

Olympics blow out golden torch

The Olympics have now ended in Sochi, with an impressive closing ceremony — as expected. The show was a great success and crowned wonderful Games for Belarus, at which our athletes enjoyed some head-spinning victories. There's no doubt that the Sochi Olympics were unique and unpredictable.



Darya Domracheva during Winter Olympic Games closing ceremony

By Dmitry Baranovsky

After around ten days of the competition, Belarus joined the top five most popular Google enquiries within the US, inspired by our five gold medals. Three of our athletes in 'red-and-green' stepped up to the top plinth of the podium.

Darya Domracheva

Medals were expected from our top Belarusian biathlete. However, even the most passionate optimists could hardly have imagined that Darya would do so brilliantly — especially after her disappointment in the sprint race, which opened the biathlon programme at the Laura Sports Complex. She failed even to come close to a medal, leading to doubts regarding her readiness. Of course, those concerns were dispelled over the coming days, when Ms. Domracheva claimed three gold medals (in the pursuit, individual race and mass start). Her rivals were truly 'knocked-out'; even her arch-competitor — Norwegian Tora Berger — couldn't match Darya's speed.

Day seven of the Games was our

star hour: Darya captured gold and Nadezhda Skardino took bronze, in the individual race. After Darya's mass start gold, President Alexander Lukashenko signed a decree to award her the title Hero of Belarus, to which Ms. Domracheva commented that her success was no surprise for her, as she believed that her years of hard work would eventually pay off. She noted, "Over my career, I've had many races. Some were successful and others — not. Each time, I concentrated my efforts to become stronger and, as a result, joined the Sochi Olympics ready for any situation... and enjoyed these victories."

Darya may yet claim the Big Crystal Globe this season, as she is among the favourites, with no plans to slow down after her Sochi triumph.

Alla Tsuper

Bookmakers gave odds of 125-1 on Alla Tsuper's Sochi gold: only those with strong faith believed in the Belarusian's potential for success. Alla began her trampoline career long ago and was many times close to winning major competitions but,



Alla Tsuper's joy of Olympic victory

on each occasion, missed out. She attended the four previous Olympics without bringing home a medal, perhaps due to a lack of self-belief. Three years ago, Alla retired and chose to have a child, but was persuaded to return, leading to her unexpected but very welcome triumph in Sochi.

Around 18 months ago, the head coach of Belarus' national freestyle team, Nikolay Kozeko, suggested that Ms. Tsuper test her sporting luck for the last time and Alla agreed. It took less than a year to get back in shape, regaining her former strength and, importantly, she rebuilt her self-confidence. No great achievements were expected from her in Sochi, which enabled Alla to relax and jump as never before. The jump which brought Alla an Olympic gold had been performed only twice in her life (the first during a training session). Ms. Tsuper took a risk and created a true sporting sensation, knocking out her rivals Chinese Nina Li and Xu Mengtao and Australian Lydia Lassila.

"I'm very happy at becoming an Olympic champion," Alla gushed, breathless with joy after the final results were announced. "I've demonstrated my fighting spirit and

strength, showing that I'm able to do anything. I've been lucky today. I wanted to win, as my tricks and jumps were complicated. I'm really happy. I don't think this will ever happen again so I'll finish my career now, on a high note."

Anton Kushnir

It took 22 years for Anton to claim his Olympic medal, despite being a hot favourite four years ago in Vancouver (when the Ukrainian sportsman joined our Belarusian team). Mr. Kushnir's ski acrobatics talent was well confirmed by his Big Crystal Globe (won during World Cup rounds) but he met failure, which prevented Anton from going through to the finals. He was on the edge of retiring, being without financial support. However,

the Belarusian team leader was dissuaded by coach Nikolay Kozeko, who convinced Anton to continue training and taking part in competitions. Mr. Kozeko has been proven correct.

After the Vancouver Olympic champion, Alexey Grishin, fell down during the qualification stage, Mr. Kushnir became a contender to continue the Belarusian freestyle tradition: since 1998, we have never returned from a winter Games without an Olympic medal. He succeeded: his triple somersault with five pirouettes earned him the highest score in Olympic freestyle history and, logically, gold.

"The jump was wonderful and I've done my best," Mr. Kushnir said after the competition. "I tested out the jump during the 2009 World Championship, in Japan, and planned to perform something similar in Vancouver but failed. I corrected my mistakes but my injuries prevented me from achieving what I wanted. I'm happy with this victory — for myself and my country."

Our freestyle and biathlete medals shine out so brightly that the failures of our skiers and short track speed skaters are easier to bear. Experienced skier Sergey Dolidovich came close to success in the 50km individual race but, sadly, his efforts failed to bring a medal...



Anton Kushnir's 'gold jump'



Nadezhda Skardino's happy smile