

Figure skating has lost its edge

Interest in the sport in television broadcasting circles has taken a pratfall

It might be a cliché that the only constant is change, but figure skating is finding out its true.

The major sport most resistant to positive change has done nothing but change since the 2002 judging scandal and the biggest transformation is clearly a negative one.

In a broadcasting turnaround of CART-racing proportions, very few North American TV executives are now interested in figure skating. This from the sport that gave us the Harding-Kerrigan Olympics, one of the 10 most-watched television shows of all time.

On the ice, the new judging system, now in its fourth season, has produced massive changes in results: from event to event, from the short program to the long.

The map of power has also been radically altered. Half of last year's 12 world championship medals were won by athletes from once skating-poor Asia.

And, with the midpoint of the current Olympiad – the 2008 world championships in Gothenburg, Sweden – slated for next week, North America's best, and deepest, hopes are in ice dancing.

This is akin to Switzerland becoming a serious contender for the Olympic hockey championship. Ice dancing has always been the most Eurocentric discipline, viewing outsiders with disdain and horror.

European and Grand Prix ice dancing champions Oksana Domnina and Maxim Shabalin withdrew from the Worlds yesterday because of his battered knee. But the Russians were going to be pressed anyway by French veterans Isabelle Delobel and Olivier Schoenfelder and the reigning world bronze medallists from the U.S., Ben Agosto and his



Steve MILTON

Canadian-born partner Tanith Belbin.

Charging hard from the outside are sophomores Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir, the London-area couple who train with Belbin and Agosto in Canton, Mich. They were fourth at the Grand Prix Final after finishing sixth at last year's Worlds, the best debut by a Canadian dance couple in 40 years.

Blessed with speed and talent, they are regarded as legitimate gold-medal possibilities for the 2010 Olympics.

A third Canton dance team, Meryl Davis and Charlie White of the U.S., was seventh at the Worlds last year.

At last year's Worlds, the only North American medals went to dancers: Canadians Marie-France Dubreuiol and Patrice Lauzon (taking this year off) won silver and Belbin and Agosto were third.

Four of the top seven dance teams were from the continent that, until Shae-Lynn Bourne and Victor Kraatz in 2003, had never won a world ice dance championship.

And now Virtue and Moir, in just their second year as seniors, have their aim directly on a medal, especially with the Russians out.

"We're really thankful for the new scoring system," Moir said yesterday of the points-accumulated matrix that replaced the 6.0 standard. "We're proving that you don't have to wait around year after year like you used to."

With the ice dancers down, Russia is likely to be shut out of medals again. Last spring in Tokyo was the first time that occurred in 47 years. Asians are favoured in the other three disciplines.

Unless they make huge mistakes, it's unlikely the dynamic trio at the top, Korea's Yu-Na Kim and Japan's duo of Mao Asada and defending champion Miki Ando, will surrender the podium. Kimmie Meissner, world champion as recently as 2006, will compete but was *seventh* at U.S. Nationals, in which three of the top four finishers were too young for these Worlds.

Canadian champion Joannie

"Our image to the public is the homecoming queen after she got knocked up on prom night and is living on the wrong side of the tracks."

**AMERICAN SKATER
JOHNNY WEIR**

Rochette needs two clean programs with everything in her arsenal, to even approach the podium.

And men's champion Patrick Chang and longtime contender Jeff Buttle don't have reliable quad jumps and their all-round skills will allow them to medal only if the likes of two-time champion Stephane Lambiel of Switzerland, reigning king Brian Joubert of France, American champion Evan Lysacek and Japan's Daikuse Takahashi, the favourite, crash on their superior elements.

Hamilton Skating Club's Bryce Davison has a shot at a pairs medal with his partner Jessica Dubé. They were fourth at the Grand Prix Final, but may be a year away from direct challenges to the two top Chinese pairs and European champions Aliona Savchenko and Robin Szolkowy.

Meanwhile, the Worlds will be seen in the U.S. only on ESPN – with a three-hour taped segment on ABC – reflecting the sport's precipitous decline stateside.

A dearth of top American female skaters (but some are on the way, with a 1-2-3 finish at Jr. Worlds) accelerates the plummeting popularity caused by overexposure in the late 1990s and the judging obscenity at the 2002 Olympics.

Even in skating-mad Canada, interest has waned. Longtime rights holders CTV has dropped out of skating altogether. It turned up its nose despite its role, with subsidiary TSN, as major partner in the rights-holding consortium for the 2010 Vancouver Games.

And, until the CBC's Scott Moore, one of skating's few remaining broadcast allies, recently picked up the rights, there was a good chance next week's Worlds would not have been broadcast in Canada.

Leave it to outspoken American skater Johnny Weir to get to the heart of the problem, particularly south of the border.

"Figure Skating used to have a public persona comparable to the high school homecoming queen or prom queen," Weir told reporters in January.

"Now our image to the public is the homecoming queen after she got knocked up on prom night and is living on the wrong side of the tracks."

smilton@thespec.com
905-526-3268

SPORTS NOTEBOOK

Canadian ballplayers close in on Olympics

[TAICHUNG, TAIWAN] Canada moved another step closer to clinching a spot at the Beijing Games with an 11-0, mercy-rule win over Spain at the Olympic qualifying tournament yesterday.

Aaron Wideman, of Mississauga, threw four shutout innings while another Ontarian, Nick Weglarz, of Stevensville, homered and knocked in a pair of runs to lead the way.

Canada is tied for second with Taiwan at 4-1 heading into today's matchup with unbeaten South Korea (5-0). A victory against the front-runners or Germany (2-3) tomorrow should be enough to clinch one of the three Olympic berths up for grabs.

James Avery, of Moose Jaw, Sask., gets the start against South Korea.

Roush race team won't appeal ruling

[CONCORD, N.C.] Roush Fenway Racing won't appeal the penalties imposed by NASCAR against Carl Edwards after his winning No. 99 failed post-race inspection at Las Vegas.

Edwards was docked 100 points and stripped of the 10 bonus points he earned for the March 2 victory when NASCAR discovered the cover was off the oil tank in his Ford.

"We have conducted a thorough internal investigation and have found no evidence whatsoever that anyone intended for the bolt/nut fastener to fail to secure the lid for the entire race," said team owner Jack Roush yesterday. "We have subsequently added protective measures to insure that the lid will remain fastened even if a failure of this type should again occur."

Roush Fenway president Geoff Smith said the team decided against an appeal because simple negligence was never sufficient grounds to overturn or reduce a penalty.

Hamilton Spectator wire services