

BY SPLIT DECISION FINE LINE BETWEEN BAIUL'S GOLD, KERRIGAN'S SILVER

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HAMAR, Norway – They stood toe loop to toe loop and traded Lutz for Lutz. Then it was Salchow against Salchow.

The difference between Nancy Kerrigan and Oksana Baiul was minuscule, and what that difference was is debatable. The decision could have turned on technical difficulty, or perhaps it was a matter of taste.

It may have been politics.

Or it may have come down to an instinctive, impromptu decision by an incredibly composed 16-year-old Ukrainian to ad-lib a jump amid the most pressure-laden moment of these Winter Olympics.

Whatever it was, Baiul took the ice with a gimpy leg and a bad back – the result of a practice collision just 32 hours before – and won the figure-skating gold by beating the best long program Kerrigan has skated. Kerrigan took the silver and China's Chen Lu the bronze.

"I could not possibly think about a gold medal after that performance," Baiul said through an interpreter. "All I could do was show myself to the judges. I judged by the applause of the crowd that I did very well."

By then Kerrigan, 24, was backstage with the unanimous endorsement of the nine judges as the best to that point. She had landed five of her six planned triple jumps, a performance that earned a standing ovation in the Olympic Amphitheater.

"I started out with a big double flip, where there was supposed to be a triple, but it was a very good double," Kerrigan said. "My jumps were very high, very clean. It shows how strong-minded I am."

Then came the marks for Baiul, who landed five triples of her own, and the unanimity of the judging panel fractured along a line once believed erased.

Two had Baiul third

Five judges – from Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, China and the former East Germany – ranked Baiul ahead of Kerrigan. But the British and Canadian judges had Baiul third behind Kerrigan and Chen, and the U.S. and Japanese judges ranked it Kerrigan-Baiul-Chen.

"Quite simply, a majority of firsts wins," said Kerrigan's coach, Evy Scotvold, "and apparently the first girl had a majority of five firsts to our four."

The technical difficulty of the two programs, as performed, was almost a tossup. Kerrigan had two jump combinations, including a triple toe loop-triple toe loop. Baiul had no triple-triples and passed two planned opportunities for triple-doubles.

And then, with five seconds left in her four-minute performance, Baiul tacked a double toe onto the end of a planned double Axel, a combination considered on a par with Kerrigan's relatively easy triple-triple, giving Baiul one more jump overall.

"I planned to do a triple toe loop, but I missed it, and then I remembered that time was running out and with it the chances for the gold," Baiul said. "So, I went for the double Axel, and then for the cascade (double toe) and everything that you saw. The rest was history."

The Czech, Ukrainian and Chinese judges gave Baiul a higher technical score than they gave Kerrigan. German judge Jan Hoffman, a men's silver medalist for East Germany at the 1980 Olympics, had the skaters tied. He put Kerrigan on top technically, but gave Baiul the edge by the higher artistic mark, which is the tie-breaker in the long program.

Paul Wylie, the 1992 men's silver medalist and Kerrigan's old training pal, was incredulous.

'Judging in the old manner'

"I don't agree," he said. "I think they now are rewarding people who stand in front of the judges and pose for them instead of skating. The Czech, Polish and German judges – who is really East German – are used to judging in the old manner."

Baiul's coach and guardian, Galina Zmievskaya, said, "I have never been interested in which judge gave which mark. I'm only interested in the final result."

"I think the referees made the right judgment," Chen said.

Skating analyst Gerri Walbert was perplexed by judges giving higher technical marks to Baiul, but not by the result.

'A little slow'

"I thought Nancy was a little slow and her program was a little top-heavy -- all the tough stuff was crammed in at the beginning and then there were just spins," she said. "Obviously there was some politics there.

"But we're nit-picking here. I think there's just a perception of vitality that Baiul emanates that the judges like."

There was much about both skaters to admire.

Kerrigan proved her point about finally conquering the long program, which dropped her from first to fifth in the world championships last year and has cost other titles in the past.

It was seven weeks and a day since her knee was clubbed in Detroit, three months since her last competitive appearance and four months since this particular long program had been performed before judges.

"You can't be sure of your placement until the end," she said. "I don't think (second place) takes away from what I did out there. I don't think it matters." The obstacle Baiul had to overcome was more immediate.

Thursday afternoon, she collided with Germany's Tanja Szewczenko, who wound up sixth, badly bruising her back and requiring three stitches for a cut on her right shin.

Baiul was in obvious pain at practice Friday, skipping half her jumps and leaving immediately after her music was played.

Baiul had a pain-killer

An hour before her competition, German team doctor Salim Al-Bazaz injected Baiul's back and leg with a pain-killer.

"Part of my tears (after skating) were due to pain," Baiul said. "I do not remember clearly my feelings. But when I was told this afternoon that I would not be able to skate, I thought that was a tragedy, and therefore the emotions had been building up over time."

As the tears flowed, the pain-killers ebbed, and Baiul limped away from the post-competition news conference. Zmievskaya was wearing the gold medal. All Baiul said she wanted was a Snickers.

FINAL STANDINGS

1. Oksana Baiul, Ukraine
2. Nancy Kerrigan, U.S.
3. Chen Lu, China
4. Surya Bonaly, France
5. Yuka Sato, Japan
6. Tanja Szewczenko, Germany
7. Katarina Witt, Germany
8. Tonya Harding, U.S.
9. Josée Chouinard, Canada
10. Anna Rechnio, Poland