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## Chen cementing his place among world's best

Following record-setting short, possibilities appear endless for 17-year-old

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*Though only 17, Nathan Chen is already considered one of the top men's figure skaters in the world due to his exceptional athletic and jumping ability. -Jay Adef*

It's easy to get carried away at moments like this, to get ahead of yourself, to forget what you have seen is just one performance that lasted just under three minutes, in what was only the first of two phases at a championships event.

And yet what 17-year-old Nathan Chen did Friday night at the [2017 U.S. Figure Skating Championships](#) in Kansas City was so far ahead of its time in the history of U.S. skating that no one wants to wait any longer to envision the medals and titles -- both national and global -- that now seem within his reach.

"I honestly don't think he's going to have to wait his turn," 1984 Olympic champion Scott Hamilton said. "He can beat anyone in the world right now."

Chen already did that in winning the free skate at December's Grand Prix Final. He beat the three men who have won the last six world titles, did it by landing four quadruple jumps cleanly and did it in his debut season on the Grand Prix circuit, winding up second overall in the event to 2014 Olympic and world champion Yuzuru Hanyu of Japan.

His two most recent short programs entering the U.S. championships, however, were badly flawed. That was what made this performance, with its two quads, such an important measuring stick for him -- and led everyone else to start measuring Chen's chances for a world medal this year and an Olympic medal in 2018.

He landed a quad lutz-triple toe combination despite imperfect takeoffs on both, explaining the mishaps by saying, "Part of the program is learning how to fight and secure the jumps that aren't perfect." He followed the combination with a flawless quad flip, then tossed off his nemesis jump -- the triple axel -- with spread eagle transitioning in and out of it. He received maximum levels for his spins and footwork sequence as well.

For the first time, Chen showed a real ability to link skating and dance, which he had studied growing up in Salt Lake City. Skating to the ballet piece *Le Corsaire*, Chen moved in ways that must have pleased his old teachers at Ballet West Academy.

"It's something I have been striving for the whole season," Chen said of the artistry. "Of course, having the jumps helps that performance quite a lot. I'm glad it finally came together tonight."

It added up to a score of 106.39, breaking the U.S. record of 99.86 set by Jeremy Abbott in 2014. The 42.83 he scored for the three jumping passes was higher than the total technical score of all but two other skaters -- Vincent Zhou (48.53) and Ross Miner (46.21).

Chen's total technical score was 62.07. He has a lead of nearly 18 points over runner-up Miner and nearly 19 over third-place Zhou going into Saturday's free skate, making it a virtually foregone conclusion he will become the youngest men's national champion in 51 years.

"I've never in my long life seen a short program with that difficulty matched with world class artistry," Hamilton said. "I honestly feel he was under-marked."

"This kid is so crazy great and absolutely owns these jumps that everybody else loses sleep over."

Many would have lost sleep facing huge expectations in a competition for the first time, as Chen did here. His performance at the Grand Prix Final started a hum that had grown to a roar in the ensuing six weeks.

"It does add a lot of pressure and a little bit of nerves," Chen said. "At the same time, it gives me a lot more excitement. I feel the praise, and I feel it's something I'm expected to do. I feel like I'm able to

deliver."

That does not surprise his coach, Rafael Arutunian, who said Chen has been dealing with expectations at every level of his career, which includes two national titles at each of the novice and junior levels.

"He grew up as a warrior," Arutunian said. "Since he was eight, he was winning his events against competitors usually much older than him. At the junior worlds in 2014, Chen finished third with a cast on his hand. Who does that?"

Chen's performance at the 2016 U.S. Championships, with a third-place finish and four quads in the free skate, had also started a buzz. It died quickly when Chen hurt his hip in the exhibition at the same event, leading to surgery that kept him out of last season's world junior championships and world championships.

Keeping Chen healthy is Arutunian's biggest concern. The coach made a point of saying how much he would like to have the financial means to hire a trainer or physical therapist who could work with Chen every day, an appeal that was clearly directed at U.S. Figure Skating.

Chen has done free skate practices this week with five flawless quads, adding a salchow to the lutz, flip and two toe loops.

"There is no limit," Arutunian said. "We are looking to do more and more. The only scary part is not to get damaged."

Neither Arutunian nor Chen shies away from questions about Chen winning medals or titles at worlds in March or the 2018 Olympics. No U.S. man has earned a senior global championship medal since Evan Lysacek won the 2010 Olympic title.

"I don't think [the medal talk] is something I should be afraid of," Chen said. "It's something I have wanted my entire life. It will bring more energy to my skating versus pulling me down.

"At the Grand Prix Final, I was able to stack up against high-level skaters," he continued. "This short program helps me push that further, to think (of a world medal or title) as a possibility."

Yes, we're getting a bit overheated. But it has been so long since anyone could be carried away by the medal prospects for a U.S. male skater that even the possibility casts a glow.



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