into my zone. I never want to scale back, I want to go out and fight.” Japan’s Shizuka Arakawa opened her program to “Turandot” by Giacomo Puccini with a solid triple Lutz-double toeloop combination, a triple Salchow and triple flip-double toeloop, but she fell off the edge on the landing of the loop. The reigning Four Continents silver medalist landed a double Axel, a triple toeloop, but stepped out of her second triple Lutz. With a segment score of 113.37 for the Free Skating, she slipped to third behind Kirk. “I’m always good in practice, but when the competition came, I was nervous. I wanted to do a triple-triple combination, but I didn’t have enough height for it”, the Japanese explained.

Skate America was a scoring event for Cohen, who picked up 12 points. Kirk pocketed 9 points and will score again at the NHK Trophy in Japan. Arakawa did not score in Reading. Her first scoring event is Skate Canada next week.

## **Pairs, Free Program**

The competitions at Skate America concluded with the Pairs Free Skating. In what was a very close decision, Qing Pang/Jian Tong of China won their first Grand Prix gold medal while Maria Petrova/Alexei Tikhonov (RUS) claimed the silver medal. The bronze went to Dan Zhang/Hao Zhang (CHN).

Overnight leaders Pang/Tong skated to “Variations on a Theme of Paganini” and reeled off a high triple twist, a huge throw triple Salchow and throw triple loop. However, the 2003 Four Continents silver medalists struggled with their side by side jumps today. Tong fell on the first double Axel and stepped out of the second Axel, but they both did land a triple toeloop.

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Pang also stumbled in the backwards outwards death spiral. The Chinese received 56.52 points for their executed elements and 61.44 for their performance components.

Petrova/Tikhonov, who skated last, entertained the crowd with their "Princess of the Circus" routine. The couple started off well with a solid side by side triple toeloop-double Axel sequence, a throw triple loop and a triple twist, but Petrova ran out of steam towards the end of the program. She fell out of the throw triple Salchow and had trouble keeping up with her partner in the side by side footwork. The reigning World bronze medalists beat Pang/Tong in the free skating with 119.98 to 117.96 points, but overall it was not enough to move up to first place. In the overall result, Petrova/Tikhonov lost by the very thin margin of 0.12 points.

"This was the first time that we've skated our new program in competition, and we felt nervous", Tong explained. "Hopefully we'll do it a lot better the next time. After we came second in the free skating, we were very surprised to win the event."

Petrova and Tikhonov both were pleased with their performance. "We skated well two thirds of the program, but we have to work on the last third", Tikhonov said. "It helped us a lot that we skated this new program in exhibitions before. We really like this program, and we had a lot of people who helped us with it."

The two-time World Junior Champions Zhang/Zhang turned in a technically demanding performance that featured an incredibly high triple twist, a side by side double Axel-triple toeloop sequence, a side by side triple Salchow and two more triple throws. The young couple earned the highest technical score of the evening with 59.12 points, but their skating skills, transitions, performance, choreography and interpretation weren't as strong. Canada's Utako Wakamatsu/Jean-Sebastien Fecteau dropped one spot to fourth after a few errors.

Petrova/Tikhonov got 9 points and will score again at the Cup of China in November, and Zhang/Zhang earned 7 points. Pang/Tong did skate for points at Skate America.

The event concludes tomorrow (Sunday) with the Exhibition Gala.

Skate America was the first of six events of the Grand Prix of Figure Skating series. The Grand Prix moves to Skate Canada in Mississauga next week. The skaters are awarded prize money and points, and the top six skaters or couples with the most points overall will proceed to the Grand Prix Final in Colorado Springs, USA, December 12 to 14. Full results and standings will be published after each event at [www.isu.org](http://www.isu.org).

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