

The Shinano Mainichi Shimbun

657 Minami-agata-machi
Nagano City, Japan
TEL 026-236-3000
FAX 026-236-3098

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Japan wins Olympic team jumping gold



Hiroya Saito leaps 130 meters on way to Japan's gold

Japan's ski jumping team put an end to four years of frustration with an emphatic victory Tuesday in the Olympic team competition.

Before tens of thousands of screaming Japanese fans, anchor Kazuyoshi Funaki sealed the gold medal with a 125-meter jump in snowfall and windy conditions as the four-man home squad finished with a total of 933.0 points.

Defending champion Germany, led by three-time Olympian Dieter Thoma, took home the silver in a distant 897.4 points while Austria won bronze for the second straight Olympics, scoring 881.5.

At the 1994 Lillehammer Olympics, Japan had to settle for the Olympic silver when final jumper Masahiko Harada flubbed on his last effort and gifted the gold to Germany.

And for an instant, Japan's gold medal chances were put in doubt at the ski jumping stadium in Hakuba when Harada, the No. 3 jumper this time, struggled with fog and poor visibility on the inrun and traveled only 79.5 meters on his first try.

That put Japan back in fourth place after the first round of jumping. But the tide turned in the second round, when leadoff jumper Takanobu Okabe unleashed a mammoth leap of 137 meters to break the large hill record.

Hiroya Saito followed with a 124-meter effort before Harada redeemed himself with a 137-meter jump as Japan rose to the top of standings and stayed there for good.

Bronze medalist at last week's large hill event, Harada shed tears as he hugged his teammates before Funaki, the last jumper of the day, secured Japan's first gold medal in the event.

"We did it, we did it," Harada said, his voice cracking with emotion.

Tuesday's event put a cap on a brilliant two weeks of jumping by the home team, winning two gold medals, one silver and one bronze. (Kyodo News)



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