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Marvelous short lands Chen comfortably in front

New U.S. record has Chen in line for U.S. title; Miner distant second

Posted 1/21/17 by Lynn Rutherford, special to icenetwork



Reigning U.S. bronze medalist Nathan Chen entered the event as the heavy favorite, and after setting a new U.S. record of 106.39 points for his brilliant 'Le Corsaire' short, the 17-year-old sits comfortably ahead of the field. -Jay Adef

The Nathan Chen Show hit Sprint Center on Friday night, leaving awe, hope and a shattered scoring record in its wake.

The first 50 seconds of Chen's short program at the [2017 U.S. Figure Skating Championships](#) saw the 17-year-old reel off a quad lutz-triple toe loop combination and quad flip worth more than 30 points. A triple axel -- launched out of and landed in spread eagle positions -- followed in the routine's second half.

Combined with Level 4 spins and steps, the tally reached 106.39 points, breaking the 99.86-point record set by Jeremy Abbott in 2014 and outpacing the field by nearly 18 points.

"Finally, this is the program I've been looking for all season," Chen said. "I landed all the elements I was looking to do. It's definitely a huge step for me, and I'm really happy with the score I got -- that was huge. I got all of my levels, and that's a huge improvement for me as well."

The routine, choreographed by Marina Zoueva to selections from the ballet *Le Corsaire*, was a huge uptick from the short Chen did at the Grand Prix Final in Marseilles, France, last month, where he defeated Olympic champion Yuzuru Hanyu in the free skate and came away with the silver medal over two-time world champion Javier Fernández. It vaults him into the conversation for world and Olympic medals, something the teenager took in relative stride.

"That's what I strive for my whole life," he said. "I don't think it's something I should necessarily be afraid of. At the same time, it gives me a lot more excitement."

Asked if his teenaged pupil could contend for a medal at the 2017 World Figure Skating Championships in Helsinki, Finland, Chen's coach, Rafael Arutunian, fairly scoffed.

"He beat Hanyu in (the) free program at the Grand Prix Final, and I think then he was at the Final for just the first time, if that gives you any explanation," said Arutunian, who trains Chen in Lakewood, California.

The coach told reporters Chen would include up to five quadruple jumps -- toe and perhaps salchow, in addition to the flip and lutz -- in his free skate Sunday. He has landed all of them in practices here. A decision would be made after practices Saturday.

Last January, after landing four quads in his free skate and winning a bronze medal at the 2016 U.S. Championships, Chen was nominated for both the world and world junior teams. A hip avulsion fracture, suffered in the event's gala exhibition, ended those plans and took Chen off the ice for more than five months.

Mindful of this history, Arutunian said, "Only scary part is, to not get damaged. I want to hire proper people, (therapists) to make adjustments to his body and how he feels. I want to have professionals around every day, and that costs money."

Back to the rest of the field.

Bouncing back from disappointing finishes in his fall events, Ross Miner skated a clean and inspired short to Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind" that included a gorgeous triple axel and gained Level 4 for its spins and steps. The 25-year-old skater heads into the short program with 88.67 points, less than a point ahead of 16-year-old Vincent Zhou.

"In the beginning of the season, I was doubting myself," said the Boston-based skater, who trains under Mark Mitchell and Peter Johansson. "I would go out and hold back. I kind of told myself, 'I want to go out

and have fun out there and skate like I do at home every day.' I've been skating for a while, I have experience, and I want to use it to draw on and skate better in competition."

Zhou landed a solid quad salchow, as well as a triple axel and triple lutz-triple toe loop. Like the other skaters, he gained Level 4's for his spins and steps. With 87.85 points, the teenager is within striking distance of qualifying not only for a spot on the world junior team but for one of the two U.S. world spots as well.

"Going to worlds would definitely be a massive step up, and I guess I haven't prepared for it in the fullest," Zhou said. "It would be an honor to be able to go, but for now, I'm setting my sights more on junior worlds."

Tammy Gambill, who trains Zhou in Riverside, California, had a different view.

"Absolutely, he is ready for senior worlds," Gambill said. "He could do both (worlds and junior worlds). They are at least a month apart. There is time if he had a management plan for both, to taper down and build up again."

Limited by a stress fracture in his right fibula, Jason Brown kept himself in the conversation by earning 79.23 points for his short, choreographed by Rohene Ward to "Writing's on the Wall" from the *Spectre* soundtrack. The 2015 U.S. champion fell on a downgraded triple axel and under-rotated a triple lutz, but his superb style and performance quality gave him the highest program component scores (PCS) of the event.

"Right now, I know I'm not in the strongest shape and the best place," said Brown, who was diagnosed with the injury in mid-December. "But I gave it my all, and I can't walk away from that performance having regrets."

Brown told reporters he re-started practicing his triple flip and triple lutz on Friday of last week, and began doing triple axels the beginning of this week. Off ice, he wore a protective support boot.

"My biggest hope is that if I can buy myself more time for Four Continents and the world championships, (I will be) 100 percent," he said. "The last thing I want to do is go to worlds or Four Continents at 70 or 80 percent."

It was a disastrous evening for Max Aaron, the reigning silver medalist who had been expected to contend for one of the two U.S. world spots. The 2013 U.S. champion fell on his quad salchow and the second jump of a triple lutz-triple toe combination, and also put a hand down on his triple axel. He is mired in 12th place with 72.54 points.



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