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The Inside Edge: Chen under the radar -- for now

Flatt skates for possibly final time; McManus engaged to longtime girlfriend

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Skaters, including Nathan Chen (third from left), take a bow after performing at the 45th edition of 'An Evening with Champions.' -Sarah S. Brannen

The 45th annual *An Evening with Champions* at Harvard University was a great chance to catch up with skaters. Since the show is a benefit, donors get the chance to attend a reception after each of the two performances and mingle with the stars.

Johnny Weir was a big draw and spent most of both receptions surrounded by eager autograph seekers under the portico of the elegant Dillon Field House, where the festivities were held. (For more on Weir, check out [Monday's interview.](#))

Inside, Ludmila and Oleg Protopopov held court with admiring Russian coaches from the area. They were wearing 2014 Russian Olympic team jackets and said that they loved the opportunity to attend the Sochi

Winter Games.

"Two weeks before Sochi, they invited us. It was wonderful," Ludmila said.

"They gave us these jackets [representing] 50 years since our first gold medal in 1964," Oleg added.

Chen aims high

At the reception Friday night, 16-year-old Nathan Chen leaned on the railing and looked out toward Harvard Stadium. Nearby, fans didn't seem to realize who he was.

That may be one of the last times he enjoys such anonymity.

Landing a sweet quad toe and an easy triple axel under spotlights, Chen looks ready to make his long-anticipated rise to the top.

The 2014 world junior bronze medalist is still small and compact, but he has a surprisingly deep voice now and a lot of maturity. He explained his reasoning for staying in the international junior ranks for one more season.

"I don't have enough points to have two senior Grand Prix, which ruins my chances at the (Grand Prix) Final," Chen said. "I haven't had great success on the Junior Grand Prix (JGP) for a while, so I'm aiming for the JGP Final and hoping to do the best that I can there. This will be my last year as a junior."

Chen was hampered by injuries last season, but he says he's healthy now and his results speak to that: He posted some of the highest scores ever recorded in the history of the JGP three weeks ago in Colorado Springs, landing two quads in his free skate.

"For now, we'll stick with two quads," he said. "We'll see about adding more in later on. I've been working on [doing three] a little bit, but as of this next competition (next week's JGP in Spain), I'm only going to do two. We'll see by nationals."

Omori in Michigan

Across the room, Shotaro Omori talked about his recent move to Michigan and his coaching change to Yuka Sato.

"For the past few years, it's really been about trying to figure out why I skate and what drives me," Omori said. "Working not only with Yuka but with Jason Dungjen and Alissa Czisny, they've really been working

together to help me figure out my purpose in skating and how to love skating again."

Omori, 19, said he felt a little lost after some disappointing results. The 2013 world junior bronze medalist did not qualify for the free skate at the same event in 2014, and he finished 17th at the 2015 U.S. Championships.

"When you're doing something for so long, when you start doing all these international competitions, you almost feel like your results and your skating accomplishments define you," Omori said. "I wasn't truly skating for myself and what matters in my skating. Skating has been such a refuge in my life; it's something I'm so passionate about. I just love skating so much, and I think that's why, this year, I haven't done so many competitions. I'm skating just to skate."

A quiet farewell

Without any fuss or ado, fans may have seen Rachael Flatt skate for the last time. She is very busy applying to medical school.

"This is probably my last show," Flatt said. "I want to move on -- I'm ready."

Flatt skated to "At Last" wearing a silver dress by Julie McDonough that she says is her "favorite ever." She has let her blond hair grow long, and she looks wonderful. We wish her the very best as she moves toward becoming a doctor.

An engagement

Colin McManus skates with Anastasia Cannuscio, but he has dated her sister, ice dancer Isabella, for the past six years. He told us he has known for the past two years that he wanted to marry Isabella. The off-ice couple got engaged Sept. 4.

"I've known for a while -- you have that feeling, and you know when it's right," McManus said. "When you're with someone for six years, of course the idea of marriage comes up. For me, it was a matter of not if but when."

After going out for a quiet dinner in Maryland, McManus proposed to Cannuscio at home. The next night, after an apple-picking outing, he surprised her with a secretly planned engagement party.

"The scheme was, I told her my sister and I planned an anniversary party for our parents," McManus said. "Meanwhile, I was planning a surprise engagement party. I had bought her a dress and shoes. When we walked in, all our friends and family were there."

Both skaters coach at the Ice Club in Abington, Maryland, and Cannuscio is also the learn-to-skate coordinator at the University of Delaware. The two plan to wait until McManus has finished his competitive career to marry.

"I want to close that chapter of my life and then start the next one," he said. "We coach together as a team, and that's what we hope to do in the future. We're just excited to say the word 'fiancée' at the moment."

As for the on-ice couple, Anastasia and McManus left Monday for the Nebelhorn Trophy, their first competition of the season.

"We're really fortunate that we got to come up and do the show," McManus said.

"We put some of our new lifts and elements into our show program, so we're still practicing them," Cannuscio said.

"We're very interested to see how our programs go over," McManus said. "Both of them are kind of departures for us, so we're just going to see how they're received, and that's what we're most excited about."

Writing

Like Flatt, Kimmie Meissner recently graduated from college. She majored in English, but she's pondering a different career direction at the moment.

"I think I'm going to go back to school for physical therapy, I've recently decided," Meissner said. "That's what I wanted to do originally, but then I went to school for English. I have to get my pre-requirements in, so right now I'm taking one statistics course. I think I want to go to the University of Maryland, but it's going to be a long way away for me still."

Writing is very important to Meissner, who says she writes every day.

"A lot of times I wake up in the middle of the night and have to write something down so I don't forget it," she said. "I have a little book -- I always travel with it; I always have it. If something comes to me, I'll type it on my phone and keep it in my notes...except a month or two ago, it erased everything. I had like eight different pieces on there. I was so upset! I was depressed for at least a week. It was horrible."

Apart from all this, Meissner is still focused on skating and coaching. She has been touring with *Stars on*

Ice and loves to perform.

"While I'm kind of back at this level, I might as well do what I can right now," she said.

Healing

Ashley Cain says she is still recovering from an injury last March that hampered her until August.

"I had Achilles tendinitis, mixed with plantar fasciitis," she said. "So, every time I was landing, it was like a sharp pain all the way up my leg. I did [2015 Philadelphia Summer International] and the doctor told me I was restricted to only doubles. After that, I took off about two weeks, and then slowly came back. I just stroked and slowly started adding jumps again."

Cain went to physical therapy every day for a while, and she still goes twice a week. She says that the injury has taught her to take better care of her body.

"It was a little bit of a blessing in disguise," she said. "Right now, I have a really good plan for the season and I'm progressing well. I did Mid-Atlantics last week and it was a huge step forward for me. I was able to do triples, and I was able to land them nicely, and all my spins, and no pain at all."

Study

Alex Johnson said he spent the free day between shows studying. At the moment, he's taking online classes through a community college back home in Minnesota.

"After this semester, I should be able to transfer to the University of Minnesota and then finish up in two years," he said. "I haven't really figured out what I want to do. I think for sure I will continue going to school. With skating, I'm taking it one year at a time, but I still love it and I really want to continue on to 2018."

After that, Johnson is considering the possibility of going to law school.

"I've had a lot of conversations with skaters who are now attorneys," he said. "One of them put it into perspective as: You go into court, and boom, it's like when your program is starting. The music goes on, and you're going. I feel like when I'm done skating, I'm going to want something as challenging and as much of an endeavor as skating."

Leaving that idea aside, Johnson says he thinks he's likely to go into coaching.

"I feel like I'm a lifer for skating," he said. "I love skating -- I love watching it, I love doing it. So, I feel like it's something that's in my blood and I don't want to give that up. I can see myself choreographing or coaching, or maybe doing shows for a little bit. But I also want to experience the other side of life outside of skating."

Committee

An Evening with Champions is completely run by Harvard students. This year, skaters Christina Gao and Harrison Choate were on the organizing committee in addition to being performers in the show. Two other current Harvard students, Yasmin Siraj and Marina Kalina, skated as well, as did Massachusetts Institute of Technology freshman Kevin Shum.

The show has raised over 2.8 million dollars for the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Proceeds benefit pediatric and adult cancer care and research.

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