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First Tie for Alpine Gold, Though Not Precisely

By BILL PENNINGTON FEB. 12, 2014



Dominique Gisin of Switzerland, left, and Tina Maze of Slovenia celebrated their gold medals in the women's downhill after recording identical times after rounding to the hundredths of a second.

Doug Mills/The New York Times

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KRASNAYA POLYANA, Russia — A tie is not uncommon in most sports. Without it there would be no overtime, no extra innings and no sudden death. But a tie for the gold medal in an Alpine Olympic event had never occurred before Wednesday's women's downhill at the Sochi Games.



When Tina Maze of Slovenia, a favorite in the event, descended the racecourse in the late morning, she was chasing the little-known early leader, Dominique Gisin of Switzerland. As Maze crossed the finish line, a giant scoreboard over her shoulder pronounced her time as 1 minute 41.57 seconds. It then flashed a No. 1 next to Maze's name — and a No. 1 next to Gisin's name.

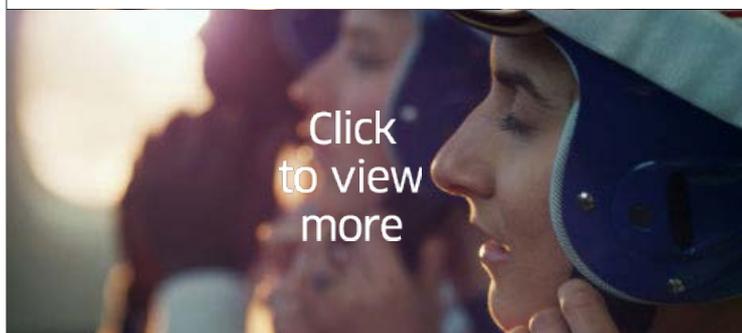
The racers had identical times.

Or did they?

In a glass-enclosed timing booth perched at the top of the grandstand next to the finish, the times for Maze and Gisin were measured

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and recorded to the 10,000th of a second: four digits to the right of the decimal point, not just two. As Daniel Baumat, vice president of Swiss Timing, the company that administers the timed results for the Olympic Games and many other sports, said late Wednesday: “There is a more precise number, to the 10,000th. But the rule is to report to the hundredths. We follow the rule.”



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Tina Maze, left, of Slovenia and Dominique Gislin of Switzerland after crossing the finish line with the fastest times. Photos by Doug Mills/The New York Times

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F.I.S., the international governing body of ski racing, which also oversees the Olympic ski racing competition, considers timing to the hundredths of a second to be a worldwide standard, as it is for most sports, but not all of them.

When asked why F.I.S. would not use the more comprehensive or complete number that was available to break the tie, Jenny Wiedeke, the organization’s communications manager, said: “When you start getting into such small numbers you cannot guarantee the integrity of that number. It’s an outdoor sport in a winter climate; a piece of flesh could be the difference.”

Maze and Gislin were awarded gold medals.

Still, in the timing control booth, three people — the head timer, a backup timer and a computer operator — saw who won the race according to the timing data. Baumat said he did not look.

“We don’t care,” he said. “The rule is hundredths. We said, ‘OK, it’s a tie.’”

Baumt said that no one, including F.I.S., is informed of the actual winner.

“That is forbidden,” he said.

But when asked if the times recorded to the 10-thousandths of a second were the most precise and accurate times for how long it took Maze and Gislin to ski the roughly 2,800-yard downhill course Wednesday, Baumt answered, “Yes, of course.”

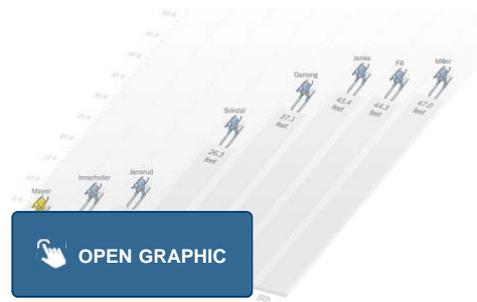
In speedskating events, according to its bylaws, if there is a photo-

finish system available showing time resolution into the thousandths of a second, the recorded times from that system are used.

GRAPHIC

How Close They Came to Winning

A schematic visualization of Olympic finishers.



Asked about speedskating's timing process, Wiedeke said: "That's an extremely controlled environment — indoors, no wind, no weather. Who knows what 20 years will bring, but for now hundredths is a perfectly accepted standard worldwide."

Swiss Timing uses various devices for measuring ski racers, including on-hill monitors manned by staffers. But the essence of the system is a trip wire that the racer triggers with her shins when she pushes out of the start house. The time is then chronicled until the racer passes through photocells similar to an electric eye on either side of the finish line. The photocells are positioned 30 centimeters above the snow.

Although there has never been a tie for a gold medal in an Olympic Alpine event, there have been ties for other medals, most recently at the 1998 Nagano Games when Didier Cuche and Hans Knauss tied for silver in the men's super-G. There were also ties for silver in the 1992 and 1964 women's giant slalom, and for bronze in the 1948 men's downhill.

It was the eighth tie for gold in any event at the Winter Games. Lara Gut of Switzerland won the bronze medal, 10-hundredths of a second behind the leaders. The American Julia Mancuso, another prerace favorite, was eighth.

Neither Gisin nor Maze was upset by the dead heat, with Gisin philosophical about the outcome.

"Sometimes you're behind the hundredths on the scoreboard, sometimes you're ahead of the hundredths and sometimes you're in the middle," Gisin said. "I'm O.K. in the middle."

Both racers, amazingly, have previous experience with tying and winning at their sport's highest levels. Gisin won her first World Cup race in 2009 in a tie with Sweden's Anja Paerson.

In the postrace news conference Wednesday, Maze had reporters snickering when she said about her tie with Gisin, "Sometimes the result is closer."

While not necessarily a closer result, Maze explained that in her first World Cup win, in 2002, she was in a three-way tie with Nicole Hosp of Austria and Andrine Flemmen of Norway.

While Maze and Gisin were convivial about the result — they held hands as they simultaneously ascended the top

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Women's Downhill

Gold Tina Maze Gold Dominique Gisin Bronze Lara
Gut 4th Daniela Merighetti 5th Fabienne Suter 6th Lotte
Smiseth 7th Edit Miklos 8th Julia Mancuso 9th Nicole
Hosp 10th Ilka Stuhec
1
Final

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step of a podium for a flower ceremony at the race finish (medal ceremonies are in the evening) — it was an exceedingly important outcome for both racers.

Slovenia had never won a Winter Olympics gold medal, and Maze, the defending overall World Cup champion, has struggled through an uneven season and was edged out for a bronze medal by Mancuso on Monday in the super combined.

“I was upset, but I knew the Olympics were not over,” Maze said. “But this matches my dream. I don’t care if there are two happy faces afterward as long as I am one of the happy faces.”

For Gisin, the gold medal she won Wednesday gives her a far more pleasant memory of the Olympic downhill than the one she has carried with her for four years.

At the Vancouver Olympics, she crashed 100 yards from the downhill finish, flipping and tumbling across the snow like a rag doll until she lay on her back semiconscious from a concussion.

As Maze came down the racecourse Wednesday, Gisin turned away from the mountain, unwilling to watch.

“When the crowd cheered and I looked back and saw that we were both No. 1, I was like, ‘That’s good,’ ” she said.

As for her comeback since the Vancouver Olympics, Gisin, who has had nine knee operations, said: “It’s the story of my career. Up, down, front, back — it’s not always easy, but I come back and that makes me proud.”

Still, she thought Maze was going to catch her as she waited at the bottom — and Maze did hold the lead after the final timed interval. But just before the final jump, Maze skidded wide on a turn and the slightly more circuitous path most likely cost her time.

As Maze said: “I thought I lost too much time up there at that last jump. But luckily I did not.”

In the end, on the scoreboard, if not the timing booth, the two were forever equal.

“We have been friends,” Maze said. “I guess we will be linked together forever now. We’ll become better friends.”

Correction: February 12, 2014

An earlier version of a web summary for this article reversed the identities of the gold medalists in the women's downhill. Dominique Gisin of Switzerland was at left; Tina Maze of Slovenia was at right. An earlier version of this article and a picture caption misspelled the surname of the Swiss gold medalist as Gisen in several instances.