

American Liu rides wave of joy to figure skating gold

BY THUC NHI NGUYEN
Los Angeles Times

MILAN She flipped her hair. She shrugged. She dusted her hands off.

Alysa Liu makes winning an Olympic gold medal look easy.

The 20-year-old became the first U.S. woman to win the Olympic singles title since 2002, electrifying the crowd at Milano Ice Skating Arena with her “MacArthur Park” program Thursday and overtaking Japanese rivals Kaori Sakamoto and Ami Nakai, who won second and third, respectively.

Liu scored a monster 150.20 points in her free skate, the highest mark for a women’s free skate all season in international competition to win by a total of 1.89 points. Her choreographer Massimo Scali’s jaw dropped when he heard the score read in Italian. A beat later when the screen caught up to the public address announcement in the stadium, Liu nodded confidently and cracked a subtle smirk.

She doesn’t care about the scores.

Liu, who grew up in Oakland, Calif., has floated through her second Olympics as if she had not a single care in the world. A two-year retirement during which she climbed Mt. Everest, got her driver’s license and started college at UCLA made skating feel inconsequential. Now so unbothered, Liu spent part of her six-minute warmup



ANTONIN THULLIER TNS

Team USA’s Alysa Liu competes in Thursday’s free skate, where she racked up a season-best 150.20 points.

cheering on teammate Amber Glenn in the leader’s chair. Minutes before taking the ice, Liu snapped a selfie with her coaches. She gives her coaches a high-five right before taking her starting position. “She’s not like us,” her coach Phillip Diguglielmo said. “The rest of us here would be like, ‘Oh my God, I’m nervous. Oh, I can’t do this. I have a million voices in my head.’ She has one voice in her head, and it says, ‘I got this.’”

The only emotions Liu felt during her program were “calm, happy and confident.” When she sees the faces in the crowd smile, Liu said she can’t help but smile, too. And there was a lot of smiling. Her Donna Summer disco

program had fans clapping within the first minute. Diguglielmo and Scali held their hands overhead to join the roar. Liu’s pre-program message to the crowd on the video board was “Y’all better turn up!”

Liu, who won the 2025 world championship with the same crowd-pleasing program, returned to the sport in 2024 with the sole objective of sharing her art. She wanted to make as many programs as possible. Winning never seemed to matter. With the gold medal hanging around her neck, Liu stopped short of saying she even wanted it. She surely didn’t need it, she said.

“What I needed was the stage,” Liu said. “And I got that.”

Once Liu processed the final scores, she rose to her feet and turned toward Nakai, clapping for the 17-year-old. Nakai, skating in her first Olympics, was shocked. She held up three fingers to Liu, asking if she had finished on the podium. Overjoyed, they hugged. Liu picked Nakai, who had entered the free skate in first place, up off the ground.

Sakamoto was less than a point ahead of Liu entering Thursday’s free skate, but small mistakes from the three-time world champion, in addition to Liu’s strong technique and infectious energy, made Liu the first U.S. woman to win the Olympic gold medal since Sarah Hughes in 2002. The United States’



MATTHEW STOCKMAN TNS

Gold medalist Alysa Liu, back, celebrates with bronze medalist Ami Nakai after the final scores were released on Thursday.

20-year drought without a medal - since Sasha Cohen took silver in 2006 - was the country’s longest.

Liu held her palms up in disbelief after finishing the program of her life that put her in the lead with two competitors remaining. She leaned into the camera and pointed to the piercing on the inside of her upper lip. She did it herself.

With blond horizontal stripes dyed in her dark brown hair, bold black eyeliner and the smiley lip piercing, Liu has cut an alternative path to the top of a sport that long valued a specific kind of femininity. But the slick back bun, classical music and balletic dress was not Liu’s brand.

Her brand is joy.

And now as just the second figure skater in history to win two Olympic gold medals at the same Olympic Games - joining U.S. star Nathan Chen - Liu has the stage, and the attention, to display her joy for the next generation of athletes.

“People will be able to see how she approaches the sport now versus before and see how much more successful it is now in a healthy way,” Glenn said.

“And I’m hoping people can really learn from that.”

Glenn got redemption after the short program, putting up a season’s best 147.52 during her free skate that vaulted her from 13th to fifth with a 214.91 total score. The only blemish was when Glenn put one hand down on her final jump - the same triple loop that cost her in her short program. But as she held one leg behind her during a spiral in her last sequence, Glenn smiled as she looked into the crowd. After the program, she whipped her fist through the air triumphantly.

The performance put a positive punctuation mark on Glenn’s winding Olympic journey. She has faced intense scrutiny at the Games. The same pressure that consumed Glenn and teammate Ilija Malinin could not even touch Liu’s glowing aura.

When asked Thursday if she felt any “Olympic pressure,” Liu smiled.

“You would have to explain what Olympic pressure is,” she said.

Then she bounced away, the gold medal around her neck blending perfectly with her gold dress.

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