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Reinvigorated Rippon not holding anything back

After four months of rehabilitation, U.S. skater has sights set on Olympics

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Since breaking his left foot in January, Adam Rippon -- pictured here at Rockefeller Center -- has made it his goal to return to the form that helped him win the 2016 U.S. title. -courtesy of Kelly Rippon

Each day, as he hobbled into the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs wearing the boot he'd been given after breaking his left foot in January, Adam Rippon fixed his eyes on a clock inside the physical therapy room.

It was an Olympic clock, and on Feb. 9 -- exactly one year from the start of the PyeongChang Winter Games -- Rippon looked at it with one goal in mind.

"Let's go," he told himself.

Since Jan. 6, when he came down wrong on his foot during a warm-up in Los Angeles, "go" has actually translated to "stop" for Rippon, 27. He knew right away what had happened, and that the injury was bad.

No chance to defend his national title. No chance to go back to the world championships -- where he wowed a year prior in Boston on his way to finishing sixth overall -- to try and help the U.S. men earn three spots for the Olympics.

Instead, weeks and weeks off the ice turned into his reality, with hours of painstaking physical therapy, a constant trial of patience for an athlete who loves to be on the go and the test of a question that looms over every Olympic hopeful: 'Do I really want to go through all of this?'

The answer, solidified in an unexpected period of pause, has been "yes" for Rippon.

"I have re-ignited that fire," Rippon said Monday from a bench overlooking The Rink at Rockefeller Center. "I had to ask myself again, 'Do I really want to do this?' I feel more motivated than ever."

Earlier that morning, Rippon skated live on the *TODAY* show for the first time in his career. He gave hosts Jenna Bush Hager and Sheinelle Jones a faux lesson ("It's all in the arms!" he instructed the two beginners at one point) and executed a beautiful triple flip during his performance, one of at least five he did that day to a smattering of applause from the lookers-on.

Two weeks prior to his appearance in New York City, Rippon stepped on the ice for the first time in nearly three months. He had worn his loathed boot for 14 weeks on his left foot after arriving in Colorado Springs, cursing the item but not his situation. Days prior, triple lutz in his *Stars on Ice* exhibition required so much physical push that he thought he had broken his leg.

But Rippon -- as he has shown himself to be over the years -- is unbroken. In a candid 20-minute conversation, he talked of feeling like the forced time off was a blessing in disguise. He watched the skating in both Kansas City and Helsinki from afar with a certain longing. As texts poured into his phone the morning of the men's free skate at the 2017 World Figure Skating Championships, when Nathan Chen and Jason Brown secured three spots for the U.S. men in PyeongChang, his resolve only steeled further.

"This time around, going to the Olympics sounds right," Rippon said. "I feel like I'm ready. I'm not only ready to go -- I'm ready to go and have a great Olympics."

In 2014, Rippon looked equally ready, but his dream was derailed by a dismal eighth-place finish at the U.S. championships. Since then he has furthered his reputation in men's skating as one of the most graceful and poetic performers in the sport. Like Jason Brown, he's struggled to incorporate the quad into his programs; he said he'll work on adding a quad lutz, toe and flip to his repertoire for the 2017-18 season.

At this point in time, Rippon says his programs are a work in progress.

"I feel good where I am with next season," he said. "I want to keep pushing the envelope. I want to go back to doing the quad lutz...and the quad toe. I'm just going to go for it."

Rippon didn't go for it at the Grand Prix Final in December, finishing last by 33 points. It was a jarring experience for a skater who appeared to be coming into his own.

Looking back, he knows exactly what happened.

"For the past 18 months, my whole mentality was, 'Don't pay attention to what everyone else is doing; just skate,'" he explained. "When I got to the Grand Prix Final, I just started thinking, 'How did I get here? Why am I here?' I know that I have unique qualities that make me one of the best skaters in the world, but you lose some perspective when you see everyone else doing all of these [quads] and I just felt like, 'Oh, I'll be over here doing my triples.'

"I really did not listen to that golden rule that I had set for myself," he continued. "That's how I qualified for the Grand Prix Final in the first place. I needed that wake-up call. I'm so glad that I had that experience. At the end of the day, qualifying for and being at the Grand Prix Final has always been a dream and goal of mine, so...check. But I wasn't good and I want to improve on that."

To that end, he'll remain in Colorado until he is "100 percent healed," with hopes of returning to Los Angeles and coach Rafael Arutunian in June.

Being at the OTC has helped him "not turn into a potato" and given him a daily rigor of physical therapy that he said has helped his off-ice strength and improved his flexibility.

He's seen the entire process as one of hidden cause -- and one he hopes will help him see that Olympic clock as an omen.

"I'm just one of those people that if I have a situation, I don't feel slighted or sad -- I deal with it," he said. "I hadn't taken seven days off in 17 years. Maybe I needed this rest. That's how I took it. I'm hoping that as I get training again, I'm going to look back and be grateful for the time I had off to heal and recover."

"I really know who I am now, and I feel like I've learned from all of these experiences," he added. "I'm in the best shape of my life and I'm going to get into even better shape. I feel ready and confident. I'm just going to rock it."



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