



## Yamaguchi wins 'Dancing With the Stars'

By SANDY COHEN – 2 hours ago

LOS ANGELES (AP) — After four consecutive male winners on "Dancing With the Stars," it was finally ladies' night.

Kristi Yamaguchi was named the new "Dancing" champ on the show's season finale, becoming the first woman to win the ABC dance-off since its inaugural season. The figure skater came into the final contest Tuesday with a perfect score and bested fan favorites Jason Taylor and Cristian de la Fuente to claim the mirrorball trophy.

"This is definitely for all those women out there to continue to be strong," she said after the show, hoisting the prize above her head.

The Olympic gold medalist was clearly the most talented dancer on this season's competition, regularly landing atop the judges' scoreboard. But viewer votes count just as much, and with the audience 75 percent female, men have had the edge. Last season ended with a shocker when race-car driver Helio Castroneves upset Spice Girl Melanie Brown.

"Obviously the fans are the deciding factor here," Yamaguchi said, "and I can't say enough to thank them."

She also had plenty of fans among her fellow competitors, who said she deserved the title.

Taylor, the massive but graceful pro football star, called Yamaguchi "just perfect," adding that he "grew up watching her compete for our country." De la Fuente, who was eliminated early in the two-hour season finale, said "it was impossible to beat her."

His professional partner, Cheryl Burke, agreed. "Kristi deserved it more than any other woman in any other season," she said. "It's about time that a woman wins."

Yamaguchi's athletic background helped make her a winner, said judge Carrie Ann Inaba, because athletes know how to channel criticism into competition.

"She was technically great and she was doing incredible choreography," Inaba said, adding that Yamaguchi's performance personality emerged throughout the season. "She was able to really develop her crowd-pleasing skills and that's what set her over the top."

The judge acknowledged on Monday's show that men often fare better in the ballroom, saying "they have a natural tendency to be more crowd-pleasers."

"When men get on the floor and you're watching the male power, it's unbeatable," Inaba said after Tuesday's show. "It generates this sort of excitement on the dance floor that's really hard to touch."

Winning the "Dancing" crown doesn't quite compare to winning an Olympic gold medal, Yamaguchi said, but it's still "a fun, amazing experience."

"It's not just this (trophy) but what it represents," she said. "It's all the hard work and the time spent together and the friendships made, challenging yourself and learning something new."

Though Taylor and de la Fuente didn't win, each was victorious in his own way. Besides forming a close friendship with each other, Taylor, an aspiring actor, has taken meetings with Hollywood heavyweights, and de la Fuente learned an important life lesson.

The actor ruptured a tendon in his biceps while dancing on April 28, but delayed the surgery necessary to repair it so he could continue in the contest.

"It's about wanting something in life and going for it," he said. "In this case it was a dance show, but it can be anything that you're afraid of. Go for it. Do it. The reward that you get when you put your heart, your soul, everything you've got in something, it's priceless."

On the Net:

- <http://abc.go.com/primetime/dancingwiththestars>

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