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Rippon: 'My job is to get the audience to its feet'

U.S. champion uses choreographic nuances to enhance performance

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Adam Rippon believes a skater cannot be an artist without first being an athlete. -Getty Images

A few years after skating to the soundtrack of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, [Adam Rippon](#) is back with another bird-themed program. When he skates it, his body lines and extensions, as well as his pure glide, make him fly over the ice. This season, he qualified for the Grand Prix Final for the first time of his career. On the eve of the men's short program in Marseille, Rippon talked to icenetwork about the way he balances artistry and athleticism in his programs.

Icenetwork: So, this is your first Grand Prix Final. How does it feel?

Adam Rippon: This looks very surreal to me...and at the same time, it's very exciting. This is something I always wanted to be a part of. I used to watch the great skaters I admired as I grew up skating in the

Final. This is my ninth season on the Grand Prix circuit. To finally be able to skate here is something I always aspired to. It's also a sign that a lot of my hard work has paid off.

Icenetwork: Two years ago, [you told icenetwork](#) that you had developed as an artist. Then you managed to increase the technical content of your programs. How do you manage to balance between the two, as you do in your free program?

Rippon: I found that, yes, I love to be an artist and be creative. But if I want to be an artist, I need to be an athlete first.

When I am practicing at home, I need to only focus on the athletic side of my skating. I need to set some goals and push myself to reach them all the time.

You know, I have put myself in every possible scenario: skate when I am tired, skate when I'm running late, start after two minutes into the program, etc. I try to challenge myself all the time.

Whereas when I am at a competition, I can think of being an artist. I just rely on my training and let go with the elements.

I have grown older, and I think I have gotten better. At home, I always ask my coach (Rafael Arutunian) to push me. He knows me well enough that even when I'm tired, he knows it's safe for me to skate. That's why I trust what he tells me to do so much. I ask him to push me, and he treats me like a younger skater at times.

Icenetwork: Do you feel you need to be pushed?

Rippon: Oh no, I don't need to be pushed. (Raf) will be the one to stop me most of the time. But I need to be guided and challenged. At the end of the day, I'll have done the program a hundred times, and I'll feel it in my body. Then, when I come to compete, I do what I need to adjust to the environment, like set visual cues for my program: see where judges are, look at the boards to check what I will see at the end of a spin, etc. Nothing more.

Icenetwork: Referring to quads, how do you consider them now that you've landed one (in Paris)?

Rippon: So many people are doing quads right now, and I feel they are really important. I can feel the quads in my body. But it's taking me longer to get new elements. It always has.

It was a difficult process. I had to pull (the idea that) I couldn't do quads out of my mind. That was preventing me from even trying them. I had to switch my mind from trying to land them to "Just try!" Overall, it's much better this way.

IceNetwork: Now you have the quad lutz and quad toe under your belt, so it looks like you can compete with the very best of the world, don't you think?

Rippon: I've got the lutz and I've got the toe, that's true.

But I don't want to rush myself. So many times I have rushed, and it has never worked. Mentally, that would put me behind. By this time next year, I want to be in my best shape. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

IceNetwork: You're not only getting better with time -- you're also becoming wiser!

Rippon: (Laughing) I try!

IceNetwork: How, as an artist, do you view a quad? What do you feel it brings to a program from an artistic point of view?

Rippon: It does bring (something) artistically. It makes the performance more exciting. A performance is not exciting if there is no risk. I want to give exciting performances. Instead of putting pressure on myself, I could just land eight triple salchows, if I wanted to. It would not be that exciting, however. That's why I want to push myself and push the envelope. I want to show a well-rounded performance.

Also, doing a quad gives me excitement, so it adds drama to the program and the performance. At home, when I practice, I work so that whether I land the quad or not, it doesn't affect the overall performance.

IceNetwork: When you landed your quad toe in Paris, though, it looked like...the sky had opened for you, a wider space for the bird you portray to express himself.

Rippon: That is exactly the way I felt. I don't think I would have felt the same if I had landed a double axel (which is the only jump I could land at that spot). So the quad does add a world-level quality to the performance.

IceNetwork: And yet you have great depth to your skating, on top of your quad.

Rippon: Raf knows that when you are competing, you need to know what your strengths are and you need to know how to get the maximum points from them. So I know that I need to refine my jumps, spins and steps better than any other skater. I need to make them look effortless. I need my jumps to be in sync with the music.

Raf's dream would be to watch a program and enjoy it without being nervous at all. Well, my job is to make him enjoy my programs! (He smiles.)

Icenetwork: What do you think is needed for us, skating fans and spectators, not to feel nervous for you, especially when we know that you're taking risks?

Rippon: I think that as a skater I need to take the time to enjoy the special things and the nuances the choreographer has included in the program. I feel really well prepared because of my training regimen at home. So when I come here, I can really focus more on these subtleties, even more than on technical stuff. I feel less nervous myself this way, so the audience may feel less nervous as well.

I feel like I am a professional skater. Whatever the result will be, my job is to get the audience to its feet. And then, of course, I hope this will lead me to good results -- but that's not my job. My job is to show up prepared and ready and to deliver a performance.

You can't just be an artist in a sport. You need to be an athlete first so you're able to perform in order to be an artist.

Icenetwork: Then, in the actual competition, you focus more on the artistry and your soul?

Rippon: Arriving at a competition, I feel ready and focused. I want to get the most out of each second. I do feel I live in the moment of each second. And then I'll realize that there is only one minute left!

Icenetwork: Maybe that's what makes us feel that we also are living the moment of each second of your program? How do you work for such a result?

Rippon: At home, I practice my programs in a few huge chunks. I don't go through a million small elements. I want to make sure that each of these pieces is seamless and flowing. I'll do triple axel, then the other triple axel, then the lutz-toe-lutz -- that's all one element. It's also much easier mentally when you come to a competition with only a few pieces, rather than a million.

Icenetwork: How much of your soul do you give at home, then, compared to here?

Rippon: My soul is maybe 50 percent there when I practice a program at home. But it's completely different: At a competition, I skate maybe 50 minutes a day. At home, I may be doing 100 percent more than I'm doing in a competition! Here, I'll give all my soul. I feel the adrenaline going. It gives me extra power. And I need to channel that extra power.



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