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# After Earthquake, Japanese Skater Sets Mind on Moscow

By Alec Luhn

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Yuko Kavaguti and partner Alexander Smirnov holding up their bronze medals at last year's Worlds.
**David Carmichael**

When a combination of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster upended Japan's plans to host the 2011 World Figure Skating Championships, a Japanese-born skater who competes for Russia was touched in more ways than one.

Yuko Kavaguti was scheduled to compete in the pairs competition in her homeland in late March. But the catastrophe on March 11 led the Japan Skating Federation to regretfully back out of hosting, and the Russian Figure Skating Federation won the right to be replacement host.

That returned Kavaguti and her skating partner, Alexander Smirnov, to Russia for the championship. The pair placed fourth in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver and took third in last year's world championship.

In an interview with The Moscow Times on Wednesday, Kavaguti said she wants the performances by her and Smirnov to bring cheer to the Japanese. She described how she was torn up by the unprecedented disaster – and how she focused on daily practice.

Kavaguti has resided and trained in Russia since 2003. She graduated with a degree in international relations from St. Petersburg University in 2007, obtained Russian citizenship in 2009 and even changed her last name from Kawaguchi to the more Russian-sounding Kavaguti. But her roots in Japan – she was born in the Aichi prefecture in the middle of the main island – are deep, she suggested.

Taking place at Moscow's Megasport Arena, the championship will run April 25 through May 1. Kavaguti discussed her expectations and showed off some charm.

**MT:** After your injury at the Olympics, what goals do you have for this year's World Championships?
**YK:** The goal is always that we have to skate our best in the moment. It is like this every time. Of course, everyone wants to be first.

**MT:** Do you think that you have a good chance of winning the gold medal this year?
**YK:** Last year we also had a chance. [She laughed.] So we have to just skate our best, that's all. It depends on how other skaters skate, how the judges [give out] marks. We do our job, that's all.

**MT:** Do you feel that this may be your year to win the gold?
**YK:** I'd say so. Well, we like this year's programs. We love both the programs, the short program and the free program. Even in practice, we are having a good time with this program.

**MT:** What is difficult, and what is exciting, about this competition?
**YK:** Difficult – that's because it's a world championship. That's the most important competition this season. The difficulty makes me more excited. And because it's in Russia, in Moscow. It's the home country. We want to show in Russia that we are Russian, we want to show our best. But personally, I don't want to think about this. I just want to skate.

**MT:** How did you feel about the championship being moved from Japan to Russia?
**YK:** It's not that the world championship got canceled. I appreciate that the Russian president made a decision like this. Of course, I wanted to go home, but maybe next time.
All the skaters prepared for the World Championships. And if not for that, for what did we prepare?
The Japanese federation, they wanted to have a world championship in Tokyo, but they just can't right now. So if another country can [host] the world championship, it's very good for the audience, for fans.

**MT:** What was your initial reaction when you heard that the championship had to be postponed?
**YK:** It was shock. But at that time, I was more shocked about the earthquake and what happened in Japan. After that I'm like, I felt like, why am I skating?
People in Japan — it could be my parents. I'm like, for what am I doing this sport right now? I can't be in that place, to just be sad. Of course, I am skating for myself, but now I want to

skate for them, too. “For them,” I mean people in Japan. To make them happy for just a little moment.

**MT:** So it felt strange to be skating while these tragic events were going on in Japan?
**YK:** Yeah. People are suffering, and I can’t do anything for them. Like I shouldn’t be having fun because they are suffering. Maybe [I feel this way] because it’s my country, Japan. I feel it because my parents are also suffering. I feel something as a Japanese person.

**MT:** Are all of your relatives OK?
**YK:** Yeah. They are fine.

**MT:** That’s very good news. Did you think that the championships should have been canceled altogether?
**YK:** No, they shouldn’t be canceled. It shouldn’t be [held now] in Japan, but it shouldn’t be canceled. It’s good that we want to have competitions. People were waiting for the performers. If there is an opportunity to have a championship, then why not?

## 'Africa!'

**MT:** How do you feel about the choice of Russia as the replacement?
**YK:** I say it doesn’t matter for me which country is going to have the championship — Russia, Canada, America, China. Africa! It doesn’t matter. A championship is a championship. We don’t think about the country when we skate. We think only about our performance. So it’s not important, Russia or Japan. In any country, a championship is a championship.

**MT:** Do you think that the tragedy surrounding this event could affect your performance?
**YK:** Physically, I am not suffering, you know? I have my health, I have a partner. We have good conditions on ice, good conditions at practice. So I think it shouldn’t affect [performance]. I am fine. We are preparing for the World Championships. We are not thinking about the earthquake over there.

**MT:** And even the emotions that come out of that tragedy, they won’t affect your preparation or your performance?
**YK:** If that question was [asked] three weeks ago, maybe. But not now. I had some emotions, shock.
Now people in Japan are trying to continue life. All that we can do as sportsmen – we can give them the power to continue life. So I should not think about, “How sad, how tragic, how, how, how.” Not positive emotions. We have to give them positive emotions. To give them, I have to be positive.
We want to make people happy, that’s all.

**MT:** You have decided to compete for Russia. Has this country in some sense become your home?
**YK:** People around me – everyone is so nice, so warm. They treat me nicely, like family. But still my country is Japan. I felt so much after the earthquake because it was happening in my country.
I am still Japanese. But I like Russia, too. This is my second country.

**MT:** How do you like the Megasport Arena?
**YK:** It's very nice. It's warm, very warm. I have to be very warm, so I like it. It's big.
We don't think about place. Of course, the rink is very nice, but we don't think about conditions – which country, which rink.

**MT:** You've competed at Megasport how many times before?
**YK:** Oh, I don't know. It's many times. I know, where's the dressing room, where's the toilet, where's the everything. It's very good.

**MT:** Do you have any certain memories from competing at Megasport?
**YK:** Last time, my birthday was during the competition.

**MT:** You had your birthday during the competition?
**YK:** The day of the long program. The president of the federation was there, he gave me a lot of roses.

**MT:** And who helped you celebrate?
**YK:** Everyone. Because they announced that I had my birthday that day. So during the warming up, they all celebrated me. It's such a good memory.

## 'Not Only Us'

**MT:** Do you do anything special before a competition?
**YK:** No, nothing, nothing. I do what I do every day. Nothing special for competitions.

**MT:** You just do what you do every day?
**YK:** Yeah.

**MT:** What does that entail? So what do you do every day to prepare?
**YK:** Come to the rink, change clothes, warming up and skate. That's all.

**MT:** I understand that your training schedule changed because of the postponing of the championship, because you had already reached your peak and then had to come down and then build back up. Was that tough to do?
**YK:** Yeah, but it was a good experience. And my coach, she knows how to [handle] it.
Everyone has the same condition. It's not only us. What happens, happens. We have to adjust. I learned [about this earlier] because when I came to Russia, it was hard to adjust. I adjusted. Don't make a panic.

**MT:** What would you say to your Japanese countrymen about the championship? A general message, if anything, that you would want to get across?
**YK:** I want to say to them, just keep going. Continue to live. I know it's going to be very hard. It's not going to be like, tomorrow, everything is fine. It takes a long, long time till everything recovers. But just don't give up.
I would be very happen if our performance gives them some [reason] to have positive emotions, to live.

**MT:** What would you say to your Russian – adopted – countrymen?
**YK:** [Long pause.] I wish that people enjoy our performance. [She laughed.]

**MT:** Is there anything else that you'd like to add?
**YK:** [Long pause.] That's everything. Just enjoy. We do our best, and if our performance could move people's hearts, that would be great. And we would love it if people could get some good impressions, some good emotions.

**MT:** I'm sorry, one more question. I wanted to ask about your partner, Alexander. How has he helped support you after the earthquake?
**YK:** Why does he have to support me?

**MT:** Has he helped in any way?
**YK:** I am not that bad. I came to practice every day. The earthquake has nothing to do with our pair. So I try not to bring my shock, my feelings to the practice.

**MT:** I bet he is happy that the championship was moved to Russia.
**YK:** He has the same feeling, that for us, the [location] doesn't matter.
But in Russia we have a lot of fans. So it gave us more power. In Japan, we have a lot of fans, too. We are lucky that we have two countries at our back, Russia and Japan.

Staff writer Rachel Nielsen contributed to this article.

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