



CHRISTINE BRENNAN | Opinion 

Still no ruling on Russia's controversial figure skating medal from Beijing Olympics. Why? | Opinion



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WASHINGTON — It has now been more than 10 weeks since the 2022 Beijing Olympics ended, a Winter Games that will forever be known for the Russian doping scandal that consumed them and the figure skating team medal ceremony that never was.

All those days have gone by, yet the members of the silver-medal-winning U.S. figure skating team, as well as their competitors from Japan, Canada and Russia, are no closer to a resolution about who gets what medal than they were the day they left China more than two months ago.

Why? Because the journey to justice in the labyrinth of international drug testing, a trek that will eventually determine once and for all if Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva will be punished and if she will take her gold-medal-winning teammates down with her, begins in Russia, of all places.

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Russia, where President Vladimir Putin last week took a short break from overseeing his atrocities in Ukraine to say that Valieva is not guilty of doping, even though she tested positive in December for a banned substance.

Russia, where the investigation is in the hands of the Russian Anti-Doping Agency, the oxymoron to end all oxymorons, an organization that was suspended from 2015-2018 for helping Russian athletes cheat.

Russia, the country that devised the most dastardly state-sponsored doping scheme this side of East Germany.

Russia, where by all accounts, there has been no movement on the Valieva investigation, even though international drug testing protocols state that the anti-doping agency in the country of the athlete who allegedly cheated must begin the process.

“It’s maddening,” U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee CEO Sarah Hirshland said during an interview Monday.

Asked if a medal ceremony might not occur for two, three or even four years, she replied, “I hope not,” but said she knows of no timetable for when the American skaters, and the other two teams — whoever they end up being — will get their medals.

It’s certainly not going to happen anytime soon.

“We are looking at the possibility of it not being resolved until 2024,” said attorney Paul Greene, who represented the U.S. skating team in February in its ill-fated, last-ditch appeal for a medal ceremony to be held before the Olympics ended.

“It could take that long,” Greene said in a phone interview last week. “It’s horrible. I’ve never had more blameless clients than those U.S. skaters. Totally blameless. They did nothing wrong. They were only asking for their silver medals. They weren’t asking to be upgraded to gold. They just wanted what every other athlete who has

won a medal has received. Instead, they are the only athletes to ever be denied a medal ceremony at the Olympics.”

So, too, were the Japanese skaters, who finished third, and, possibly, the Canadians, who finished fourth and would move up a spot if Russia is stripped of its gold medal.

The lack of any semblance of a sense of urgency for Russia to investigate and punish its own is bad enough. Then consider the invasion of Ukraine, a horrifying yet opportune distraction for Russia's sports leaders. Put it all together and the Valieva case is something that the Russians appear to have conveniently forgotten.

“I've said to our figure skaters as recently as last night, nothing is more frustrating than the timing of the Russian invasion,” Hirshland said. “It has completely paralyzed progress that may have been made because this investigation really sits first and foremost with RUSADA as the first step.

“The dynamic between Russia, the Russian Olympic Committee, the Russian Paralympic Committee, and likely RUSADA, the whole Russian sport ecosystem, is absolutely tied up in this,” she said. “And so I think the impact is significant in an unfortunate way that probably does mean further delay in resolution on the figure skating team.”

Hirshland also called out Putin for his inappropriate public defense of Valieva.

“When you have a national president or a national leader commenting on the outcome of an investigation before the investigation is done, it does cause you to question whether or not you can count on fair process,” she said.

So what's next? All eyes are on RUSADA. Nothing happens before it does its job. Marta Nawrocka, a spokesperson for the International Testing Agency, an independent anti-doping organization, said in an email that while “there is not really a standardized time frame for cases...anything from a couple of weeks up to 12 months is possible, depending on the various procedures and delays.

“Should (RUSADA) fail to proceed in a reasonable time frame, the World Anti-Doping Agency as the global regulator can address this with RUSADA...and can instruct RUSADA to proceed within a set deadline.”

When RUSADA finally decides to act, let's offer a wild guess that it will side with Valieva (and Putin) and exonerate her just as it allowed her to stay at the Olympics and continue competing despite the positive drug test.

Thankfully, that's not the last word, Nawrocka said. "The decision on the merits by RUSADA's panel will be subject to appeal by WADA or the International Skating Union if one of them (or both) consider that the decision rendered by the RUSADA panel is not in line with the World Anti-Doping Code.”

Eventually, someday, a decision will likely work its way from the Court of Arbitration for Sport to the International Olympic Committee, which will make the final determination if Russia keeps the gold medal, or if the United States moves up to take it.

In the meantime, Hirshland was asked what her message would be on behalf of the U.S. skaters to the foot-dragging folks at RUSADA.

“Conduct this investigation quickly and fairly and transparently and honestly,” she said. “Everybody — everybody — in sport deserves that, including their own athletes.”