

Gold Sweep for Rhythmic Gymnastics

August 12, 2012



Russia competing in the group event for rhythmic gymnastics Sunday. It won 57 points, 1.5 points ahead of Belarus. **Mike Blake**

LONDON — It's a clean sweep for Russia in rhythmic gymnastics, just as it's been at the last three Olympics.

The Russians won their fourth straight Olympic gold medal in the group event Sunday, easily beating Belarus. With Evgeniya Kanaeva winning the individual all-around Saturday, Russia has now won both rhythmic titles at every Olympics since the 2000 Sydney Games.

The Russians didn't even bother waiting for the final standings, exchanging hugs and blowing kisses at the camera before the score of Ukraine, the last team to perform, was announced.

No need to, as Russia finished a whopping 1.5 points ahead of Belarus with a total score of 57 points, delighting the big contingent of Russian fans in Wembley Arena.

Italy, which had hoped to break Russia's stranglehold on the Olympic gold after winning the last three world titles, was third after appearing to make mistakes on both of its routines.

The group event involves five gymnasts using two sets of apparatuses — five balls, and three ribbons and two hoops — in routines designed to showcase unison, flexibility and artistic skill.

Imagine a combination of a ballet, a Cirque du Soleil show and a 4-year-old's birthday party run amok, and you get the idea. One second the teams are doing gorgeous arabesques in perfect time together, the next they're whipping brightly colored balls this way and that or tossing hoops high into the air.

The Russians took a solid lead with their first routine, with five balls.

Wearing leotards with stiff, sparkly high collars and shocking pink skirts, the routine was filled with complex choreography. One move featured three of the Russians bending over, as if to create a bridge, while a fourth rolled beneath them. She then joined the bridge, and the last team member did a walkover over all of them.

But it was their routine with the three ribbons and two hoops that showed why no one's been able to knock them off the top spot on the Olympic podium.

Their routine to Latin music was a riot of color and visual illusions, some of their skills so mind-boggling even a magician couldn't figure out how they did them.

With the ends of the seven-meter-long ribbons pulled taught on the floor, the handles resting on a hoop, one of the gymnasts stamped on the hoop, sending the ribbons flying into the air like rainbow-colored silly string.

They used the ribbons to bounce the hoops so high into the air it made the flags hanging from the ceiling flutter, and turned one into a giant spinning circle that one of the gymnasts danced through.

When they finished, one of the Russians kissed the handle of her ribbon.

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