

INTERNATIONAL SKATING UNION

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Event 4 (of 6)

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ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating: Trophee Lalique, Day Three

The Trophee Lalique, continued Saturday at the Palais Omnisport in Paris, France, with the Free Dance, the Men's, Pairs and Ladies Free Skating. The Trophee Lalique is the fourth of six qualifying events of the ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating series.

Ice Dancing, Free Dance

Albena Denkova/Maxim Staviski of Bulgaria won the Free Dance and captured their first Trophee Lalique title with a total event score of 210.44 points. Canadians Marie-France Dubreuil/Patrice Lauzon claimed the silver medal (202.37 points) while the bronze went to Isabelle Delobel/Olivier Schoenfelder (FRA, 200.30 points).

Dancing to the romantical "Suite in D-minor" by Georg Friedrich Händel, Denkova/Staviski put out a flowing program that featured innovative lifts and two difficult dance spins as well as fast footwork. The program impressed with its transitions as well. However, the reigning World bronze medalists fell on an optional lift towards the end of the program, but recovered quickly. The Bulgarians scored 40.42 points in the element score and 67.61 for program components. With a total segment score of 108.03 they placed first in the Free Dance. "This competition was a big challenge for us", Denkova told the post-event news conference. "We made many changes since Skate Canada and obviously there was not enough time. We did only one run through with the changed elements. But we're very happy with the response of the public to our programs." Staviski said that he doesn't really have an explanation for the fall.

The Canadians had opted for a sexy Tango routine and produced difficult lifts and intricate footwork, but appeared somewhat hesitant in places. Dubreuil/Lauzon received the highest technical score of 44.20 points and 63.68 points for program components which added up to a total segment score of 107.88 points. The Canadians, who stood in third following the Compulsory and Original Dance, moved one spot. "This program is physically very hard, and it was our third competition in a row", Dubreuil said. "We were maybe a little bit tired. But we still put out a pretty good performance and we're looking forward to working a little bit more on that program to make it even better for the next competition."

Delobel/Schoenfelder excited the home crowd with a lyrical program to "Merlin" by Maxime Rodriguez. The French Champions executed interesting lifts and transition moves as well as two nice dance spins and strong footwork, but Schoenfelder made a little mistake in the twizzle sequence. The couple earned 104.08 points for their program and slipped to third place. "It was a good competition for us except for the fall yesterday", Schoenfelder explained. "I think we're improving from one competition to the next." Delobel said that the couple put yesterday's mistake behind them quickly. "Today was another day, and we're strong together. So we skated better."

Tanith Belbin/Benjamin Agosto (USA) skated to excerpts from "Westside Story" to finish fourth.

Denkova/Staviski won 12 points and are now heading the Grand Prix standings with 21 points. They will skate again in their non-scoring event, the NHK Trophy in Japan later this month. Dubreuil/Lauzon scored 9 points and now have 16 overall. Delobel/Schoenfelder pocketed 7 points and have 14.

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Men, Free Program

Two-time World Champion Evgeni Plushenko (RUS) skated to the gold in the Men's event. Belgium's Kevin van der Perren was the surprise winner of the silver medal, while defending Laliqee Champion Michael Weiss (USA) took the bronze.

Weiss skated first of the top contenders. The two-time World bronze medalist tripled this opening toeloop and missed the quad toeloop attempt, but he recovered to land a triple Axel-double toeloop combination, although the Axel was two-footed. The 27-year-old produced three more triples and interesting spins in his routine to American military music, but he missed his second Axel. Weiss earned 130.08 points for this performance and took the lead at this time.

Plushenko was up next. The Russian reeled off a quad-triple toeloop-double loop combination, two triple Axels (one in combination with double toeloop) and four more triples, he only doubled the loop. The 21-year-old showed also two combination spins and intricate footwork in his program entitled "Tribute to Vaclav Nizhinski", which is dedicated to the famous Russian ballet dancer. Plushenko scored 77.84 points in the element score, improving significantly on his result at Skate Canada two weeks ago. He received 81.10 points for his program components and 158.94 points overall for his free skating.

Van der Perren followed. The 2002 World Junior silver medalist put out a strong program to the "Robin Hood" soundtrack that included a triple Lutz-triple toeloop combination and his trade mark triple Salchow-triple toeloop-triple loop combination as well as two more triple jumps and three double Axels. Van der Perren earned 133.38 points and was ranked third in the Free Skating but moved up to second overall.

Skating last, Brian Joubert of France turned in another good performance to the "Matrix" soundtrack, hitting a quad toeloop, a triple flip, triple Axel, triple-triple toeloop combination, a triple loop and Salchow, but he doubled the Lutz and his final jump, a triple toeloop didn't count as it was the third triple toe. The French Champion placed second in the Free Skating and pulled up from sixth to fourth.

"I'm fine with my skate", Plushenko commented. "I finally did two triple Axels and the quad-triple-double combination. I didn't skate so well at Skate Canada." It was the first time for Plushenko to win the Trophee Laliqee.

"I was so happy about my fifth place finish at Skate Canada, and I thought this would be the limit I would get", van der Perren commented. "Today I proved myself wrong. But I was lucky. If all the others skate clean, I don't think I'll be second or third." But van der Perren announced that he hopes to put a quadruple jump into his programs by the time of the European Championships.

"My skate wasn't as good as I would have liked", Weiss admitted. "I guess the judging system balances out two programs. So I got lucky with the marks and overall scores. Next week will be a scoring event for me in Russia. So this was a non-scoring event. I was happy to just get a medal."

Plushenko won clearly with 234.29 points in the overall event score, van der Perren (197.33), Weiss (195.98) and Joubert (195.58) were close together. Daisuke Takahashi of Japan, who stood in second after the Short Program, dropped to fifth after a few errors.

Van der Perren took the lead in the Grand Prix standings with 13 points from his two events. Plushenko, who scored for the first time in Paris, got 12 points and competes again next week at the Cup of Russia.

Ladies, Free Program

Sasha Cohen (USA) successfully defended her Trophee Laliqee title with Japan's Shizuka Arakawa winning the silver ahead of Julia Sebestyen of Hungary.

Cohen produced a triple Lutz-double toeloop, a triple flip-double toeloop combination, a triple loop, triple toe and triple Salchow, but she put down her hand on the double Axel and slightly two-footed the solo triple flip. Her "Swan Lake" program also featured fast spins with interesting positions. Cohen received 197.19 points for this performance, which meant a clear victory. "This was my third Grand Prix, and it's tough to maintain my skating throughout the four weeks of the Grand Prix season. I was happy with my performance tonight and very happy with how the event turned out."

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Arakawa had to overcome a shaky start into her "Turandot" program when she stepped out of her opening triple Lutz, but she went on to produce three clean triple jumps and a double Axel. However, she stumbled on the second jump in her combination consisting of a triple flip and an overrotated double toeloop. The judges awarded her 109,78 points. "I made some mistakes today", Arakawa told the press. "I rushed too much going into my jumps. Now I'm happy with my placement."

Julia Sebestyen put out an elegant Tango program that included good spins, a triple Salchow, a triple Lutz-double toeloop combination as well as triple toeloop (in combination with an overrotated double toeloop), but she doubled the flip and two-footed her second triple Lutz. She scored 104.88 points for this program to remain in third place. "I'm happy with my Free Program. That's the third good long program for me this year", the European bronze medalist said.

All three medalists skated for points in Paris. Cohen (12 points) tops the Grand Prix standings with the maximum of 24 points and is qualified for the Final. Arakawa (9) has 18 points from her two events, while Sebestyen (7) got 14 and will have to wait and see if that will be enough to make the Final.

Pairs, Free Program

In the Pairs Free Program, reigning World Junior Champions Dan Zhang/Hao Zhang (CHN) upset World silver medalists Tatiana Totmianina/Maxim Marinin (RUS) to claim their first senior Grand Prix gold medal. US-Champions Tiffany Scott/Philip Dulebohn captured the bronze, their first Grand Prix medal.

Performing to's Emmerich Kalman "Gräfn Mariza", Zhang/Zhang hit a huge throw triple twist, a double Axel-triple toeloop sequence, a throw triple loop and Salchow, but Zhang fell on the side by side triple Salchow. The Chinese couple earned 59.08 points in the technical and 55.68 points in the program component score (114.76 points total segment score). "We're actually not so satisfied with the performance", Dan Zhang said. "I fell on the triple Salchow, that was disappointing. We were nervous, because this is an important event."

Totmiana/Marinin run into trouble right at the beginning of their "Cotton Club" program when they both fell on the side by side triple Salchow. Other mistakes followed, and the couple from St. Petersburg was ranked only fourth in the Free Skating. They slipped to second place. "I think this was the worst we've ever skated", Marinin commented, who had been sick prior to this event. "I had fever and I couldn't skate at all for three days. So we had only three days left for our preparation, and it wasn't enough."

Scott/Dulebohn produced a solid performance that contained a side by side triple toe-double toeloop sequence, a triple twist and two triple throws as well as a one-armed lift. They received 107.60 points for their routine to "Les Miserables" and finished second in the Free Skating and third overall.

"We skated pretty well. We had a few mistakes, but it definitely has room to grow for next week (at the Cup of Russia)", Scott explained. "We are honoured to win the bronze medal", Dulebohn added. "It's the first time for us. We really wanted to win a medal in one of our Grand Prix this year. It's very gratifying. It wasn't our best performance, but we really feel that our long program is getting stronger as the season goes on." Canada's Anabelle Langlois/Patrice Archetto finished fourth.

The Trophee Lalique was a scoring event for Zhang/Zhang (12 points) and for Totmianina/Marinin (9). The Chinese now have 19 points and are currently in second in the Grand Prix standings. The Russian couple will score again next week at the Cup of Russia. The top three couples from Lalique will meet again in Moscow. The Trophee Lalique concludes Sunday with the Exhibition Gala.

Full results and standings are directly available on the ISU Internet site on www.isu.org .

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