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## Wagner, Rippon hope to walk the walk in Detroit

Media-shy Arutunian lets his skaters' results speak for him

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*Ashley Wagner and Adam Rippon have become even closer under Rafael Arutunian. -Lynn Rutherford*

Rafael Arutunian lets his skaters' jumps do most of his talking.

Ashley Wagner credits him with helping to add consistency to her triple-triple combination. Adam Rippon says he's well on his way to mastering a quad or two due in large part to his tutelage. That's good, because Arutunian himself isn't too interested in giving interviews.

"I've never seen anybody hate it as much," Rippon said. "Ask him a question and he'll say, 'You see what they are doing' and walk away. And we'll say, 'Raf, they want a quote.'"

"NBC wanted to come in and interview everyone, and Raf is like, 'Not me.' He goes over to me and Ashley and says, 'Do I have to?' And we said, 'No, you don't have to do anything you don't want to do.'"

Many coaches enjoy sharing their thoughts; after all, it's their blood, sweat and tears out there on the ice, too. But when this reporter tried to talk to Arutunian about Wagner's training at U.S. Figure Skating's Champs Camp in August, he said, "I am doing my work." OK, got it.

"You could call him, but it will be a short conversation," Rippon said. "His attitude is, 'if you put it out there, you will get the scores.' That's his mentality. If you can walk the walk, [then] that will talk the talk for you."

While the taciturn former Soviet may be a man of few words to the press, his skaters say he gets his message across to them where it truly counts: on the ice.

"He's definitely got the biggest personality out of any of the coaches I've ever worked with," said Wagner, 22, in a media conference call last week. "He is Russian, so I've mastered the language of grunts and random sounds. Instead of saying exactly what he wants, he says, 'I need you to go ba-bab-bab' and expects you to know what he means."

Fortunately for Wagner, she does know.

"He does a great job explaining [technique] in a way I understand," she said. "That is something I've had a lot of problems with in the past, so to have a coach who in one way or another, ironically enough, speaks the same language, is great."

Wagner began training under Arutunian in June after John Nicks, her primary coach since the summer of 2011, retired from traveling to events. Although she still works with Nicks, it's clear Arutunian has taken charge of upping her technical ante.

For the two-time U.S. champion, that means gaining a consistent triple flip-triple toe, a combination she said she needs in order to compete with Yu-Na Kim, Mao Asada and Carolina Kostner at the Sochi Olympics in February. She will try it at Skate America in Detroit this week, where she and fellow U.S. skaters Samantha Cesario and Caroline Zhang square off against Asada, among others.

"The triple-triple establishes you to another class of figure skating; the elite of the elite are competing it, and I want to be a part of that," Wagner said. "You get a lot more respect as an athlete when you put the triple-triple out there under pressure."

Wagner included the combination in her free skate to *Romeo and Juliet* at the Japan Open earlier this month, landing it but receiving a downgrade from the technical panel.

"Working with Raf, he's given me technique that has really helped me build the consistency of the jumps," she said. "Now, it's getting it down to the point where I have to do it the same every single time under pressure."

In her teleconference, Wagner resisted suggestions to play it safe, saying with characteristic candor, "A clean program will do a lot, but it will not win the Olympics and it probably won't get me on the Olympic podium. I, myself, don't think I'm talented enough to get on the podium without a triple-triple."

Rippon, fifth at the 2013 U.S. Figure Skating Championships, hopes to land his first-ever clean quad Lutz in competition in Detroit this week, where he will compete against U.S. champion Max Aaron; two-time U.S. world junior medalist Jason Brown; and international skaters including Daisuke Takahashi, Denis Ten and Takahiko Kozuka. The 23-year-old, who placed sixth in the world in 2010 and 13th in 2012, has attempted quad Lutz, Salchow and toe loop in past seasons.

"I can't train [quad Lutz] the same way I do my triples and do 20 or 30 attempts a session, so it's been a learning experience," Rippon said. "I'm lucky that Rafael knows what he's doing. I've been training the quad Lutz really well so it's in both the short and long [programs] at Skate America."

Depending on how practices go in Detroit, Rippon and Arutunian may add a second quad to the skater's free, choreographed by Tom Dickson to Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun."

"The quad toe is going much better, and Rafael and I are still mulling over the idea of adding it," Rippon said. "Maybe by the end of the season, I will have quad Lutz and quad toe in the free skate."

"There is no reason I should not be a serious threat to anyone [at Skate America]," he continued. "I'm going to go out and show I am ready and well-trained, and see where I stack up."

Rippon began training under Arutunian in September 2012, moving to Lake Arrowhead, Calif., from Detroit, where he had been coached by Yuka Sato and Jason Dungjen. Previously, he trained with Brian Orser and Nikoli Morozov.

"What's great about my relationship with Rafael is he can explain to me why he wants me to do something, instead of me just going out there and doing it," Rippon said. "Not that I don't trust what he is saying is correct, but when he has a theory behind it, that gets your brain more kicked in."

The skater tested his programs, including a short choreographed by Cindy Stuart to Bizet's *Carmen*, at a small local event in September. Last week, he worked with Dickson to polish his free skate.

"I've had great experiences working with both my choreographers," he said. "Tom Dickson comes up to California every now and then, and Cindy lives nearby, so I was fortunate to have two people I can work with pretty consistently."

Apart from technical wizardry, training under Arutunian yields another big benefit: Rippon and Wagner, best of friends, energize each other during practice sessions.

"We are really similar, but at the same time, we're kind of a great yin and yang for each other," Rippon said. "She always wants to go out and get everything done, but not stress herself out. She is really confident in what she does. I want to do a million things over and over and over.

"So, for Ashley, she sees me do many repetitions. I see how confident she is, and it helps me not over-train. We're a good team. I don't let her get away with any moping around, and she doesn't let me get away with anything, either."

**Reporter's notebook:** Until recently, Arutunian trained his skaters, including Wagner, Rippon and rising U.S. junior Nathan Chen, at Lake Arrowhead's Ice Castle International Training Center, where he trained Michelle Kwan during the latter stage of her career. That facility closed at the end of August, and Arutunian moved his group to East West Ice Palace in Artesia, owned partly by the Kwan family.

"We took the move in stride; Rafael has always had a really good relationship with the Kwans, and they said, 'Why don't you come down and check out the rink?'" Rippon said. "I have a friend living near there and I could move in and be roommates with him. Ashley could stay in Dana Point, so we were able to find living situations quickly and it didn't interfere with training."



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