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Armed with quads, Chen ready for Greensboro

U.S. novice, junior champion ready for U.S. senior championships debut

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Two-time U.S. junior champion Nathan Chen will compete as a senior at the U.S. championships for the first time in Greensboro, North Carolina. -Jay Adef

Sometimes, the best way for [Nathan Chen](#) to get his mind off skating is when he is on the ice.

In hockey skates.

During the day, Chen is on the ice, in figure skates, training alongside Ashley Wagner and Adam Rippon under the watchful eye of coach Rafael Arutunian at the East-West Ice Palace in Southern California.

When he is finished with his training, which these days includes quadruple jumps, he goes home. Unlike his fellow training mates, however, he returns to the rink later that night to join his other training mates -- his teammates on his U16 Midget A hockey team.

"At first, I wanted to be a goalie," said Chen, who got interested in hockey because his two older brothers played. "I thought being a goalie would be the most fun. I really liked the goalie gear. I thought it was cool. But my family said being a goalie would be boring, just standing there in front of the net, not skating. So I decided to play up [at forward] instead."

Although he practices on the same ice for skating and hockey, he keeps his ice worlds separate. Skating, where he has been exceptionally successful, having won two novice titles and two junior crowns, is where he is most serious. Hockey, which he hopes he can continue playing until the U18 level, is more for fun.

He doesn't plan on giving up either anytime soon.

Some of his hockey teammates know he will be competing at the [2015 U.S. Figure Skating Championships](#) in Greensboro, North Carolina, and some don't. The ones in the know are supportive, Chen said, and his hockey coach understands why Chen is missing a few hockey practices these days.

Chen's skating passion began in figure skates. He was born in Salt Lake City in 1999, and his family caught the Olympic bug when the Winter Games came to town three years later. His oldest brother, Tony, played hockey and continued up to the U18 Midget level. His second-oldest brother, Colin, played hockey for a couple of years. Both of Chen's sisters figure skated for a while. Chen was about three years into his figure skating career when he decided to lace up hockey skates as well.

"When I first started skating in hockey skates it was a huge transition with no toe pick," Chen said.

But he quickly got the hang of it and came to enjoy his second on-ice sport.

"It's a lot of fun for me," Chen said, chuckling a little before adding, "I don't get all the blame from the coaches. You skate together during the drills and when you're waiting for the next drill, you get to hang out and talk."

At skating practices, things are more businesslike. And because it is an individual sport, he has the support of his training mates and coaches -- but it is a different feeling than when he celebrates scoring a goal in hockey.

When asked if he had a similar feeling landing a quad as he does scoring a goal, Chen said, "It's a little bit of a similar feeling, except with skating and the jumps it's more of a sense of achievement from all the hard work. With scoring a goal, it's more celebrating with your teammates."

Chen is not the only figure skater with a love of hockey. Max Aaron, the 2013 U.S. champion, once played for Team USA's development team. Michael Weiss, a three-time U.S. champion whose foundation has been instrumental in helping Chen's family finance his skating, is an avid hockey fan with a particular passion for the Washington Capitals.

For his part, Arutunian supports his young skater's passion for hockey but has big plans for the 15-year-old when he competes at the U.S. championships this week.

Chen is making his senior debut in Greensboro, but his programs are not like those of many rookies. He has a quad planned in his short program, and the plan is to do two in the free skate.

He comes to Greensboro knowing how to win having already won four U.S. crowns at lower levels. One high-level coach said she would not want to be skating against Chen this year, saying that the technical arsenal and "mental toughness" that he gained from winning and reclaiming his titles is a skill many senior skaters never get the chance to learn.

In fact, Chen is the only skater to have won back-to-back novice titles and two junior titles, and the junior men's competition dates back to 1918.

Chen is the youngest entrant in the senior men's competition. Although he has yet to obtain a driver's permit, he is old enough to compete at the world championships. Skaters must be 15 before July 1 of the previous year. (Chen's birthday is May 5, 1999.) The United States earned three men's spots at worlds.

"I've thought about that," Chen said. "I've thought about that a lot. I think that would be an awesome opportunity."

Based on his skating résumé, he is a quick learner. He won his first novice title in his U.S. novice championships debut and his first junior title in his U.S. junior championships debut.

"The first year I went into novice, I was completely inexperienced and I just wanted to see where I was," Chen said. "I was completely caught off guard when I won. The second year, I was lot better prepared. In junior, the first year, I was competing against all elite guys and I was pretty surprised again when I won."

He struggled the following season, placing third in 2013, but came back to the U.S. championships last year in Boston and reclaimed his junior title.

"I wanted to redeem myself from the previous year," Chen said. "I was not really thinking about titles. I just wanted to skate better."

Nothing about Chen's young, but steady progress, surprises Arutunian, who has been guiding the skater's career along with his wife, Vera, and choreographer, Nadia Kanaeva, for about three years. Arutunian credited Chen's previous coach, Evgenia Chernyshova, a former world junior champion pairs skater who guided Chen in his hometown of Salt Lake City, for creating solid technical groundwork.

"Nathan had been on my radar for five, six years," Arutunian said. "He was coming to me for lessons from Salt Lake City when I was in Lake Arrowhead. He would come in the summers. He would come in the winters, whenever he needed help. He would come to me and say, 'Now I need my loop,' or 'Now, I need my Lutz,' and I would give him exercises.

"The good thing about Nathan is that he would do the exercises, and he would come back."

Now training with Arutunian and his team full time, the work is paying off. Although Chen is a newcomer to the senior scene, some skating insiders believe he could figure into the medal mix.

"I'm really psyched for it," Chen said in reference to taking his first crack at the senior U.S. championships. "I've just been thinking about what it will be like. I've skated with a lot of senior skaters before at shows and train with Ashley and Adam, but it will be good to be out there."

Getting Chen ready to compete technically with the big guns has been coming together quickly. Just about five months ago, he started working on quadruple toe loops. Within two weeks, he was landing them.

Again, this did not come as a surprise to Arutunian.

"No, no, no, not surprising at all," Arutunian said. "His technique was ready. Everything was ready."

Chen said he started working on the quad using a harness and said Arutunian guided him through the jump.

"I wasn't that close the first week," Chen said. "It probably took me about two weeks. It's kind of come-and-go right now but I can land it pretty decently."

"I was a little surprised when I first landed it," he said. "It was just a huge adrenalin rush."

What has been more of a project is getting Chen to look like a senior-level skater. And that's where Kanaeva comes into the picture. A former pupil of Arutunian's herself, Kanaeva thought a lot about how to package Chen this season.

"He is growing like a man and I wanted his free skate to be more serious, more dramatic and show a more mature side of his skating," Kanaeva said of Chen, who is just about 5-feet tall. "Year by year we have been working on his skating skills, his power. I talk to him and tell him if he wants to be strong in senior he has to pay attention to this.

"He has all the jumps," she added. "Now the difference for him is to open up his skating."

Kanaeva selected Michael Jackson music for Chen's short program, and the composition of the program is interesting in that the first half -- to "Smile" -- does not feature lyrics, but the second part -- to "Smooth Criminal" -- does. This was done purposely, as the beginning of the program features Chen's most difficult maneuvers and the second part allows him to let loose more with the music.

"That's when he can open up," Kanaeva said.

This is the first season singles skaters can compete with lyrics, and Chen welcomed them to his competitive program.

"It gives the program a little bit of a show feeling," he said.

The free skate is much more traditional, employing a piano concerto by Frederic Chopin. Chen has been involved in ballet for years. When he was living in Salt Lake City he trained with the Ballet West Academy and he continues to take ballet classes now that he is in California.

Chen is looking forward to showcasing these programs in Greensboro, where he defended his novice title in 2011. He's four years older now and ready to show how much he's changed in the interim.

He has big goals this week, and when he returns to California after the U.S. championships, he hopes to score big goals, too.



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