

# NBC Sports Group Media Conference

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**Chris McCloskey**

**Terry Gannon**

**Tara Lipinski**

**Johnny Weir**

Press Conference



on this call would argue figure skating's leading the way. Certainly a chance, a good chance at gold medals in four of the five disciplines.

And also I'm looking forward to sitting next to my cohorts once again. Never a dull moment, never know what they're going to say, and I can't wait to get there.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thank you, Terry, now over to Tara.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you so much for joining us. In a moment we'll be joined by our figure skating broadcast team, host Terry Gannon, Olympic gold medalist Tara Lipinski, and two-time Olympian Johnny Weir to preview the figure skating competition for the upcoming Milan Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games.

This will be the fourth Winter Olympics for this trio who began calling the Olympics together in Sochi in 2014. As you were probably aware, Tara and Johnny, members of the U.S. Figure Skating Hall of Fame. And Terry, this is his eighth Olympic assignment overall and as you may know, he is also calling the opening ceremony along with Savannah Guthrie for these games. And in addition, Tara and Johnny are currently in the fourth season of the Emmy Award-winning series of "The Traitors". Be sure to tune in to that on Peacock.

Before we get started, there will be a transcript of today's call posted on [nbcsports.com/pressbox](https://nbcsports.com/pressbox) a few hours after this call concludes. But now we'll begin with opening remarks from each of our speakers. We'll start it off first with Terry Gannon.

TERRY GANNON: Chris, thank you. Good to be part of this, and I can't wait to get to Milan. You know, just big-picture wise, I'm sure you've done your homework and know as much as we do at this point, the biggest Winter Olympics ever. More events, more sports, more athletes. Fourth time overall for the Olympics in Italy. First time since Torino back in 2006.

And in terms of Team USA, should be a great team. High expectations. Might be the deepest, most talented contingent that the U.S. is going to send for an overseas Winter Olympics and in terms of figure skating, the people

TARA LIPINSKI: Okay. Hi, guys, I'm just so excited to be back in the booth with my two guys and more than that, just very excited for this Olympics. I truly believe this is the best team that I've seen in possibly over 20 years. There hasn't been a U.S. woman on top of an Olympic podium since 2002, but this women's team, we're calling them "the big three" and for good reason. There could be multiple medals, multiple U.S. women on top of that podium and it's just very exciting to feel the excitement coming back into the sport.

Obviously I am biased, but figure skating is the premier event at the winter Olympics. This year it feels extra special. I skated at the height of figure skating's popularity in the late '90s, and that same vibe, that same energy, the crowds, the interest, it feels the same, and I haven't felt that way in a long time so I'm really excited to get to Milan and watch this unfold, especially in the women's event with these three women. They have three very unique different stories and personalities and they bring so much to this sport, and I think it's going to be game-changing what we see from them.

And then on top of that, as Terry mentioned, out of the four disciplines, I think that the U.S. could come home with three Olympic gold medals and one of them being for Ilia Malinin. He is man-on-the-moon type material. Once-in-a-generation type skater. The things he does I thought I'd never see in my lifetime. Whatever he does, I know it's going to be a historic skate. If you sort of look back at what he's done this season, he's almost competing in a different competition than everyone else, winning events by 75 points.

So I am elated to go over to Milan and watch this all unfold and see figure skating explode again once more, and to be able to do it with my partners-in-crime Johnny and Terry. It's the best job I could ever ask for.



CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thank you, Tara, over to Johnny.

JOHNNY WEIR: Hi, everyone. Thank you very much for this opportunity to chat. First and foremost, I am so excited to get to Milan and sit next to my two best friends and watch figure skating. It always feels like I'm coming home when we sit in the booth and I'm so excited about that and so grateful that we have the opportunity to entertain and to teach people about this sport that we love so much. It's the greatest honor to bring the Olympics to our country.

Looking at the skating itself, Team USA has three reigning world champions in Alysa Liu, Ilia Malinin and Madison Chock and Evan Bates and the women's, men's, and ice dance categories at the Olympics of course. The team event will be hotly contested but I would say that team USA are heavy favorites at this point. Starting (indiscernible) the team event is going to be a great way to start for U.S. figure skating fans and even for people that only tune in every four years for the Olympics and don't watch the trials and tribulations of the skating season on a whole every season. I think that it will just be the most magical way to start.

In addition, I'm so excited to watch Terrance host the opening ceremony and I can't wait to see how he does. Looking at figure skating as a whole, it's just going to be so dramatic and the story lines across all of the disciplines in the sport... political, personal, there are so many brilliant and interesting stories that we have to tell. I can't wait to get over there and do what we love to do.

TERRY GANNON: Thanks, John. The pressure is on now that I know you're watching. (Laughter)

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: All right. Thank you so much for those opening remarks. Now we can open it up to questions from the press.

THE MODERATOR: Once again, ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to ask a question, please press star one on your telephone keypad and we'll pause for a brief moment. Thank you. We'll now take our first question.

**Q. Hi, great to talk to you guys and thanks for having this. I want to start this off with a question about history more than looking forward, but Nathan Chen is from Salt Lake City, which is what I'm covering, and he was the topic of the last two or a big part of the last two Olympics.**

I'm wondering, looking forward and how you see his fingerprints or his skate prints maybe being on these coming Olympics, what whispers of him can you see in

these games?

JOHNNY WEIR: I think that just getting to sit next to Tara Lipinski, who is an Olympic champion, once you achieve that and once you become the face of your sport, every young person that ever takes up skating is inspired by you. People that are your peers and competing at the same time are inspired by the things you are able to accomplish in your career. And you can certainly see a huge influence across especially men's skating from Nathan Chen, whether it's the way he dressed or the way he skated and the new boundaries he's able to break technically and including so many quadruple jumps in his performances.

The name of the game now is the quads for the men and Ilia Malinin is now leading the way. The quad God. He's able to perform all the quadruple jumps including the quad axel. He was the first person to ever do that, and I don't think without Nathan Chen that we would have seen so much of a push for those quad jumps which are absolutely amazing to watch.

TARA LIPINSKI: Yeah, I would just say the same thing. Without Nathan, we would not be seeing multiple quads in a performance, and all the time we called Nathan "the quad king" and I think that's a testament to his talent. Obviously we have a quad God now, but Nathan really revolutionized men's skating and Ilia is redefining that in a more evolved way as we step up that ladder, but Nathan is the one that set that path forward.

THE MODERATOR: We'll now take our next question.

**Q. Hello Johnny and Tara, thank you for taking the time. You mentioned the big three in the women's team earlier in your comments. I wonder if you could give us a brief scouting report of each of them and how you see their medal process prospects shaping up.**

TARA LIPINSKI: Sorry you cut out there. Are you talking about the women's?

**Q. Yes, the big three.**

TARA LIPINSKI: We can start with Alysa Liu who is the reigning world champion. If you look back in history and the track record of winning the world champions before an Olympic games, it really sets her on the right path to not only be the favorite to win this Olympic gold medal but to bring it home and she us having a comeback like I have seen before in this sport. It's definitely not one of pressure. It's one of joy and passion and love for her sport and I think that's what's connecting her to millions of people at home.

She's so relatable and so authentic in the way that she performs and competes and she also has this unique ability, which I think everyone is trying to figure out what it is and then copy it, but she is skating in her own little bubble without pressure because she really feels that she's doing this for herself and she's taking full ownership over her skating. And she doesn't feel the expectations that you would think she would and that gives her the edge to be able to compete under pressure.

Then you have Amber Glenn, which her story of perseverance is just incredible. Johnny and I have both commentated Amber from pretty much the start and seen how she's grown and really come into the woman that she is. And she is so special and I think important for our sport the way that she's so open and vulnerable about her mental health issues and struggles and how she overcomes the doubts and the pressure that she faces and over the last two years -- she's in her 20s, which is definitely not old, but in figure skating terms it is older and she's proven what you can do at any age if you work at it. She has a triple axle which she's the only American woman putting that into competition right now from the big three. The way she performs is so special. Because of her vulnerable she connects to the audience that way.

And then Isabeau Levito really is that -- I call her that skater in the snow globe. She is that quintessential ballerina that was put on ice. She brings elegance and grace and charm and she is a perfectionist. As beautiful and sparkly are her costumes, underneath it all is desire and will.

So we have a team that is really looking strong for the podium. At one point after watching the short program, it is probably a very small percentage so I will put that out there, but there's a part of me that could see a possible U.S. sweep happening. A lot of the stars would have to align for that to happen, but that's why I say I don't think I have seen a team this good in decades or not just two decades, maybe more, but I think Alysa Liu is the favorite for that Olympic gold medal, and I think Amber Glenn, depending her title for three times has now shaken things up a bit and is now an equal favorite as well.

JOHNNY WEIR: I will piggyback a little bit off of Tara about the big three. I think it's very special that there's a woman from figure skating representing each section of the country. Isabeau Levito is from south Jersey to southside Philly. Amber Glenn is from Texas, and Alysa Liu from California, and I think it's cool that there's those three different perspectives and three different styles in each of those women.

Alysa Liu, like Tara said, has found a way to completely relax into competition and she told us last week that she doesn't feel like her life is on the line anymore when she skates so he's able to put a lot of that pressure that many athletes feel down, and it's amazing to see her confidence and ease that she skates with.

Amber Glenn is an emotional favorite because of how much she's been through. Four years ago, she couldn't even compete at the national championships because she tested positive for COVID so she couldn't even try for the Olympic team, and I think what she's done in the last four years has been tremendous. She's landing consistent triple axles. She's leading the world in many ways in terms of that technical side of our sport and the artistic side. She really wears her heart on her sleeve when she performs, which makes it very welcoming to watch her.

And then Isabeau Levito. She's paying homage Sophia Loren. Isabeau is Italian in heritage and just the fact that there's going to be an Italian-American competing in the Italian Olympics just adds to the excitement of watching her skate. She is one of those skaters that can tell you and count on one hand how many times she's fallen that week because she is so driven and striving for perfection and that makes her performances special in their own way.

So the big three, they couldn't be more different even though they're all competing in the same sport and that makes it really exciting for an audience because there's going to be someone for everyone to root for but I think overall, as Tara said, the team is so strong. The American audience has three strong representatives of the United States to root for.

TERRY GANNON: Can I add one thing on Alysa Liu? Just because I cover all different sports. You run across athletes who say I just want to go out there and have fun. That's the most important thing and then I play better that way. You believe them only to a certain extent. With her, it is as authentic as you can get and she's kind of unlike any other athlete as you can get. She's unlike any other athlete at the highest level because it's absolutely true with her and it would have never been that way without her stepping away from the sport and now her return with an entirely different mindset.

Now, it's the Olympics, who knows, but that's a big advantage going in to me, that authenticity.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. As a reminder, if you would like to ask a question please press star one on your telephone keypad. We will move on to our next question.

**Q. Hello, this question is for Johnny and Tara**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

**specifically. I wanted to ask a fun one about your experience on "The Traitors". I wanted to ask if there was anything from your figure skating or announcing journeys that you feel like helped you while filming "The Traitors" or if there's anything that you learned during "The Traitors" that you think has helped you call events.**

TARA LIPINSKI: Oh, wow, hopefully nothing I learn from "The Traitors" will see any other part of my life with all that treachery and deception. (Laughter) It was a blast to film and to be honest, to be able to do it with my best friend there was the best part. I think that, of course, in any area of my life -- I won the Olympics when I was 15 so I was so young and now I have had many different careers after and gone through personal obstacles where I do rely on that athletic mindset that I grew up with and all of those tools that I learned when I was a young girl, dreaming of going to the Olympics. I think I apply them to all areas of my life: Work, personal, and probably even "The Traitors" of knowing you just got to get back in there and I think it's just always for athletes the story of resilience, right?

JOHNNY WEIR: And I think just to jump off the same thing, "The Traitors" was just so much fun to film simply because we got to just play a game and even though it is a game of deceit and being a traitor or not and trying to fight for your life essentially, it's just a lot of fun to be able to put everything down and play a game for a little while. I think we both enjoyed it so much and the fact that Tara was there gave me so much strength and confidence because my best friend was just across the way.

We did play it cool, though, at the beginning. We pretended we weren't as close as we actually are so people wouldn't get rid of us immediately, but I think whenever it comes to anything that could even be remotely seen as a game or competitive or something where you strive to be your best, our athletic backgrounds will always be our secret weapon. There's such a good education that you get in learning about yourself when you involve yourself in a sport, especially in a sport as competitive as ours. You learn a lot about yourself very quickly.

I think that all of our background in skating definitely helped us to enjoy our time and to show up every day wanting to do our best because it is a very intense sport and you go all-in very quickly. It's just in the way they set it up and the way we travel and the way we move about. You go in so hard right away.

I hope that there's no deceit in my commentary. I hope I didn't learn too much that I can take into the commentary booth with me, but I know that it was just so fun.

TARA LIPINSKI: You know what I can say -- not to cut you off, but I do think we learned something. I do think our bond became even stronger, if that's possible, just going through a different experience like that and being away from home and in sort of an environment that we're not completely used to. I trust him with my life.

JOHNNY WEIR: Yeah, Tara and I have always felt that way with each other and with Terrance as well but we can completely trust each other. If I start to fall apart, Tara will be right there to pick me up and vice versa. I think that bond is what has kept us going strong for so long. That trust in one another and the honest joy that we have sitting with each other. Just every opportunity that we have together makes it deeper and stronger and for our real lives away from cameras and attention, it just enriches both of our lives so much.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, we will now take our next question.

**Q. Hi, I have a question for Tara. You mentioned just how young you were when you were at the Olympics first. I think the other day we saw your dress that you wore in the Olympics. Amber sat next to it and she was like I cannot believe this. This is tiny. Amber is 26 now making our Olympic debut. Alysa is 20 and is having more success now than even when she was 12 doing triple axles.**

Is there something you think in the sport whether it's cultural, coaching otherwise that you think is allowing women to have these longer careers? For a long time in the sport when women were kind of -- I don't want to call them afterthoughts -- but when you got to your teenage years it was a very small window that it was thought that you could have success in figure skating as a woman.

TARA LIPINSKI: Well, I think if you look back to the late '90s and early 2000s, figure skating was at the height of its popularity and for multiple reasons. In '94 with Nancy and Tonya, and I think also because the U.S. was winning medals. They were very competitive. They were pushing boundaries. They were raising the technical bar and they were able to compete with every country, Russia, Japan all of them. I think that skating is a bit cyclical and obviously there's going to be dips here and there.

I think we saw that in the 2000s, in the later 2000s and I think now you're looking at this season where it's a very different era than it was four years ago when we were watching the Olympic podium with three Russian women and quads, multiple quads in a skate. So obviously things have changed a little bit with Russia out of the game. I think that opens opportunities for others, but that's why I

think someone like Amber, who is older in our sport. It really is hard to say that that's old. But in perspective of what the age usually is, I think she's showing us that she can still push the technical bar. She's not just sitting back on her laurels doing a triple-triple. She's moving the needle by risking a very difficult almost and proving that with practice she can still do that.

Sometimes I don't think it's about age. It's more about what pressure is felt to actually push that bar and then prove that you can consistently deliver. I think that's when you look at the creme de la creme that rises. It's the cream that rises to the top because it's the skater that is artistic, well-rounded and can technically deliver elements that maybe not everyone else is with ease and under pressure.

JOHNNY WEIR: If you don't mind me jumping in, after the last Olympic games, the age minimum for skaters to compete in the Olympics was 16 and since that Olympics they changed it to 17, first of all, in hopes that it would help elongate the careers of many of the top women because for a while, we saw an influx of young talent from Russia specifically that would they had two seasons where they really shone brightly and then they would go away and we would never see them compete in international competitions again because there was another 13, 14, 15-year-old there to take their place. I think the International Skating Union did a clever thing in aging that age minimum to 17 for Olympic games and for senior-level competition.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. We will now take our next question.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: This is Chris. This is going to be our last question. Apologies. We are running out of time. Go right ahead, sorry.

**Q. Thank you and thank you for the time. I have to ask a little bit of a news question. As you might be aware, your co-analyst Gabriella Papadakis gave an interview in France today saying that she was supposed to be going and doing ice dance commentary for NBC in Milan, but that's no longer the case related to the book that she's put out. I just wanted to know if you have a comment on that and what, if anything, you might be able to tell us about the ice dance analysis and commentary you have planned.**

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: If you want, we can chat about that after this call. This call is really focused on everything that's going on on the ice.

**Q. Okay, I do have one on-ice question if that's okay.**

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Sure.

**Q. Separately unrelated to that, I wanted to ask, and I have been following your coverage all through the season, there's a lot of interesting music being selected by skaters of all disciplines this year. Also the ISU is doing a lot to try to expand the viewership and make the sport appeal to more viewers and younger viewers, especially in the internet age today. I wanted to get each of your thoughts about music selection and particularly choosing modern music to skate to and why certain pieces might work and might not work and just your general thoughts about the ongoing efforts to make skating a more popular sport through these Olympics and beyond.**

TARA LIPINSKI: Sure. I think that it is incredible that we are in an era where we can listen to Madonna. Amber Glenn is skating to Madonna in her short program. That was definitely not the case when I skated. The sport has to evolve and it has to appeal to a younger generation. I think it's just taken time as some things do, especially in figure skating, for people to adjust and accept that, but I think that U.S. Figure Skating, ISU, they have all done a good job in understanding that we want more engagement from a younger audience and I think lyrics, the songs that these skaters choose can really make an impact and a difference.

I also love, though, that it's a bit of a mixed bag and that you could be listening to Led Zeppelin and the next skate you're listening to Swan Lake. Because the thing that makes our sport so interesting is at the end of the day, the judging system has been changed a lot and there's so much progress there, but it is a sport that is a bit subjective when it comes to the artistic scores. So you really get to see different personalities come alive in what these skaters choose and how they choose to display their personalities and connect with the people at home.

JOHNNY WEIR: Back in our time it was obviously a very different world and that doesn't just go for our sport, it goes for the world as a whole, but I remember not really knowing anything about my competitors, what they were skating to, where they lived, who coached them what their daily lives were like. You only really get any news when you're at competitions with them. So it could be your biggest rival that lived across the country or across the world and you wouldn't know anything about them. So they were scary monsters out there waiting to steal your dreams.

Then on the same token, you have a panel of strangers that you also don't know anything about that basically determine your entire future, whether you would be a great star athlete or you should hang it up and pursue something

different. The change there came from social media. I definitely feel that there's a completely different vibe in these newer generations of skaters, these younger generations, because they know each other. There is a friendly atmosphere, honestly, backstage. Even though it is still figure skating and it is competitive, but they know each other. That lends themselves -- officials and the skaters. But everyone knows one another. It lends itself to being a more comfortable place to express yourself versus back in our time when you would work on a brand new program and new costuming and think you were so cool and then in the first competition an official would say oh, that's terrible. You need to change it and you have already worked on it for six months.

Now, the interaction between people is just so open and more honest than it used to be, but I think the skaters definitely feel that comfort to express themselves more fully than they would have, and yes, of course, they're still being judged and they still have to deliver on the day and perform well, but they're freer than they were in our time and I think that that's a really special thing to celebrate in our sport.

And I think that people choosing music that really does express who they are instead of skating to music that has been used a million times because you know judges like it, I think that's been a wonderful turning point in skating. The fact that the athletes can speak more and they can update their fans every single day on what they're doing and not wait for a press conference at an event, for example.

I think that the Internet, as much as it's changed the whole world and social media has changed the whole world, it's certainly changed our sport and the way people within it interact with one another and that ultimately lends itself to more inspiring and more open performances and communications and making a very competitive world a little bit less hostile. I think it's great when people can actually express themselves at center ice, because once you're out there you're completely alone and you want a good song to skate to.

TERRY GANNON: And let me just leave you with this, I'll close with this. I'm all for more Zeppelin in figure skating. (Laughter)

TARA LIPINSKI: That's why I chose that, Terry.

TERRY GANNON: Thank you, Tara, I did notice.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. That's all the time we have. I will now hand it back to Chris for closing remarks.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Okay, well, thank you so much to all our panelists and speakers today. As a reminder, a

transcript of this call will be posted on [nbcsports.com/pressbox](https://www.nbcsports.com/pressbox) in a few hours. Please be sure to tune in to the opening ceremony of the 25th Olympic Winter Games on Friday, February 6th live and in primetime on NBC and Peacock hosted by Savannah Guthrie and Terry Gannon. Thank you, everyone.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. This concludes today's call. Thank you for your participation.

