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Chen continues to defy limits of figure skating

U.S. champ becomes first skater to land five clean quads in competition

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Nathan Chen's ability to land quads has taken the world of figure skating by storm. -Jay Adef

Athletes are always redefining the limits of human possibility. When they push past one barrier by doing something extraordinary, something for the ages, they dream of what might be next.

When Nathan Chen, then 16, landed four clean quadruple jumps in the free skate at last year's U.S. championships -- becoming the first U.S. athlete to do so -- it already defied the imagination. He had already pushed the sport to the edge of the 22nd century, so it was hard to believe it would take him only one year to defy the realistic pace of progress.

Chen was dreaming even bigger, however, and began working to turn visions into reality.

Five quadruple jumps in the eight jumping passes of a free skate? So what if nobody had ever done that many quads clean in a competition. Why not?

That is precisely what Chen did Sunday afternoon at the [2017 U.S. Figure Skating Championships](#) in Kansas City, tossing them off with surpassing ease that could only have one thinking that this is just the beginning of how this young man may reset the physical parameters of figure skating.

A quad axel? A quad-quad combination?

"There really is no end point," Chen said. "You just keep adding in new stuff, keep on trying new things."

Said his coach, Rafael Arutunian; "I think it is not far away when everybody will do all quads."

Chen had tried five quads last fall at the Finlandia Trophy, but two ended in falls and only one resulted in a positive Grade of Execution (GOE). That did not discourage him or Arutunian from trying again, and Sunday at the Sprint Center was the perfect time, as Chen had an enormous lead entering the free skate and was on his way to becoming the youngest U.S. men's champion since 1966.

"Rafael has been expecting this kind of result for many years," Chen said.

Such expectations meant the coach seemed unimpressed by the first four quads, done consecutively in the opening 90 seconds of the four-and-a-half minute program to Borodin's "Polovtsian Dances."

Quad-lutz-triple toe combination. Quad flip. Quad toe-double toe-double loop combination. Quad toe.

Arutunian stood expressionless, leaning on the boards. No biggie. He had seen Chen do that in the Grand Prix Final last month.

A little more than a minute later -- when Chen hit a quad salchow -- Arutunian could no longer act nonplussed. He walked away from the boards, smiled and hugged Nadia Kanaeva, one of the other coaches who works with Chen. The jumping passes with the five quads would get GOEs from +1.14 to +2.0.

"That was an amazing performance," Chen said, and who would deny him that expression of self-satisfaction, since it was the truth?

"Everyone will see that and be trying the same thing," Arutunian said. "So our goal is to prepare something else for next season."

What in the world could that be? What Chen is doing already makes him seem extraterrestrial, and he is absolutely in a world by himself among U.S. skaters.

Some of his singularity is measurable statistically: Chen's winning score of 318.47 was nearly 44 points higher than the previous mark set in a U.S. event, and his free skate score of 212.08 was 24 points above the previous best. His 55.44-point margin of victory over Vincent Zhou was 32 points larger than any previous score of any discipline at the 12 U.S. championships that have been held since the implementation of the IJS (international judging system).

More importantly, he now has a jumping arsenal that brings him level or higher than the world's top men -- Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu, Javier Fernández of Spain and Canada's Patrick Chan -- who have combined to win the previous six world titles. Chen beat them all in the Grand Prix Final free skate.

"This," Arutunian said of Chen's five-quad skate, "is a tough message for them. We will see how they react."

Chen is not their match artistically, despite his significant improvements this season. His components score Sunday was second to that of third-place finisher Jason Brown, who has never landed a clean quad in competition and did not try one in Kansas City as he continues to recover from a stress fracture in his right leg sustained in December.

Brown, the 2015 U.S. champion, will join Chen on the two-man U.S. team at the world championships in Helsinki this March.

"Component-wise, I kind of faltered a little," Chen said. "It's something I look to improve for worlds."

The emphasis on trying the five quads clearly took priority. In the short program, where he did only two quads, there had been more evidence of the dance basics he learned in six years of studies at Ballet West Academy in Salt Lake City.

No U.S. man has won a world medal since Evan Lysacek in 2009. Chen, who will be competing in his first senior worlds, does not recoil at suggestions he could become an Olympic gold medalist next year.

"I believe it's possible," he said. "It's still in the distance for me, and there's so much I have to improve to make myself at that level, but I think it's definitely possible."

You dream, and you look at reality, and sometimes they become a seamless whole, with dimensions that are limitless.



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