AMERICA'S NEW LEADING MAN?

Rippon eager to show that his time is now

By Lynn Rutherford

Adam Rippon's angelic looks mask explosive power.

There's quiet edging, smooth spins, fluid stroking and then snap, the audacity of a "Rippon" triple Lutz, the namesake move that does Olympic champion Brian Boitano's famous "Tano" one better by soaring with both hands over head.

Flair, discipline, originality; the 20-year-old — whose curly blonde locks and even features give him the look of a teen idol — just may have it all, including perfect timing for the new four-year Olympic cycle.

"I feel like everything is coming together," he said. "I hope everyone sees that when they watch me."

Rippon's coach, two-time Olympic silver medalist Brian Orser, agrees with his pupil.

"He's not just challenging the world's elite; he's already there," the Canadian legend said. "Last season, he was sixth at his first Worlds. He showed he can hang in there with the big boys."

Evan Lysacek and Johnny Weir, popular champions with big personalities and contrasting styles, dominated the U.S. men's competitive landscape for the better part of a decade. Even when they weren't winning national titles, their media-fueled rivalry took center stage.

With neither competing this season, Rippon has a clear shot at challenging two-time U.S. champion Jeremy Abbott's role as America's leading man.

"It's something I would look forward to; it's not a burden or a pressure that I'm afraid of," he said. "I think it's a pressure that is also privilege, to even be considered as someone who could lead U.S. figure skating. And to even be considered in the same category as Jeremy, one of the world's best skaters, is incredible."

Ask around about Rippon at his training grounds at Toronto's historic Cricket Skating and Curling Club and you'll unearth no controversy. He's polite, respectful and hardworking. When he's not on the ice or in the gym, he's likely home studying Korean or cooking dinner for training partner Christina Gao, a top U.S. hope on the Junior Grand Prix circuit.

"At his level, to challenge the best you have to be in it with both feet," Orser said. "It consumes your life. He's not out painting the town, I can tell you that. He knows what he has to do and he gets down to it."

Orser heads up a group that includes Tracy Wilson, the 1988 Olympic ice dancing bronze medalist (with the late Rob McCall), whose stroking classes are popular with elite skaters worldwide; David Wilson, the sport's most in-demand choreographer; and Ghislain Briand, who works to perfect Rippon's jumps.

Rippon thinks the mix is a recipe for success.

"I am really enjoying training where I am," he said. "Last year was my first here, still getting my feet wet, and I wasn't sure how to communicate. This season I feel totally comfortable, totally at home.

"I know I still have so much to improve, not just in one area, but in everything. I have from this season to [2014 Olympics]; I have all this time to work and be in peak condition for Sochi."

PHOTOS BY WENDY NELSON/BLUE FOX PHOTOGRAPHY

PHOTO BY JERZY BUKAJLO

Rippon won bronze at 2009 Trophée Eric Bompard, his first senior Grand Prix medal.

Beginnings

The eldest of six siblings — including brothers Tyler, 18; Brady, 16; and Sawyer, 9; and sisters Jordan, 14; and Dagny, 12 — Rippon grew up in Clarks Summit, Pa., about 10 miles north of Scranton, a city of 75,000 most famous these days as the site of the hit series *The Office*.

According to Kelly Rippon, her oldest child's grounded calmness began early on.

"He was such a cooperative baby; I think he's why I ended up having six," she said. "He was quiet, a good sleeper. He had severe hearing loss his first year — he had an operation, and his hearing is fine now — and my theory is he learned to focus his senses a few at a time."

Adam's big brother instincts also kicked in early, and he often pitched in to help with his younger siblings.

"He would help me set up breakfast for the little ones," Kelly said. "Later, after he started skating, one of his jobs was to make lunches for everybody before we went to the rink. "He'd say, 'Mom, can you take me skating now?'"

Kelly, who studied ballet and taught dance for several years, was choreographing gymnastics floor and beam routines when one of her pupil's families asked her to create a showcase skating program for their young daughter. She began taking skating lessons and eventually managed two rinks. in nearby Wilkes-Barre, Pa. Adam began group lessons at age 10.

"The lessons were for six weeks, and at the end, I saw he could do a lot — a waltz jump, a loop, a toe, some back crossovers," Kelly said. "Another set of lessons was presented at Christmas, and after that round, he was doing 'messy' double Salchows."

In 2000, Kelly entered her son in Pennsylvania's Keystone State Games in the novice test category, meeting experienced coaches in the Philadelphia area, a few hours' drive from their home. Adam, then almost 11, enrolled in a two-week summer camp run by former Soviet national competitor Yelena Sergeeva, who coached him for the next six-and-a-half years.

In those days, Kelly would drive Adam, still enrolled in full-time parochial school, back and forth several times a week to Philadelphia. The schedule was taxing, especially after Rippon's parents divorced when he was 13.

"My mother is a superwoman," Rippon said. "I don't know how she did it."

"I would just look on Priceline.com for [bargain] hotels, pack a port-a-crib for Sawyer, and off we would go," Kelly said.

The routine continued throughout most of Adam's junior high school years, until Kelly began homeschooling her son, who eventually enrolled in a credentialed online high school program. By then, he had won the 2005 novice silver medal. The following season, he placed sixth at his first Junior Grand Prix. In 2006, he was 11th in U.S. juniors, and in 2007, he climbed to sixth.

By that time, the International Judging System (IJS) had taken root, and Kelly and Adam — with Sergeeva's blessing — felt he needed a coach fully grounded in the IJS.

Fate intervened, in the form of Daniel Raad's gloves. The skater left a pair behind at the U.S. Championships, and in February 2007 Kelly and Adam decided to drive to Hackensack, N.J.'s Ice House to return them and take a look around.

By coincidence, Nikolai Morozov had just moved there, bringing Japanese champions Miki Ando and Daisuke Takahashi with him. The Moscow-born coach, who created some of 2002 Olympic champion Alexei Yagudin's finest programs, suggested Adam come for a one-week tryout. Rippon was to stay until November 2008.

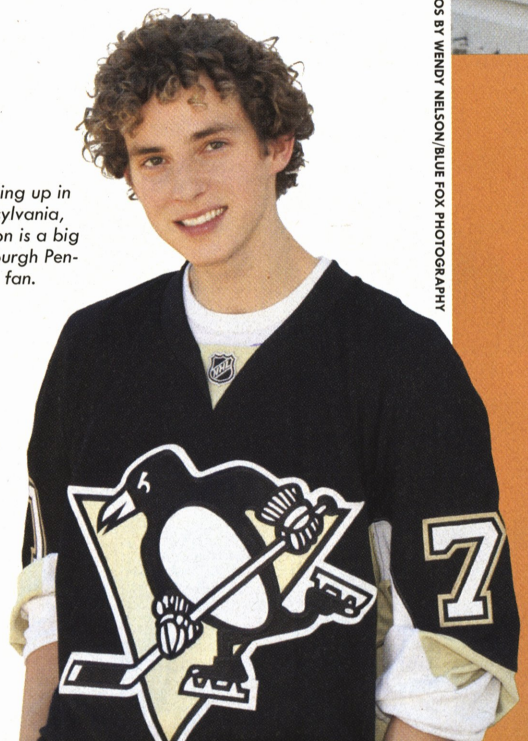
World Junior Champion

Morozov's brilliant choreography, coupled with Rippon's increased confidence, vaulted the skater to his first Junior Grand Prix win in the fall of 2007. He also won the Junior Grand Prix Final, and then took home the 2008 U.S. and World junior titles. But it only looked easy.

"In the beginning of that season I put no pressure on myself," Rippon said. "I just tried to skate my best every time I went out there. Then at junior worlds I told myself, 'I don't want to lose.' I thought, 'I've worked too hard, I can't make a mistake.' When the long program was over, I said, 'I could have done that a thousand times better.'"

That summer, Morozov was distracted by an off-ice dispute with Takahashi, and began working with yet another Japanese champion, Nobunari Oda. The coach spent much of his time traveling.

By the time 2008 Skate America rolled around, Rippon felt his programs, especially his short, were underprepared. He placed eighth at that event, followed by a fifth-place finish at Cup of Russia, and parted ways with Morozov just seven weeks before the 2009 U.S. Championships.



Growing up in Pennsylvania, Rippon is a big Pittsburgh Penguins fan.

PHOTOS BY WENDY NELSON/BLUE FOX PHOTOGRAPHY

ADAM'S FAVORITES

Sports figure: Michelle Kwan

Sports team(s): Pittsburgh Penguins, Toronto Maple Leafs

Cities: Toronto, New York, Vancouver, Paris

Season: Fall

Author: Mitch Albom

Books: *The Secret, The Five People You Meet in Heaven, Tuesdays with Morrie, Running with Scissors*

Magazine: GQ

Gadgets: iPod

Reality show: "So You Think You Can Dance"

TV shows: *Family Guy, Glee, Friends, Seinfeld, Modern Family, The Office*

Movies: *Superstar, Kill Bill I & II, Enough*

Foods: Pasta, pizza, Korean barbecue

Drink: Fresh-squeezed orange juice

Websites: icenetwork.com, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube

A recommendation from New York coach Steven Rice led him to Wilson, famous for creating intricate, IJS-friendly programs for Jeffrey Buttle, Joannie Rochette and other top competitors. Rippon traveled to Toronto to polish and perfect his routines. There he met Orser, then coaching future Olympic champion Yu-Na Kim, and decided to make the move permanent.

With Orser honoring a previous commitment, former Canadian champion Karen Preston took Rippon to the 2009 U.S. Championships, where he placed seventh. A month later, Orser accompanied him to Sofia, Bulgaria, where he defended his World Junior title, landing two triple Axels in his free skate for the first time. That fall, he won his first senior Grand Prix medal, a bronze at Trophée Eric Bompard, where he bested former World champion Brian Joubert.

Rippon placed fourth in both the short and free skates at the 2010 U.S. Championships and settled for fifth place overall. Just a week later, he won his first senior international title at the Four Continents Figure Skating Championships. After Lysacek and Weir withdrew from the 2010 World Championships, Rippon made his World senior debut in Turin, Italy.

"It was such a positive experience for him," Orser said. "He didn't just compete, he belonged and he did well. It's a changing of the guard and he's ready to take charge."

Rippon is ready to take the reins of his career as well.

"The kind of personality I have — my work ethic, my drive — really works for where I am now," he said. "I want to have some say in my costumes and music. I feel like I'm part of the process. Toronto has been a great place to mature as a person."

Wilson collaborated with former Canadian champion Sebastien Britten on Rippon's short program, set to Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* and also created a free to Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concerto #2."

"I think they're incredible," Orser said. "I think they will show Adam off like never before."

Chasing the quad

Now that Rippon is competing for podiums against the likes of reigning World champion Takahashi, two-time Canadian World silver medalist Patrick Chan, Joubert and Czech Michal Brezina, a quadruple jump would help set him apart. Both Abbott and 2009 U.S. silver medalist Brandon Mroz, considered by many Rippon's top competition in the U.S., regularly include quads in their programs.

"It's something I'm definitely training, but to be completely honest about it I've seen that a clean performance is more important than a quad," Rippon said.

"On that note, if I can do a clean performance with a quad, it's been proven that it's even more valuable."

Rippon, Orser and Brian are working to perfect both the quad toe and flip, and Orser has high hopes.

"It's been a major focus this summer," he said. "We've studied a lot of video of other skaters' quads, trying to absorb the timing and experimenting with different entrances. Adam is being smart about it. He knows his limits; he's not going to hurt himself."

Rippon, who is scheduled to compete at the Japan Open on Oct. 2 before his first Grand Prix assignment, Skate Canada in late October, hopes to show a quad soon.

"I'm going to see how they're feeling and that will determine whether I put a quad in the [free] program or replace it with a double Axel," he said. "I'm pretty solid and focused on doing the quad but not at the expense of the other elements in the program."

According to Orser, the other elements look strong.

"Knock on wood, the triple Axel is working really well, totally comfortable," he said. "Everything else is sound. He's doing the Lutz with two and one hand(s) over his head. He's very versatile with his spin positions, which helps with the new [IJS] rules."

Rippon and his coaches have also worked to boost his stamina, backloading his free program with difficult elements to earn bonus points.

"In the first half I'll have a triple Axel, a quad and a triple Lutz," Rippon said. "In the second half I put a triple-triple [combination], a second triple Axel, a triple-double-double [combination] and another triple. I've worked really hard on that and I'm very confident about it."

Rippon, who shares the ice daily with Gao and young Korean hopeful Yea-Ji Yun, benefitted from summer visits from two of his top competitors, Joubert and Czech Tomas Verner.

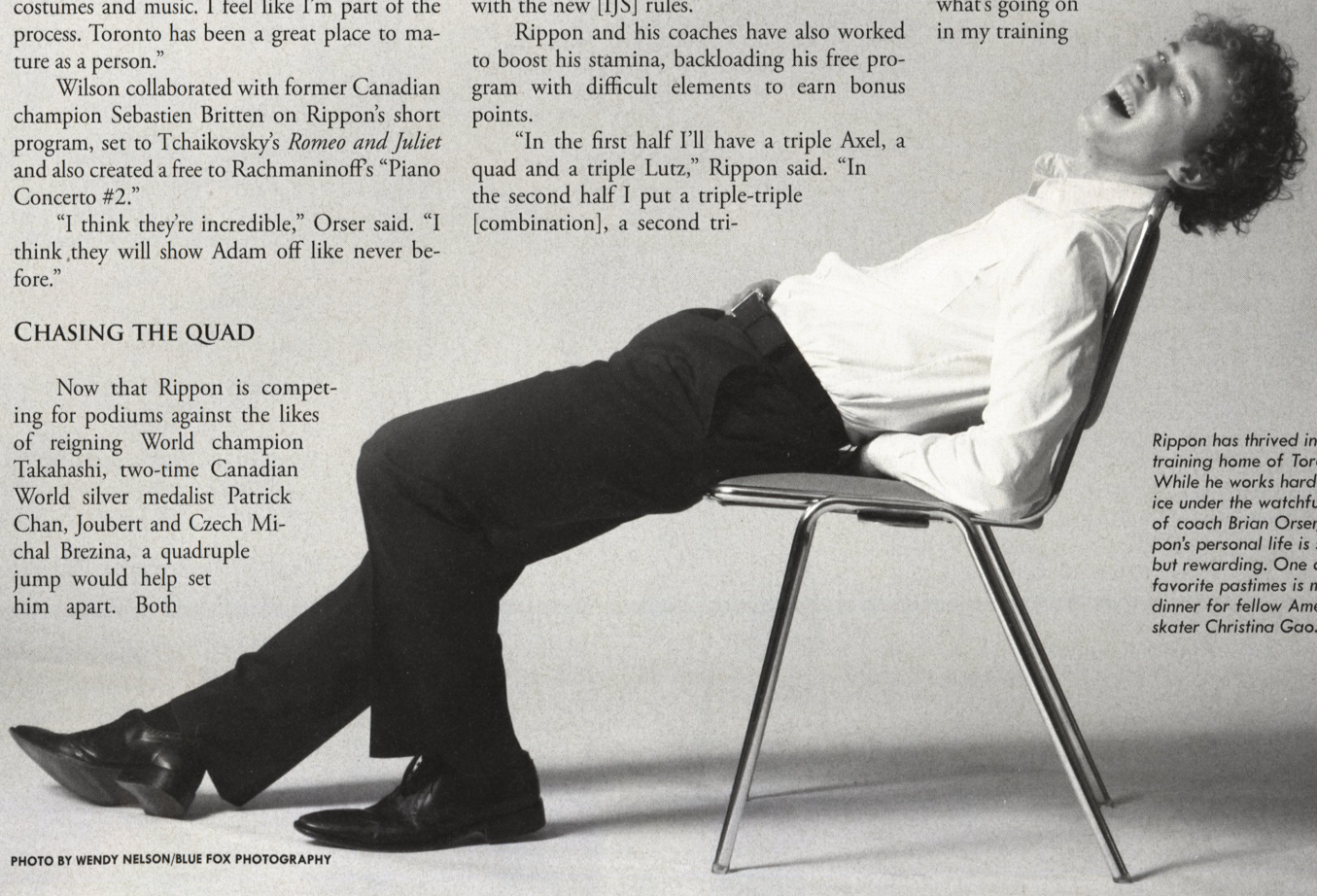
"Skating aside, they're great people and great energy to have in a training environment," he said. "Tomas is a former European champion and Brian is a former World champion. It's a great opportunity to skate with them and watch how they train."

For a year and a half, Rippon shared the ice with Kim, whose superb Olympic performances under intense pressure won her the adoration of her country and respect worldwide. While Kim and Orser ended their business relationship in August, Rippon said he carries fond memories.

"It's been a complete honor and privilege to share the ice with someone who I think has attained legendary status, who has dominated an Olympic Games," he said. "The way she practiced every day she was a great role model for everyone in the club."

Now that he's living apart from his younger brothers and sisters, Rippon has taken Gao under his wing, treating the 16-year-old — who placed an impressive fifth at the 2010 U.S. Championships — like an adopted little sister.

"When I was living in New Jersey I was able to go home on weekends and visit my family. Now the opportunity isn't there anymore because I'm a little further away from home. Christina being there [with her father, Chang], I can take care of somebody a little bit. She knows what's going on in my training



Rippon has thrived in his training home of Toronto. While he works hard on the ice under the watchful eye of coach Brian Orser, Rippon's personal life is simple but rewarding. One of his favorite pastimes is making dinner for fellow American skater Christina Gao.

PHOTO BY WENDY NELSON/BLUE FOX PHOTOGRAPHY

and it's great to talk really freely and openly with someone."

With home-cooked dinners with Gao as his social highlight, Rippon leads a quiet existence, exactly what he says he needs at this point. He doesn't drive; his apartment is near the rink, and Toronto's public transportation system takes care of the rest. While he'd like to return to school someday, right now, he doesn't have the time, so he exercises his brain by learning Korean.

"I did start taking classes with Yea-Ji Yun; it helps her learn English, and in a few months, I really want to be a little bit more conversational," he said. "It's my goal throughout these four years living in Toronto — knock on wood — to perfect my Korean and hopefully tackle French next. I would really love to learn as much about languages as I can."

An idol from the 1970s

One of Rippon's skating idols is John Curry, who won his 1976 Olympic title some 23 years before Rippon was born. Curry, famous for incorporating ballet and modern dance into his programs, founded a renowned skating company after his competitive career drew to a close.

"I've watched tapes of John Curry's show and I really admire it," he said. "It wasn't all [about] Olympic medals, it was really about performance. I've actually come in contact with some of the skaters who skated in the show, like Lorna Brown [a former British and world professional champion].

"I recently did an interview with [Canadian commentator] Pj Kwong, who told me John Curry skated at the Cricket Club one summer. When she said that, it kind of clicked, because I've always been drawn to this place on a weird, higher level, not to sound like a voodoo hoodoo."

Like Curry, Rippon aspires to produce his own ice show.

"I've done shows [including one of Kim's productions, and Canada's version of Stars on Ice], where the production has been so great, and I would love to put those experiences together," he said.

"I'd like to be involved in the marketing of the show, all aspects. I love the quality of productions in Asia; I would love to bring that excitement back [to North America], make it something like Cirque du Soleil, a show everyone wants to go to. 'Adam's show is in town, we have to go see it.' That's a dream I always think about."

Of course, that kind of success comes only to those with something Curry, and Kim, have — World and Olympic gold. Rippon hopes that is on his horizon, as well.

"Five years ago, if I had to look to see where I am now, I would be proud of myself," he said. "There probably wouldn't be much I would change, because I worked as hard as I could. I continue to try to push myself as much as I can. Even the goals I have for after my [competitive] career all involve skating." ▫

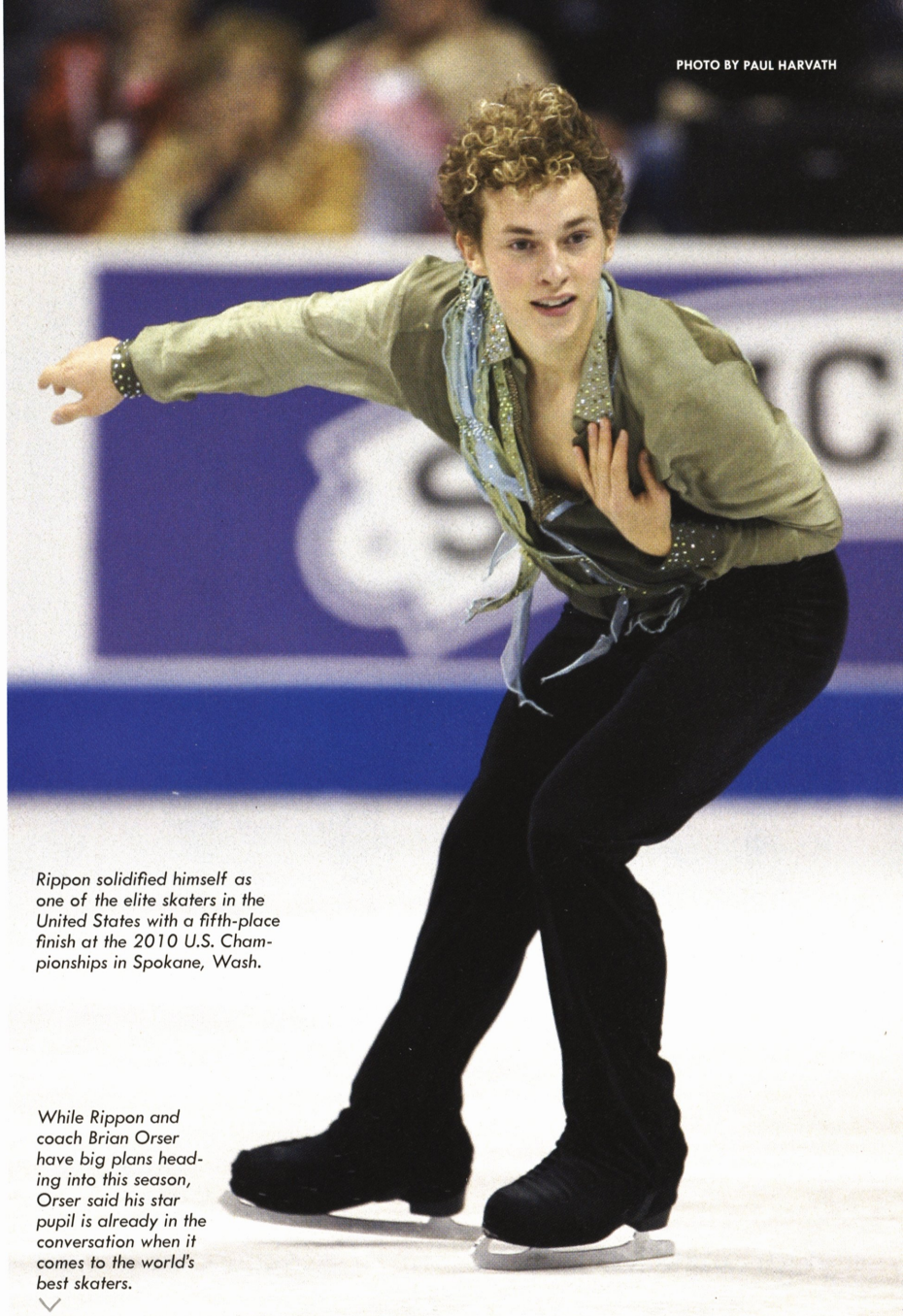


PHOTO BY PAUL HARVATH

Rippon solidified himself as one of the elite skaters in the United States with a fifth-place finish at the 2010 U.S. Championships in Spokane, Wash.

While Rippon and coach Brian Orser have big plans heading into this season, Orser said his star pupil is already in the conversation when it comes to the world's best skaters.

PHOTO BY MICKEY BROWN