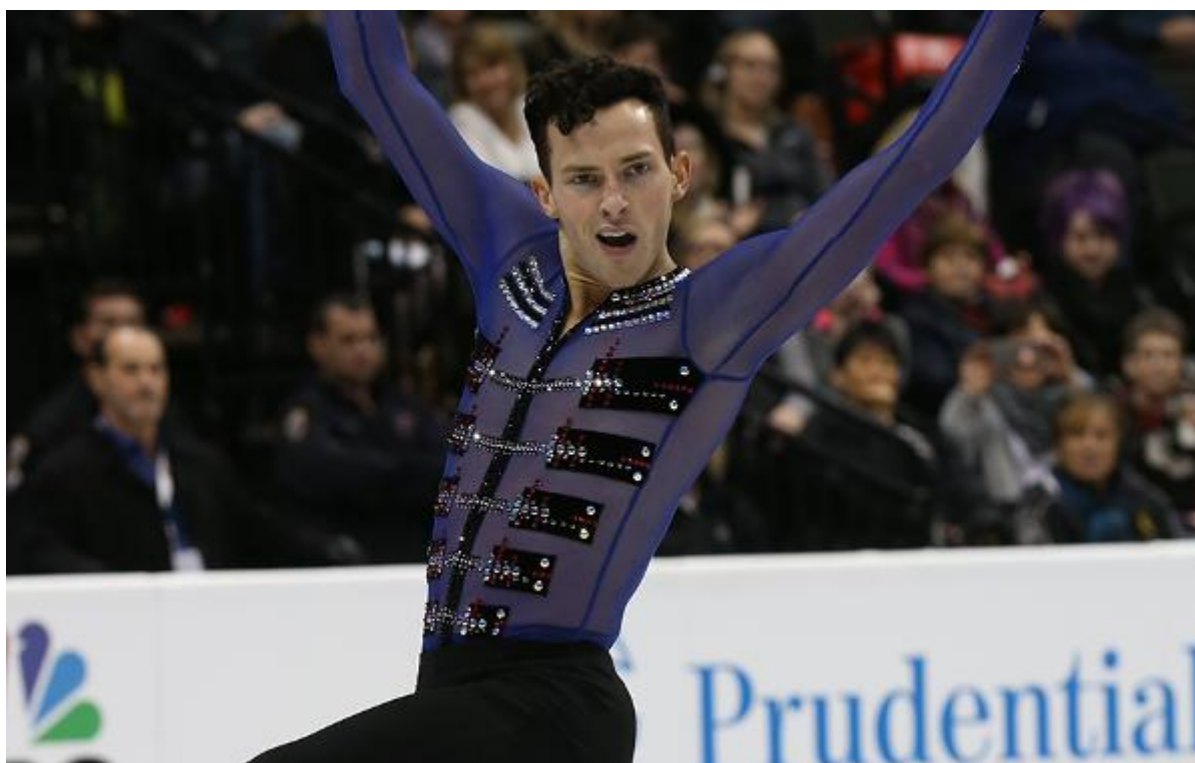


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Performance quality propels Rippon to first U.S. title

Aaron claims silver; Chen lands four quads in free; Hochstein wins pewter

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With the exception of a fall on his opening quad lutz, Adam Rippon turned in a clean free skate, gaining just enough in his Beatles routine to jump two spots and clinch his first U.S. title with a final tally of 270.75 points. -Jay Adef

At the U.S. championships, performance quality still trumps quadruple jumps.

That's the message judges sent Sunday, when they bypassed two skaters who landed a combined six quads in their free skates to reward [Adam Rippon's](#) charismatic and musical routine to win the men's title at the [2016 U.S. Figure Skating Championships](#).

"I make sure all aspects of my skating show through," Rippon said. "I think that's why I came out on top tonight."

Performing to a Beatles medley, Rippon showed refined, mature skating, complete with superb spin positions and entertaining steps. He landed eight triple jumps, including two strong triple axels, but under-rotated and fell on an opening quadruple lutz attempt.

High Grades of Execution (GOEs) for Rippon's other elements, plus the event's highest program component scores, gave him 182.74 points, and his 270.75-point total edged silver medalist Max Aaron's tally by 1.2 points and bronze medalist Nathan Chen's total by 3.82 points.

Aaron did two quads in his free, while Chen made U.S. figure skating history by landing four quads in his routine.

"I knew exactly what was going on, but it didn't change what I wanted to do and what I needed to do," Rippon said. "I wanted to put out a really good quad lutz. I wasn't able to land it, but I felt secure with the attempt in the rotation and I knew from there on out I needed to skate a strong program."

The 26-year-old skater, who is a decade older than training partner Chen, defended the judges' decision, arguing no one factor -- even multiple quads -- should determine results. In the short programs Friday, Aaron landed a quadruple salchow-triple toe combination, while Chen was credited with a quad toe-triple toe and quad salchow. Rippon did not attempt a quad.

"If everybody could skate like Yuzuru [Hanyu], then the competition would be boring," Rippon said. "You have people who are great spinners, you have people who are great performers, you have people who are great jumpers. It's not just a one-trick competition. It's not a jump competition, it's not a choreography competition, and it's not a spin competition."

Chen, who trains alongside Rippon in Artesia, California, landed two quad salchows and two quad toes in his routine to Camille Saint-Saëns' "Symphony No. 3," plus four clean triples and a snappy footwork sequence. But he fell on a triple axel and did not possess Rippon's maturity and flow over the ice. The program earned 180.60 points, including 100.24 points for technical elements.

"After the short program, I figured I was totally capable of doing (four quads), and I was ready to do it, so I decided that I could just go for it," Chen said. "I had nothing really to lose at that point so I decided that I could totally do it."

When asked what he thought of the results, Arutunian, who coaches both skaters in Artesia, California, seemed torn.

"If Adam put (a quad) on top of that program, definitely (there would be) no questions today," Arutunian said. "It would be quad lutz and there would be more points there. Nathan is an upcoming guy, and I hope when he gets older, he will put (performance) on top of his technical abilities and be Olympic champion in the future."

The coach acknowledged that to compete with the likes of Olympic champion Hanyu, who landed five quads in his two programs at the Grand Prix Final, as well as quadsters like world champion Javier Fernández, China's Boyang Jin and many others, the U.S. must develop skaters with multiple quads.

"I was so excited to see a young man do four quads, and I was so excited for the big step," he said. "And hopefully, the message would be sent to everybody that this is the future of U.S. figure skating.

"Maybe we should start to think (about) changing the rules, and if somebody puts out four quads, he must get (a bonus) on the second, and then another reward for the third, and then the fourth. That would be smart."

The judges didn't get Chen's message Sunday, but U.S. Figure Skating's International Committee did, naming Rippon, Aaron and Chen to the team that will compete at the 2016 World Figure Skating Championships in Boston March 28-April 3. Chen was also nominated to compete at the 2016 World Junior Figure Skating in Hungary, March 14-20.

2015 U.S. champion Jason Brown, fourth in the world last season, withdrew from the U.S. championships with a strained back. Brown petitioned for a spot on the world team but was denied. Like Rippon, he has never landed a clean quadruple jump in competition.

Aaron, the 2013 U.S. champion who dedicated himself to improving his performance quality, interpretation and choreography this season, hit two quad salchows and five triple jumps, including two triple axels, in his free skate to music from the *Black Swan* soundtrack. One mistake -- doubling an intended triple salchow -- cost him a second U.S. title.

"I'm glad I stuck with my process and came close to a clean performance," Aaron, 23, said. "I'm trying to get those out as much as I can. Every time I step out there, I want to make things happen. That triple salchow, that was a tough one; that was a mistake on my part. Plus, I think I could have performed it a little better."

Aaron's coach, Tom Zakrajsek, thinks the skater can put out a better performance at the world championships.

"We're still working on better spin positions, although he got his Level 4's here," Zakrajsek said. "He could also have performed his steps better. Certainly, he does the program better than that every day in practice, but this was a positive step in the right direction."

Grant Hochstein had his finest ever finish at a U.S. championships, landing a quad and seven triple jumps in an expressive routine to music from *Les Misérable*. He earned 252.84 points for fourth place. Ross

Miner, second after the short program, popped a triple axel into a single and had trouble with other jumps to place sixth in the free skate and fifth overall.



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