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## Quad mastery sends Chen to top of U.S. podium

Two-time U.S. champion lands five clean quads en route to 40-point win

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*Nathan Chen's jumping ability was on full display Saturday night in San Jose, as the 18-year-old catapulted himself to another U.S. title. -Getty Images*

SAN JOSE, Calif. -- It sounds a bit crazy to say this about a guy who had won all four of his events this season prior to the 2018 U.S. Figure Skating Championships, but Nathan Chen has been struggling.

Struggling, that is, by the ice-breaking standards he set while becoming figure skating's newest star last season.

So his strong performance in Saturday night's free skate inside San Jose's SAP Center meant more than just making him a runaway national champion for the second straight year and earning the 2018 Olympic team spot that has been a foregone conclusion.

Chen matched his historic five-clean-quad free skate of a year ago at nationals, and it was his first such performance this season. In each of his previous two competitions, the Grand Prix Final and Skate America, only two of his five planned quads were clean.

"I definitely set a big bar for myself last year," Chen said. "I wouldn't even say I reached it today. I still have a long way to go before I can reach what I did last year."

The 18-year-old from Salt Lake City would have been close to that level had he not popped a triple axel on the penultimate jumping pass of his program to the score from *Mao's Last Dancer*. Some overenthusiastic scoring -- with program components that included three perfect 10's despite a somewhat tentative effort artistically -- boosted his score to 210.78, nearly matching his record mark of 212.08, which he earned for his squeaky clean free skate a year ago.

Chen secured a total of 315.23 points this time around, besting surprise runner-up Ross Miner by 40.72 points. Vincent Zhou was third, less than a point behind Miner.

Extremely poor free skates by Adam Rippon (fourth overall) and Jason Brown (sixth) left the final men's Olympic spots open to fierce debate among the 13-member U.S. Figure Skating selection committee. The decision is to be announced Sunday morning at 11:15 a.m. ET.

A year ago, Chen was propelled by his performance at the U.S. championships to a victory over Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu at the Four Continents Championships, his first significant international victory.

He hopes for a similar effect this season.

"It's definitely the same thing as last year," Chen said. "Use nationals as a confidence-booster for February."

Chen's focus on achieving what he wanted technically here was so narrow he almost had to be reminded that it put him on the Olympic team, something he had thought about since the Winter Olympics came to Salt Lake City at just about the moment he first put on skates. He admitted it was just checking off a box at this point.

"It's all happening so fast. It seems like just yesterday I first stepped on the ice," he said. "I still need time to really wrap my head around everything."

A victory with four clean quads in the free skate at the Grand Prix Final in December 2016 had started a buzz around Chen that soon became an uproar. It subsided a bit when he was a disappointing sixth at worlds early last April but picked up again as this Olympic season got underway.

Chen opened it with a win at the U.S. International Classic, a Challenger Series event, then began his Grand Prix season with a victory over reigning world champion Hanyu at the Rostelecom Cup in Russia. He followed that with a win at Skate America -- where his free skate was decidedly underwhelming -- and a solid if flawed win at the Grand Prix Final, the first by a U.S. man in that event since Evan Lysacek accomplished the feat in 2009.

The 18-year-old came to nationals after having missed 10 days of training late last month with an illness he did not specify. It was one more thing to overcome in a season of unexpected vexations, including foot problems that have led him to play it safe and temporarily set aside the quad lutz, the highest-scoring jump.

His quads in Saturday's free skate were two flips, two toe loops and a salchow. He was seven-for-seven on quads in the short and long programs but botched triple axels in both.

"I've had frustrations here and there throughout the season," he said. "But every competition, every year is totally different from the previous. You can't try to exactly recreate what you did last year.

"The thing is, I know I'm capable of doing it, so I just had to make sure I did everything right when all the pressure came and all the people were there."



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