

YAMAGUCHI, ITO VIE FOR STAR STATUS GAMES' MOST GOLDEN MEDAL COULD TURN INTO A GOLD MINE

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ALBERTVILLE, France – The alchemists of the Middle Ages, some of whom stirred their cauldrons among the very mountains where the Winter Olympics are being held, never found the magic recipe that would turn baser materials into gold.

They had not heard of figure skating, a perverse formula of sport and show, image and reality, innocence and sexuality that -- blended once every four years -- produces a woman of fame and wealth unapproached by any other Winter Games personality.

When most of the other athletes of these two-week Games have spent themselves on the snow and ice of the Savoy, there will remain the most golden of the Olympic medals to be awarded Friday, the women's figure skating championship. The leading contenders, Kristi Yamaguchi of Fremont, California, USA, and Midori Ito of Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, Japan, will begin the contest Wednesday.

That this has been distilled into a match between two national and world champions -- despite the presence of world medalists Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan of the United States and spectacular Frenchwoman Surya Bonaly -- reflects the times as much as it does media oversimplification.

The Yamaguchi-Ito showdown parallels the taut economic rivalry between their homelands. The direction the competition takes will determine who gets rich. One agent recently estimated the winner's income at a minimum of \$1 million per year for a decade.

Ito and Yamaguchi may decline immediate offers to skate professionally in ice shows or to compete for prize money. They may want to skate at the 1994 Lillehammer Olympics. Endorsement money funneled through their respective national federations does not affect their Olympic eligibility.

Ito, 22, the first world figure skating champion from Japan, a nation of only 28 rinks, carries a burden of national pride and expectation borne by no other athlete at these Games. Her financial future is tightly controlled by the Japan Skating Federation, which

serves as her agent, but the market for her and the products she endorses seems unlimited.

Yamaguchi, 20, already appears on boxes of Special K cereal in the United States. Her other commercial ties include a contract with a leotard manufacturer and a brand of sunglasses. It's known that she has picked her agent, who will be introduced after the Olympics.

Although a U.S. champion would sell better in the United States, Ito's spectacular acrobatic ability has electrified crowds around the world and has commercial potential in America. But except for her parents' divorce when she was 6, causing her to move in permanently with her coach, Machiko Yamada, virtually nothing is known about her for image-makers to exploit.

Katarina Witt, the East German gold medalist at the 1988 Calgary Games, has toured successfully in the United States and is a television commentator for CBS in Albertville, proving that a foreign champion is acceptable to a U.S. audience under the right circumstances. Her selling point is beauty.

But Ito would face a special barrier on Madison Avenue.

"The only thing that's an asterisk to the equation is the anti-Japanese feeling in the United States, the 'Buy American' campaign," said Michael Rosenberg, who represents several skaters, including Harding and men's gold medalist Viktor Petrenko of Ukraine.

Rosenberg said Yamaguchi is in a different situation.

"I would say Kristi Yamaguchi's potential in Japan – because she's Japanese-American – is three times what Tonya's is, even though blonds and redheads sell well there, or Nancy Kerrigan's. Nancy is appealing but dark."

But there is skepticism about whether the Japanese public would accept Yamaguchi should she defeat Ito. Yamaguchi loathes the hyphen that has been attached to her Americanness. And in Japan, politicians, at least, seem particularly disdainful these days of anything red, white and blue.

"American possibilities have always been great in Japan," said Jay Ogden, senior vice president of International Management Group, which handles many athletes, including Canadian skater Kurt Browning. "But now a lot will depend on how compelling the story that comes out of here is."

In figure skating, much of the story is written before blades touch ice. The only other Olympic sport so controlled by the opinion of a panel of judges is gymnastics. Yet gymnastics has produced media superstars such as Olga Korbut and Nadia Comaneci who sprang into the public consciousness in the instant it took to flash a 10 on a scoreboard.

There are no such surprises in figure skating, where competitive history and the careful cultivation of a public image are often more important than what happens the night the judges punch their scores into the computers.

Almost from the time they enter their first novice competition, skaters are subjected to ridiculous scrutiny. They are assigned monitors by their national federations. These monitors not only check on the skaters' faithfulness to training regimens but often recommend changes in coaches, costumes and even the city where they should live. Practices are regularly visited by competition judges whose purpose, ostensibly, is to familiarize themselves with the programs they will see. But when a top-ranked skater falls in competition and still gets better marks than a lesser skater whose program was clean, it inevitably makes observers wonder whether scores depend more on reputation than performance.

That was the case Thursday when three-time world champion Browning fell once and botched another jump yet still placed fourth in the men's short program.

"There's a strategy to skating," said Scott Hamilton, gold medalist at the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics and CBS analyst in Albertville. "A lot of it is skating well every time you have to, delivering the goods. That develops an image in the judges' eyes that puts you in great position."

Because the judging is so subjective, skating also demands that athletes sometimes suppress their personalities in ways no other team or individual sport does.

"You don't have to give up your own personality," said 1988 gold medalist Brian Boitano, who beat Canadian rival Brian Orser by a margin of one-tenth of a point from one judge. "You just have to make them think that you do."

That seems to come naturally to Ito, the product of a society where individualism is anathema, and to Yamaguchi.

Despite the growing acceptance of women as athletes, the sport where women are most popular (figure skating's TV ratings easily top women's tennis and propel the Winter

Olympics' ratings past the Summer Games) is the one that puts the most emphasis on style.

Yamaguchi trains daily with weights, doing squats holding a barbell weighing more than twice her 93 pounds, but it's critical that muscles not cloud her appearance as a beautiful young woman.

"It's taken a long time for sports fans to get used to women grunting and groaning in tennis," said skating agent Kevin Albrecht. "In skating, you still have to look like a 'lady' out there."

The Winter Olympics bring a focus to figure skating that magnifies every aspect of the sport.

"Before I won, I had no idea how your life is exposed," Hamilton said. "Your whole life is different. All of a sudden, everybody knows what you did for six hours a day for your whole life.

"I know now what I didn't know then. I don't think I could do it again."

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