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## Expectations high as Chen returns to Salt Lake City

18-year-old set to debut fresh programs; plans to limit number of quads

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*Fans will get their first look at Nathan Chen's programs for the 2017-18 season when he opens his campaign in his hometown of Salt Lake City. -Getty Images*

When Nathan Chen moved from his home in Salt Lake City at age 12 to train in California, his baggage included enormous potential to make an impact in figure skating one day.

When Chen, now 18, returned this week to prepare for his first competition of the Olympic season -- the 2017 U.S. International Figure Skating Classic, which opens Thursday -- he carried the enormous expectations generated by having realized that potential with a groundbreaking debut year on the senior international level.

He won the free skate at the Grand Prix Final, finishing second overall. Not long after that accomplishment, he won the U.S. title by 52 points, nearly twice the previous record margin in the 13 seasons with the new scoring system. In Kansas City, he became the first to land five clean quadruple

jumps in a free skate, and he repeated that feat a month later while winning the Four Continents Championships over the eventual three medalists at the 2017 World Figure Skating Championships. He set national record scores for short program, free skate and event total.

Chen's performances seemed even more stunning after having been forced out of the world junior and senior championships at the end of the 2016 season with a hip injury that needed surgery.

And, as much as his old hometown might want a similar tour de force -- especially because this is his first national or international competition in Salt Lake City since winning a bronze medal in the 2008 juvenile nationals -- Chen knows it is far too early for that.

"For the most part, people are expecting brilliant from me every time out, and that's also something I'm expecting of myself," he said in a telephone interview last week. "But I have to be wary of going super hard too fast to make sure I am at my best in the important events, instead of peaking at the beginning."

Although he took little time off at the conclusion of the 2016-17 season, Chen has been careful not to rush preparations for this campaign. He did several shows and some photo shoots for sponsors, including United Airlines, Coca-Cola and Bridgestone.

"Pretty low stress," he said.

The U.S. Classic should feel the same way for Chen, who has by far the most impressive credentials in the men's field of the Challenger Series (senior "B") competition. While these events have taken on more importance in recent years, Chen is treating this one as an opportunity to see what he needs to improve on before he moves into Grand Prix events, the U.S. Championships and, almost certainly, the Olympics.

So, Chen said it's likely this week he will do just one quad instead of two in the short program and just two or three quads in the long.

"With one or two quads, it's like an exhibition program for him," said Chen's coach, Rafael Arutunian.

The Salt Lake fans will, however, have the chance to see his new programs, which Chen has chosen to keep under wraps until now. There was an apparent sneak peek at his short program -- to the song, "Nemesis," by Benjamin Clementine -- when he practiced for a show at Sun Valley in July.

Last season, Chen fell back on his nearly seven years of ballet training, doing programs to ballet music: "Le Corsaire" for the short and "Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor" for the free skate. This season, he has turned to a more contemporary style in a short program choreographed by ice dance world champion Shae-Lynn Bourne. He said his free, choreographed by the venerable Lori Nichol, would still have a lot of balletic movement "but not be centered around ballet."

"Being able to (use ballet) last season helped me set a good level for who I am artistically," Chen said. "But I tend to enjoy skating a more contemporary style. That comes out in my show programs."

His opening jump in the new short program is to be a triple axel, and Arutunian said when he does two quads in the short, the plan is to have both in the second half for bonus points. It is uncertain whether Chen will try this season to repeat his landmark six-quad free skate from worlds, where all six received full rotational credit but two ended in falls as he finished a disappointed sixth.

"I do not regret what I did at worlds, regardless of (not making) the podium," Chen said. "It was obviously a good experience. This is the new story, the peak era of the quads. Essentially, the quads are my calling card right now. But I want to be able to put everything else out there, too."

Chen and Arutunian often did not decide how many quads they planned until the day of a free skate, and the skater is proud of his ability to make split-second decisions about jumps during a program based on the way he felt.

The American did four different quads last season -- toe, salchow, flip and lutz. He has been working on the quad loop but said it is "not my main priority right now."

Should he master the quad loop, Arutunian sees the possibility of Chen trying seven quads in a program.

"The question is, 'How are you going to skate a program with seven quads, to not get injured and deliver at the right time?'" Arutunian said. "That's the approach of practice, how to put the elements together at the right moment."

"Whenever you add more quads, it's harder to deliver performance," he added. "But, we're trying to do everything. It's like putting a necklace together with every piece of diamond or gold. One missing piece can ruin it."



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