

# Skaters feeling toll of long season, but excited for new format in Team Cup Challenge

By Thomas Clouse/SR

Some of the world's greatest ice skating talent took turns Thursday as they circled the Spokane Arena before exploding into gravity-defying leaps and spins that sometimes were punctuated with landings that produced chunks of fleeing ice.

On Friday night, the Team Challenge Cup starts for real, as teams from Asia, Europe and North America have converged on Spokane to square off in the inaugural event designed to become the skating season's final event every other year.

"Oh my gosh, it's amazing," said 2015 national champion Jason Brown. "It's always incredible to be a part of an inaugural event."

Brown, 21, of Highland Park, Illinois, is coming off a back injury that sidelined him for more than five months.

"I never really had a season this year. I worked so extremely hard to get healthy again," he said. "Everybody is proud to be here and represent their continent. No one really knows what to expect, so that just adds to the level of excitement."

Team Challenge Cup follows the same format of the team-skating competition that was first held in the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

The teams of ladies, men, pairs and ice-dance pairs will combine their scores for a chance at some of the \$617,000 in prize money. The men and ladies will start the competition Friday night at 7:30 p.m. after the opening ceremony.

The competition continues at 1:30 p.m. Saturday with the pairs free skate and ice-dance pairs free dance. The men and ladies will compete at 7 p.m. Saturday in the free skate after which time a team champion will be crowned.

The event concludes with an exhibition of some of the top skaters on Sunday at 3 p.m.

U.S. skating officials selected Spokane based on the marketing efforts of Barb Beddor and Toby Steward from Star USA, which helped attract a 2002 Skate America event and the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in 2007 and 2010.

"One of the big reasons we're here this week is our relationship with Spokane and the Spokane Arena and Star USA from a marketing perspective," said Bob Dunlop, the senior director of

events with U.S. Figure Skating. This is “a perfect-sized venue and community to kick this inaugural championship off.”

Many of the skaters noted that the new event comes at the end of a season that culminates each year with the World Championships. Many of the skaters suspended tours and other commitments to travel to Spokane.

Skating for Team North America will be the reigning world champion pairs Meagan Duhamel and Eric Radford of Montreal. The pair noted they have been touring in Japan and have been home exactly one day since winning the world championship.

Their one day home included washing clothes and packing for Spokane.

“It’s definitely mentally exhausting, especially after an extremely long season that started in September,” Radford said. “But at the same time, we feel a good energy. By Saturday, we should be in good enough shape to get through it and deliver a strong performance.”

The French ice dancing pair of Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron, who won the 2015 world championships, were forced to cancel just days ago because of an injury.

They have been replaced on Team Europe with four-time British champions Penny Coomes and Nicholas Buckland. They found out Monday on an airplane ride to New York that they had been selected as replacements.

“As we were in the air, I think everybody was trying to get ahold of us. So when we landed, my phone was just lighting up with emails and texts saying, ‘Call me now!’” Coomes said.

“You know when everybody stands up to get their bags out of the top and get out of the plane,” Buckland said, “we had to make a decision. That was good fun.”

The pair had to scramble to practice their free dance, which they hadn’t performed since the world championships.

“It’s nice to have the opportunity to skate it again, because we love it so much,” Coomes said.

Team North American includes three-time American champion and reigning world silver medalist Ashley Wagner, whose parents, grand parents and aunt live in the Seattle area.

“I would be lying to you if I said it was easy. It’s more mentally and emotionally the part where all of us are totally fried and tanked,” she said. “At the same time, this is a completely different set up and a different kind of competition. We’re all getting ourselves to a place where we can kind of enjoy the experience.”

Adam Rippon, 26, of Scranton, Penn., is the reigning U.S. national champion. He said he’s more than willing to overcome the rigors of a long season to take part in the Team Challenge Cup.

“I know I’m really excited to be a part of this,” Rippon said, “and compete with my fellow Canadian athletes on the same team. I think it’s pretty awesome.”

Radford noted the odd dynamic just from the practice session on Thursday.

“When the American dance team came in, I gave them a big hug,” Radford said. “We get to be on the same team for once. This is probably the only time in our entire career that we will get to experience that. Working with people that you normally compete against is kind of neat.”