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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/figure-skating-turns-to-virtual-competition-as-a-covid-19-fallback-11600869296>

SPORTS

Figure Skating Turns to Virtual Competition as a Covid-19 Fallback

U.S. skaters are competing head-to-head by recording their performances and sending them to a remote judging panel



Nathan Chen skates in the ISP Points Challenge competition.

PHOTO: NATHAN CHEN/U.S. FIGURE SKATING

By [Louise Radnofsky](#)

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U.S. figure skating champion Nathan Chen started his new competitive season with a videographer, a cluster of proctors and instructions to display a time-stamp before he performed his program in an empty training rink. Then he had to quickly upload the recording to his sport's governing body.

This is how the figure skating world is experimenting with holding competitions during the pandemic: by having skaters perform verified routines that are recorded and then judged from afar.

It would be almost a week before Chen, the 2018 and 2019 world champion, would find out how he and his American rivals had done. Their videos and scores from a remote judging panel were published online Tuesday by the U.S. Figure Skating Association.

The experience was a surreal contrast to the last time Chen had competed in January, when he defended his national title in the Greensboro Coliseum packed with skaters, fans,

judges and flowers in an event aired on NBC, who cut away to report on the death of Kobe Bryant.

It was also the surest way for Chen to debut his new programs ahead of an uncertain international events calendar. Alone on the ice he was able to skate without the mask he has worn for training—sparking a shocking realization mid-performance: “I’ve forgotten how to animate my face.”

Months into a pandemic that scratched the 2020 world figure skating championship, scattered skaters from their training locations and continues to threaten the upcoming season, the U.S. is investing in an approach that could yet save all judged sports: virtual competition.

Football, basketball, baseball, soccer and hockey teams can’t compete from their practice facilities, so their leagues have moved heaven and earth to secure daily coronavirus testing that allow their highly lucrative endeavors to continue. Nor can sprinters or cyclists or tennis players, who instead have navigated a morass of immigration rules to get to face off against each other.

But for sports that rely on athletic feats that are evaluated by a judging panel, rivals don’t have to go anywhere special to perform head-to-head. They just need some iPhones.

Skaters and gymnasts have been doing versions of this for years: showing off a newly acquired skill on Instagram, unnerving competitors and thrilling fans with a single tap of a finger even if they never try it in a championship.

U.S. Figure Skating used the contest, which it called its inaugural International Selection Pool points challenge, to confirm berths for tentatively planned upcoming international competitions, offer up some prize money, and allocate some association funding.

But mostly, it happened to create an opportunity, however strange, to deliver under pressure. That pressure extended to ensuring that the remote judging panelists had solid enough internet connections to simultaneously view the videos without a choppy moment during somebody's triple lutz.

Mitch Moyer, the skating association's senior director of athlete high performance, said he thought up the idea after three decades of watching skaters like Chen take proctored college exams while at major events—at a point in the summer when it wasn't clear if there would be any of those events in the near future for the squad he's trying to prepare for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing.

“For once a judged sport is going to be looked upon favorably,” he said. “You can do gymnastics and you can do diving and you can do some of these sports where it's just you, and you're being judged, virtually. Like anything else, you have to look at the positives and what can we do?”

U.S. Figure Skating is still planning an in-person 2021 national championship for January. But the virtual option offers a potential fallback. Moyer said the association might consider using it for other activities, such as testing developing skaters, in which judges sometimes have to fly to more remote locations.



Nathan Chen skates his Free Skate program during the ISP Points Challenge.

PHOTO: NATHAN CHEN/U.S. FIGURE SKATING

The global sweep of Covid-19 has been such that the last major figure skating competition held was in February, in South Korea. The 2020 world championships, scheduled for late March, were canceled just as the American sports calendar was collapsing, with the

Montreal hosts talking initially about bringing them back in the fall before giving that up too.

The International Skating Union nixed the upcoming junior Grand Prix circuit, and is allowing skaters who want to compete in the senior event to hit one competition in the country closest to where they happen to currently be. (That isn't enough to convince skaters such as reigning Olympic men's champion Yuzuru Hanyu of Japan, who has said he would sit out fall competition.)

It's still far from clear how the Grand Prix Final will happen, or whether next year's world championships can take place in Stockholm—and with them, qualifications for Beijing.

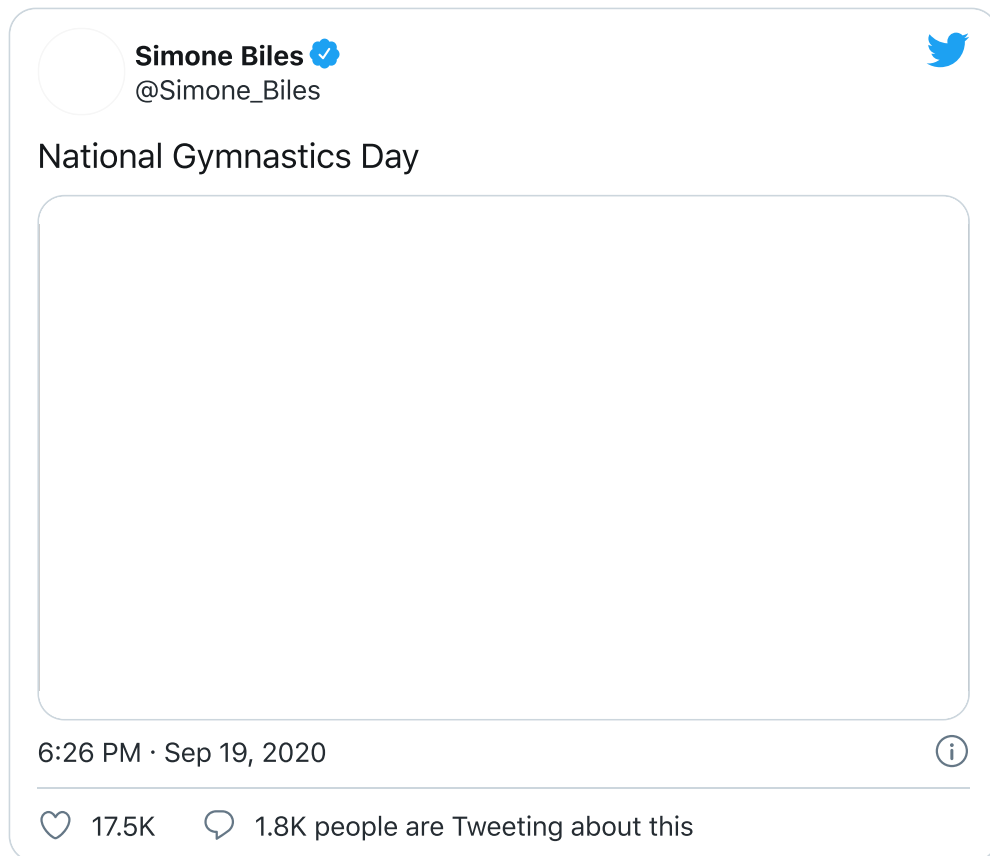
SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What do you think about virtual competitions during the pandemic?

Write to Louise Radnofsky at louise.radnofsky@wsj.com

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Chen said he still felt some of the usual adrenaline of a contest, because skaters were allowed only a single shot at a performance, to be carried out on command. “At the end of the day, you still go in for your mission.”

At the same time, there was a lot missing—like being able to eye up other skaters’ efforts, which Chen has often done and then adjusted the number of quadruple jumps he might do accordingly. Or being able to draw energy from the crowd, or get any kind of feedback in real time.

“It feels weird after every element that I do to just feel silence completely,” Chen said, adding that not knowing how he’d been scored for days wasn’t exactly comfortable either.

Without warm-ups and resurfacings, stuffed animal-clearing or a “kiss and cry” area where skaters normally wait for their scores, the virtual competition aired Tuesday ran far more quickly than a live event.

It delivered distinctly unusual championship moments, as some performers dodged beginner skaters clinging to the boards, and others had training mates who formed cheering sections for them.

But there were familiar parts too. Chen comfortably won the men’s category. There were falls. Figure skating savant Jackie Wong live-tweeted the pseudo-event.