

Sport counts on its biggest fans

Official addresses 'Skate City, USA,' aka Spokane, in announcing event

Thomas Clouse/SR

U.S. Figure Skating officials confirmed Wednesday that they didn't just come to town for a Caesar salad at the Greater Spokane Incorporated annual luncheon: Spokane just landed another major skating event.

Using a moniker coined in the 2010 U.S. Figure Skating Championships, Sam Auxier said he was thrilled to award the inaugural International Team Challenge Cup to "Skate City, USA."

Auxier, president of U.S. Figure Skating, was in the Lilac City in 2007 as a judge and returned in 2010 when Spokane set the attendance record for the championships that still stands.

"I remember the great crowds. I remember the tremendous enthusiasm, the hospitality. You even applauded for the judges. No one does that," Auxier said to laughter. "That's the type of enthusiasm we really love for our sport."

The skating officials also brought star power to the podium. Former world and Olympic champion Kristi Yamaguchi and 2014 U.S. Champion Gracie Gold attracted kids who lined up outside the Spokane Convention Center to get autographs and photos.

"I won't be skating. Let's be clear on that," said Yamaguchi, a 44-year-old mother of two who won a pair of world championships and was the 1992 Olympic singles gold medalist. "I'm happy to just be the ultimate cheerleader and help strategize about what Team North America will do."

Yamaguchi will be captain of that team.

The Team Challenge Cup, which will be held April 22-24 at Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena, will include 42 of the best skaters in the world competing on three teams: North America, Asia and Europe.

The North American team will include skaters from the U.S. and Canada.

Spectators will "get to see the top 42 skaters in the world here competing live," Yamaguchi said. "That's pretty special. It's going to be spectacular and entertaining."

The site selection, which became apparent earlier this week, made four successful bids out of five tries for Star USA promoters Toby Steward and Barb Beddor.

"I don't remember them sending this many people to any announcement," Beddor said. "It's always good to actually hear someone say it out loud."

Auxier and David Raith, executive director of U.S. Figure Skating, declined to say which two finalists Spokane beat out, but Auxier did hint that the other candidates were much larger cities.

“We are thrilled to be here again in Spokane,” Raith said. “Spokane has shown there is support for figure skating here.”

Auxier said Spokane will host the first event of something U.S. Figure Skating plans to duplicate every two years.

“We knew bringing the event here that the skaters will love the fans and the enthusiasm,” Auxier said.

Gold, who earned a bronze medal in the team event at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, said she hopes to qualify for the April competition so she can come back to the same city where in 2010 she competed as part of her first major championship.

“We are all looking forward to doing it,” Gold said. “I think (Yamaguchi) will make a fantastic captain. She has done single skating and pairs skating and won an Olympic title.

“Knowing that she is leading the team, I feel really good about it.”