

Cloudy With a Chance of Pooh Bears

With a deafening roar from the stadium full of supporters and fans, Japanese figure skater Yuzuru Hanyu finishes his free programme.

After an amazingly extraordinary performance, Hanyu falls to his knees exhausted. He has poured everything he had into that programme and this is evident from the elated and emotional reaction of the crowd.

Cheers of delight echo round the rink as an absolute storm of plush Winnie the Pooh soft toys are thrown onto the rink as these are Hanyu's favourite cartoon character. It takes the staff a solid 10 minutes to clear the ice for Hanyu's rival, Nathan Chen, who is to become the overall winner of the ISU Grand Prix Finals 2019.

The real magic happens during the Exhibition Gala when the skaters from the competition simply skate to showcase their skills and please the crowd. The feeling and the energy flowing from each skater changes drastically from the competition to the Gala. They are more relaxed and are, in general, enjoying the atmosphere and trying to put on a good show. They are more indulged in the art of the sport rather than being limited by perfect execution of the technical points. Hanyu is no different. He skated to *Notte Stellata* (the swan) by *Il Volo* and it suited him to perfection.

The piece is a very beautiful and emotional one. This, in combination with Hanyu's elegance and expression through movement, makes for a breathtaking performance.

The way the choreography flows to the music is incredible but if done by anyone else, it would not have the same absolute beauty as done by Yuzuru Hanyu.

From the singer's first big note, you can really hear emotion behind it. An emotion that is perfectly displayed by Hanyu's outstretched, gliding figure. He is so immersed in the music and the feeling of the programme that you don't dare look away, for fear that you might miss something incredible because every detail is so carefully thought through. Everything down to the placement of his fingers, has been orchestrated to achieve beauty.

This is why he can keep the full attention of the audience throughout the first half of the programme without a single jump. He didn't rely on a flashy triple axel to catch the attention. He just skates so beautifully, that when the jump comes, it looks all the more impressive in contrast with the elegant simplicity which precedes it.

This two time Olympic gold medalist won his first gold medal in 2004. He started skating when he was four years old because he was accompanying his older sister to the skating rink. Since then has broken 18 world records, among which becoming the first skater to land a quadruple loop jump in competition. This is a jump that kicks off the ice with the toe pick, after which the skater must rotate four times in the air before landing back down, gliding backwards once again.

Hanyu is also famous for his triple axel, one of the hardest jumps to execute in figure skating because unlike all the other jumps, for the axle you have to take off forwards which then requires an extra half rotation to land backwards. During the warm up before his free skate in the Grand Prix Finals, he attempted to land a quadruple axel which has never been landed.

In 2010, fans saw Hanyu walking to the rink with his Winnie the Pooh tissue box, which has now become something of a tradition and is considered a lucky charm. This is why the rink was covered in the little soft toys. This is why, when his coaches couldn't make it to the Grand Prix finals he sat alone with his Pooh bear tissue box at cried upon hearing that Nathan Chen had won.

Despite losing to Nathan Chen, it is Hanyu's performance piece at the Gala that stole everyone's hearts. As the piece of music draws to its close, so too is Hanyu's breathtaking skating. With the vocalist's last note, Hanyu crosses one leg over the other, leans forward with his arms out behind him, gliding backwards to symbolize the beautiful swan that he is.