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NEWS

Rippon gets by with a little help from his friend

Detroit-based skater contemplating doing quad Lutz at U.S. championships

By Amy Rosewater, special to icenetwork.com

(01/19/2012) - **Adam Rippon** had no intention of living in Detroit when he visited last spring. He had just planned on working on choreography with retired Italian ice dancer Pasquale Camerlengo for about 10 days and then returning to Toronto, where had been training for the last couple years.

So when he stayed with friend **Alissa Czisny**, she thought it would be a short visit.

They wound up becoming roommates for several months.

"I tried to be a good guest," Rippon said with a laugh. "I guess she was just a good host."

Rippon had been training with Brian Orser before deciding in April that he would work instead with Ghislain Briand, who had been part of his coaching team in Toronto. But he liked Detroit so much that in June he announced he would work with Jason Dungjen, an Olympic pairs skater who, along with wife Yuka Sato, also coaches Czisny.

When Rippon moved to Detroit, however, he didn't have a place to live or a driver's license, so Czisny helped him out on both fronts.

"I live in an apartment complex, and about 15 of us from the rink live here," Czisny said. "Adam's a good kid, and he couldn't get an apartment until the middle of August, so I helped him out. He was not high maintenance, and I enjoyed having his company."

As for driving, Rippon quickly discovered that life in the Motor City was difficult without a car. Detroit was much different than his previous training towns of Toronto and Hackensack, N.J. In Toronto, he could rely on public transportation, and in Hackensack he had lived so close to the rink that he could walk to practice.

"I hadn't even driven very much," he said. "I would have an occasional burst where I would drive for two days in a row and then go weeks without driving. Now I've got it down. I'm a pro."

Having overcome those two obstacles, Rippon has been able to easily adjust to life at the Detroit Skating Club. In fact, life on the ice was easier than it was off it. He joined an already high-level group with Czisny, a two-time national champion, and **Jeremy Abbott**, a 2010 Olympian, among others, and immediately felt at home.

"I think what really helps is that we have a group of elite skaters here, and we're all in our 20s," Rippon, 22, said. "We are all doing this because we take skating seriously. The kids here are well rounded. It's a competitive atmosphere, but it's healthy. Yuka and Jason provide a really good balance."



Adam Rippon has never made the podium as a senior at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships; he's looking to change that in San Jose. (Getty Images)

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In his first lesson as Rippon's coach, Dungjen asked his new pupil what he wanted to work on first. The answer was the triple Axel, so Dungjen broke down the jump to its bare bones. They worked on the single and double Axel and after a few weeks, there was noticeable improvement with the triple.

"Adam has really put everything he has into making changes," Dungjen said. "He's done everything I have asked of him, and he's been a pleasure to work with."

The results have improved as a result, especially with the three-and-a-half revolution jump.

"It's one of my stable triples now," Rippon said. "The technique is there."

Not that they are perfect, but they are much improved. At his first Grand Prix of the season, **Skate Canada**, Rippon held onto the landing of the triple Axel in the short program and stepped out of the landing and fell on a second attempt in the free skate. At **Trophée Eric Bompard** in France, he was successful on all three attempts, including a triple Axel-double toe in the free skate. He placed fourth overall but was third in the free skate.

As for quads, he is debating doing a quad Lutz, which he attempted this season but did not land cleanly, or a quad Salchow in the free skate. There is no quad planned for the short.

"It's here and there," Rippon said of the quad Lutz. "In the past, it wasn't here, ever. The good thing is that I tried it in both Grand Prixes, so that first hurdle is out of the way, and that should help at nationals. The nice thing about doing the quad Salchow and the quad Lutz is I can go back and forth, and I think it helps not to solely focus on one of them."

But what makes Rippon stand out among the crowd is his ability to feel the music and give meaning to other parts of the program besides the jumps. To succeed at this level, however, he knows he has to have it all.

A U.S. junior champion in 2008, Rippon moved up to the senior ranks with big expectations, but he has not finished better than fifth at nationals at the senior level. He is hoping for an improvement this time around at nationals, which begin Jan. 22 in San Jose, Calif.

"I just feel a little bit more mature and [that] I have blinders on," Rippon said. "I'm not worrying about other skaters. I know I can get enough points to go to the **world championships**."

"I'm thankful for nationals last year (when he placed ninth in the short and fifth overall)," he added. "It helped me learn a lot. I know the competition is going to be very strong, but I've been training well, and I feel a lot stronger than I was in the Grand Prix."

There is no place like San Jose for defying expectations. The last time the city played host to nationals, in 1996, one of the biggest underdogs in the sport came out on top. Rudy Galindo, who was written so far off the skating world that his biography wasn't even in the U.S. Figure Skating media guide entering those nationals, upset Todd Eldredge in a performance for the ages in his hometown.

"I have watched the Rudy video," Rippon said. "Rudy just looks like a person who just wanted to do his very best without expectations, and he delivered. He just seemed so free and in the moment. That's why people remember it so well."

As for his own expectations at nationals this year, Rippon said, "What I have to do is skate the programs. It was like that last year for **Ricky (Dornbush)** and **Ross (Miner)**. They had no expectations, and they got the results they were looking for."

Perhaps this time, it's Rippon's turn to reap the reward.

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