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2014 WINTER OLYMPICS

## U.S. Speedskating to Drop Controversial Under Armour Suits

*Decision Comes After Poor Olympic Showings; Will Use Different Under Armour Suits*

By JOSHUA ROBINSON and SARA GERMANO

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U.S. speedskater Shani Davis during the Olympic 1,000-meter race. *European Pressphoto Agency*

SOCHI, Russia—The U.S. speedskating team will drop its controversial Under Armour suits for the rest of the Sochi Olympic Games, the national federation announced in the early hours of Saturday here, after several athletes complained that the suits were compromising their performance.

The skaters, who have struggled in Sochi, will revert to the Under Armour suits they wore during their more-successful World Cup events last fall.



After a disastrous outcome for heavily favored U.S. men and women speedskaters, a suspect has emerged: the high-tech Under Armour racing suits the team adopted for the Winter Olympics. Joshua Robinson reports from Sochi on Lunch Break. Photo: AP.

"Under Armour provided U.S. Speedskating with three different suit configurations in advance of Sochi, and we have full confidence in the performance benefits of each of them," U.S. Speedskating president Mike plant said in a statement.

The so-called Mach 39 suits, which Under Armour developed exclusively for the U.S. team in conjunction with Lockheed Martin engineers and billed as "the fastest speedskating suit in the world," had become a target of criticism this week from athletes after several U.S. medal contenders finished off the podium.

Kevin Haley, Under Armour's senior vice president of innovation, said Thursday that the company, which has sponsored the U.S. team since 2011, was confident that its suits were fast, but that in the absence of medal-winning performances, the company would "move heaven and earth to make them better."

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Haley said late Friday the company was working hard to modify the Under Armour logo on the replacement uniforms to comply with International Olympic Committee regulations. The team said it had brought the older uniforms with them to Sochi.

After a tense two-hour meeting of team members and staff on Friday afternoon, U.S. Speedskating submitted simultaneous appeals to the IOC and the International Skating Union to be granted the option of changing back to their old suits as early as Saturday.

The main criticism from the skaters was that vents on the back of the suit, intended to let heat escape, were letting in air and making it harder for athletes to skate with proper form. Concerns over these design flaws were first reported by The Wall Street Journal on Thursday.

The team has had the suits since Jan. 1 and tested them in simulated race conditions during their pre-Olympics camp. But the skaters had never worn them in competition before the Games.

An spokeswoman for the ISU said Friday that if the team wanted to switch to a suit that is identical to ones approved at the start of the skating season—and if every team member has access to one—the switch would be legal. Olympic protocol requires all members of a national speedskating team to compete in the same kind of suit.

U.S. Speedskating executive director Ted Morris said Friday that the team members were locked in a debate over which suit to wear going forward. He said the team's members were split evenly and no final decision had been reached. "The general feeling from the athletes, it's pretty darn close to 50-50," Morris said at the time.

Haley said the team ultimately decided to change the suits largely at the insistence of a minority of skaters on the team who are considered medal contenders.



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The uniform swap puts Under Armour in a tough spot. If the U.S. team wins medals in the old suits, "it will be embarrassing for Under Armour," said Matt Powell, an industry analyst for SportsOneSource. Baltimore-based Under Armour Inc. is primarily known for its performance apparel. Shares of the company closed at \$106 late Friday, down 2.38%.

Haley, the Under Armour executive, contested the notion that changing to the previous suits would harm the company's reputation. "They're all Under Armour suits," he said. "We just want the skaters to win."

In his statement, Plant said U.S. Speedskating was "proud of its long-term, successful partnership with Under Armour."

After six long-track events in Sochi, no U.S. skater has finished better than seventh. That includes gold-medal favorites Shani Davis and Heather Richardson, who dominated the World Cup circuit this season.

"Coming off one of the stronger fall seasons, of course we were expecting to take home a bunch of medals, lots of hardware," Kip Carpenter, a coach with the U.S. team, said.

Questions around the suit began to surface on Wednesday after Davis finished eighth in the 1,000 meters, an event he won at the 2006 and 2010 Olympics. This season, wearing the previous suit, Davis claimed the top spot in three of four World Cup events over that distance.

Some skaters requested fixes to the Mach 39 suit from Under Armour's seamstress in Sochi. By the time Richardson competed in the women's 1,000, the controversial vent on her suit had been covered up with a rubber patch. Even with the change, she finished seventh.

During Friday's meeting, members of the squad were focused on identifying solutions for turning around their Games. Morris said it was one part of a continuing discussion, which has also highlighted potential issues with race tactics, skate blades and a decision to train at altitude before traveling to Sochi, which sits at sea level.

On Friday morning, several skaters refused to place the blame on the suits. Patrick Meek, who worked closely with Under Armour and Lockheed Martin throughout the development process, stood by the two companies' design. "These guys make F-16 fighter jets," Meek said. "If they can invade Afghanistan, they can build a speedskating suit."

Carpenter, meanwhile, said he didn't believe changing the suits would solve everything. "It's ridiculous to think we're slowing down a second and a half because of a skinsuit."

At a morning practice session Friday, Davis said he would feel confident going into Saturday's 1,500 no matter what he was wearing. "Suit or no suit, I'm going to try to go out there and try to win."

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