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Chen vaults in front behind clean triple jumps

Tsuruskaya sets pace in ladies; U.S. sits 1-2 in dance; Russians lead pairs

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Setting the pace with a personal-best, 78.59-point short, Team USA's Nathan Chen skated a clean routine to a Michael Jackson medley to take a 1.81-point lead. -Getty Images

The [2015 Junior Grand Prix Final](#) should never be overlooked. No fewer than four skaters or teams who competed in the JGP Final in 2014 qualified for the Grand Prix Final this year: Japan's Shoma Uno, China's Boyang Jin, Russia's Evgenia Medvedeva, and Canada's Julianne Séguin and Charlie Bilodeau.

Team USA took the lead in ice dance and men's, while Russia sits in front in pairs and ladies.

Ice Dance

This year's Final opened beautifully for Team USA, as it claimed first and second place in the first competition of the event, the junior short dance. [Lorraine McNamara and Quinn Carpenter](#) are in first with 65.90 points, while Rachel Parsons and Michael Parsons sit in second place with a score of 64.91.

Russia's Alla Loboda and Pavel Drodz are in third place, 1.89 points behind the first-place team with 64.01 points.

McNamara and Carpenter's Starlight Waltz sequences earned Level 4 and Level 3, their twizzles Level 4 and their step sequence Level 3.

"It felt strong, solid, comfortable -- what we wanted to do. It was fun, and that is most important," McNamara said of the team's program to "Anitra's Dance" and "In the Hall of the Mountain King" by Edvard Grieg. "We wanted something that really stood out amongst the other marches and waltzes and wasn't the same old one-two-three, one-two-three. This (music) really gives you energy and when we feel that energy, it's easier to project. Also, we really enjoy the characters. We can really go away with the character after the step sequence."

The Parsons siblings skated to their waltz to another strong character, Prokofiev's Cinderella.

"We both like classical ballet," Michael explained.

"I get to be a princess!" Rachel added, laughing and showing her white satin dress with golden sparkles.

Both were rather satisfied with their performance, except for the Level 3 on their starting lift.

"We'll have to find out what happened," Michael said.

The team also earned a Level 3 and a Level 4 for their Starlight Waltz sequences and a Level 4 for their step sequence.

"We both had a good time," Rachel admitted afterward. "I even found myself laughing at the end of the program!"

"Last season was frustrating because we just barely missed qualifying for the Final," Rachel said. "It feels really good to be here and it's good for the season because we get to skate our programs at this high level of competition. It's a warmup for nationals and for (junior) worlds. It's also great competition. The Russians and the French, they are all great skaters. It's fun to skate against them."

Russia's Loboda and Drodz, who claimed the silver at this event last season, skated an enjoyable waltz over Frédéric Chopin's "Waltz in B minor, Op. 69, No. 2." They danced their final no touch step sequence to a rather martial Russian battle march. They achieved a season's-best score.

Ladies

Juniors are expected to skate at a lower level than seniors, but this crop of ladies did not adhere to that line of thinking. The component scores were significantly lower than what is expected at the senior level, but the element marks were up to par with the very best in the world.

The field was shared equally between Russia and Japan, with three skaters from each country skating in the event.

Russia's [Polina Tsurskaya](#), 14, was the class of the event, turning in a career best with 66.69 points, ahead of teammate Alisa Fedichkina and Japan's Marin Honda.

Tsurskaya skated her short program with determination and poise, in a passion-red dress to a universal piece of music: "Adagio in G minor," played by a Japanese musician, Ikuko Kawai, in a Spanish mood, with guitar and castanets!

She opened with a fantastic triple lutz-triple toe combination that added 11.70 points to her total. Two of her spins were rated Level 4, as was her step sequence. Her components were also the best of the field, with an average of 7.10 points.

At 13, Fedichkina was the youngest skater of the competition -- and also the first to skate. Dressed in light pink, she delivered a perfect program, with a triple lutz-triple toe combination, and amassed 64.17 points.

Honda skated to Violin Sonata No. 5 ("Spring" sonata) by Ludwig van Beethoven, delivering a perfect performance, with a beautiful opening triple loop-triple toe combination and a triple flip at the end of her program. She topped her season's best with 63.69 points.

"Marina Zoueva came to the World Team Trophy last April in Tokyo, and she saw the cherry tree blossoms," Honda's coach, Mie Hamada, explained. "She then told me that she had a good idea for Japanese girls. She decided to describe the frail blossoms and the strong winds that makes them fall on the ground. I told her, 'Marin, you have a mission: Show the Japanese culture to Western audiences.' This number is her favorite."

At 15, Russia's Maria Sotskova is taking part in her third Final in a row having won this event in 2013 and placing fourth in 2014. Her rather slow skate to Santana's "Black Magic Woman" was not her best. She amassed 62.64 points for her short program and stands in fourth heading into the free.

Pairs

Russia's [Ekaterina Borisova and Dmitri Sopot](#) took the lead, ahead of their teammates, Amina Atakhanova and Ilia Spiridonov, and the Czech Republic's Anna Duskova and Martin Bidar.

Borisova and Sopot skated a flawless program. They landed their triple twist, side-by-side double axels and throw triple salchow one after the other, and the end of their jumps seemed to unleash all the pressure they had accumulated.

The duo skated to French skating composer Maxime Rodriguez's "Ninja," and were the only team to hit the 60-point bar, with 60.29 points and a new season's best.

Atakhonova's rough landing on their side-by-side double axels was the team's only mistake. They elected to skate to a drum remix of *The Nutcracker* by Tchaikovsky, which came back to its original form for the team's final spin. They garnered 58.50 points and the highest component score of the competition (27.48 points, compared to Borisova and Sopot's 26.05 points).

Duskova and Bidar skated to a selection from *Cirque du Soleil*. Their triple twist and death spiral were rated Level 2, their step sequence and spin earned Level 3's, and their lift garnered a Level 4. They will head to the free 4.51 points behind Borisova and Sopot (55.78 points).

Russia's Anastasia Gubanova and Alexei Sintsov are close behind in fourth place with 54.88 points.

Men's

Team USA's [Nathan Chen](#) delivered a splendid rendition of his Michael Jackson short to take the lead. He sits in front of Russia's Dmitri Aliev and Japan's Sota Yamamoto.

Chen skated a perfect program, landing a triple axel, triple lutz-triple toe combination and triple flip, the two latter elements coming in the second half of his program. He amassed 78.59 points.

"I'm really excited by the way I skated," Chen said as he left the ice. "I beat my season's best, which is nice for me. I've been struggling on my triple axel a lot and I'm glad I was able to pull it off well in the competition."

Chen's interpretation of Michael Jackson's music was probably his best showing in two years.

"I always loved this music. As kids, we used to moonwalk across the floor," Chen said. "But in the first year, I could not be Michael Jackson. This selection was made by my choreographer, who wanted to take me out of my comfort zone."

Aliev skated to Gary Moore's "Nothing the Same." His triple axel and triple lutz-triple toe combination earned the highest Grades of Execution (GOEs) of the segment, adding 9.79 and 12.03 points to his total, respectively.

"I'm happy like crazy to have managed getting all my elements and fighting my emotions inside," Aliev

said. "I could take strength from the audience to calm me down."

Yamamoto landed a triple axel, triple lutz-triple toe combination and triple flip to amass 72.85 points for his short program. His change foot camel spin was invalidated, however.

"I'm not satisfied with my program," he said. "Especially with my spins."

Skating to "Poeta" by Vicente Amigo, a piece of music his mentor, Swiss legend Stéphane Lambiel, skated to in his day, Yamamoto has developed the fluidity of his skating, which was certainly the best of the field.

Team USA's Vincent Zhou, 15, opened the competition with a near-faultless program. He landed his triple axel, then a triple flip as well as a triple lutz-triple toe combination at the end of his program (the latter was declared under-rotated, however).

Skating to Lindsey Stirling's "Crystallize," he came off the ice exhausted.

"That was the first time landing my triple axel in my short program in a competition," Zhou said. "It was a good milestone for me. This is my first season in the senior ranks; I want to show that I can be among the best. It's really motivating to come here and see the senior men doing their quads and triple axels and amazing spins and their skating skills. They are the golden standard in skating. It's really, really inspiring."



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