

Nathan Chen is Back on the Ice and Focused on Enjoying Every Moment

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Figure skating champion [Nathan Chen](#) considers his first Olympic Winter Games in PyeongChang a pivotal moment in his career — not because of a winning moment, but because of one where he struggled.

In PyeongChang, Chen placed 17th overall after what he considers to be a somewhat disastrous short program. He bounced back with the top overall score in the free skate but missed the podium with a fifth-place individual finish. Soon after, the Team Toyota athlete realized he would need to readjust his competitive mindset if he wanted to continue competing at the Olympic level.

“Bottom line is, I love figure skating and I’ve loved figure skating ever since I’ve started,” says Chen. “But I think having the opportunity to go to the Olympics in PyeongChang and completely fail in my short program and then going to college – that was the wake up that I needed. It helped me realize there’s this whole other life out there.”

Chen, who has been a competitive figure skater for almost his entire life, felt like he was developing an identity based on one result: becoming an Olympic champion. So, after PyeongChang, he took a break from the sport to attend Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. It allowed him time to decide if skating was in his future. Now, the figure skater is back in the game and taking time off from school to train for the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022 in Irvine, California, where he has been working with a sports psychologist to better prepare for the mental aspects of competing.

“There’s a lot of meaning behind what I do, and I do it for myself,” he says. “But in the grand scheme of things it’s just, not important. One competition will not make or break my life. I’ll still be who I am after this, even when I finish skating.”

An Athlete with Room to Grow

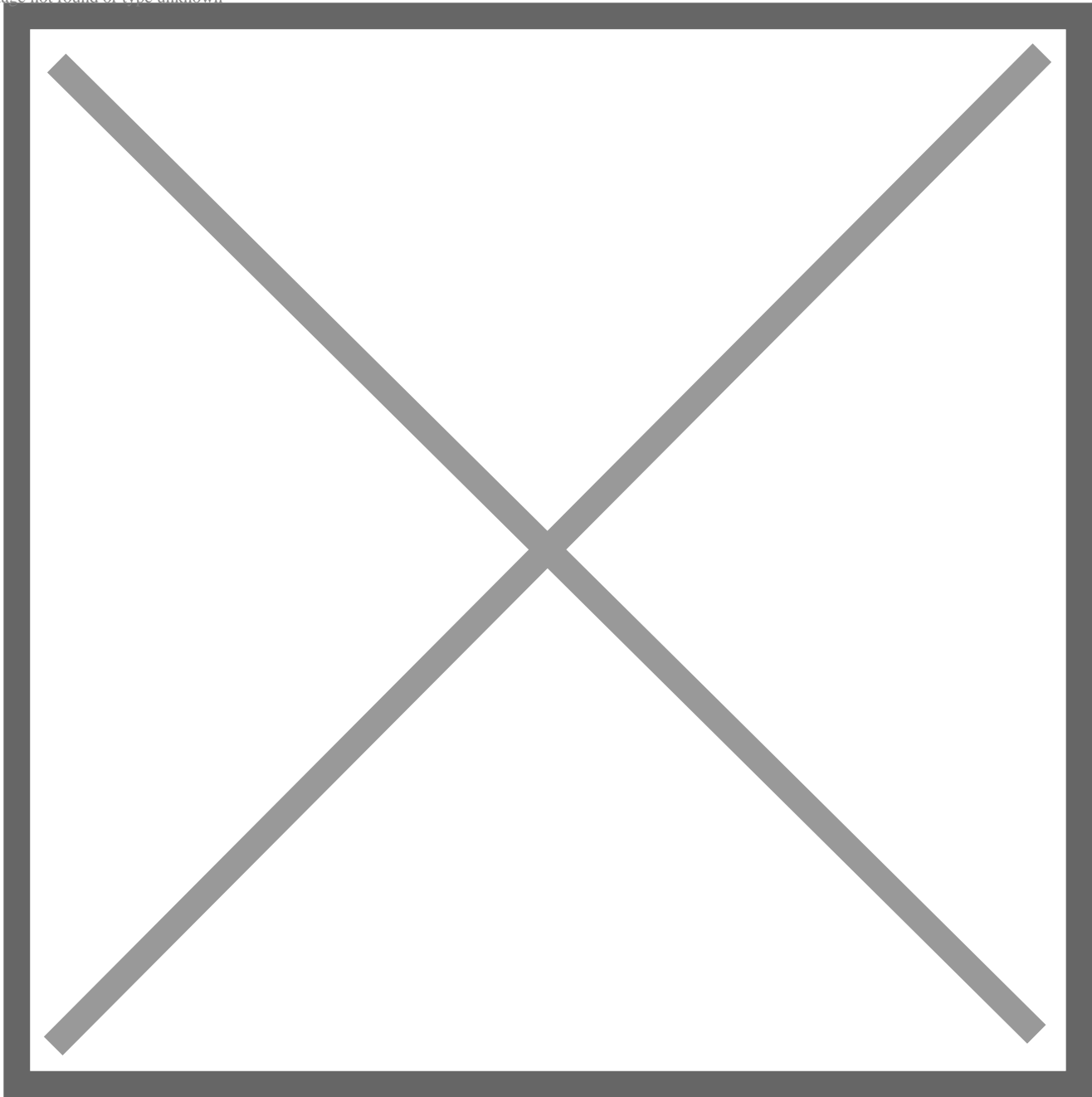
Born in Salt Lake City, Utah, Chen has been surrounded by the Olympic Games his entire life. The skating rink near his house was built as a practice arena for the Salt Lake City 2002 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, so skating was an accessible and affordable after-school activity for Chen and his siblings.

“I started skating really young and just really enjoyed it right off the bat,” he says. “I grew up around an Olympic town, so sports were something my parents wanted all of us to do to help us stay active and keep us busy and involved with kids our age.”

While his brothers primarily played hockey, Chen took to figure skating naturally and saw almost immediate success in the sport. He started training more seriously, traveling in his mom’s Toyota Prius back and forth between Utah and California. In 2010, he became the youngest novice champion in U.S. Figure Skating history. According to Chen, he was so young when he earned the accolade that it didn’t really feel like a turning point — he was just focused on what was next.

“I was going to the rink every single day, so the transition between me being serious about it and not-so-serious about it was pretty blurred,” he says.

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At 15, Chen started landing quadruples — jumps with at least four in-air rotations that have become pretty much a necessity to advance in men’s figure skating competitions. From a technical standpoint, being able to land a quad meant he could qualify for competitions like the Grand Prix of Figure Skating and the Olympics. Then at 17, he felt like he had reached a plateau. After returning to the ice following an injury, he couldn’t seem to place better than third at the U.S. Championships.

“That’s when I had to ask myself, is this something that I genuinely want to keep doing and see where this goes?” Chen says. “Or do I just be happy with how much I’ve done in my career and the experience and apply to college like everyone else?”

Chen started working with a strength and conditioning coach at the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Center (OPTC) in Colorado Springs, Colorado, who helped him through the rehab process. Spending time with Olympians and Paralympians at the OPTC gave him a motivational boost and allowed him to realize his own potential.

“At that point, I thought I had maxed out my technical skills,” he says. “But watching these Olympians train — how easily they can switch between the role of an athlete to the role of a friend, and their dedication — was inspiring. That’s what drove me to see that I still had room to grow.”

Sticking with the Sport

Chen believes his college experience has helped him refocus on skating and resume his training with a healthier approach. He has stayed busy, which has forced him to be more efficient — both on and off the ice. He has also gained a new perspective from being around students instead of athletes.

“I’m so grateful I had the opportunity to go to school and meet so many people who just don’t care about skating — it’s been great,” he says. “When I go to the rink and see the same people every single day, who have the same goals as I do, it’s easy to lose sight of the fact that there’s so many people out there with different passions and drives.”

Overall, Chen is feeling more prepared for his second Games. In PyeongChang, he let the intimidating environment worry him. But now, he is not alone and has the experience and the support system to help get him through.

“My first Games was kind of a daunting experience because all these athletes are so accomplished and I had imposter syndrome a little bit,” he says. “But, it’s different this time around.”

According to Chen, one positive aspect of competing in an individual sport like figure skating is that it’s easier to have friends who are also skaters. When he’s skating, he’s alone, not going head-to-head with another athlete. It allows the competition that happens on the ice to stay on the ice.

“It’s really cool to recognize that all of the other athletes respect that,” he says. “We’re able to create a support system that is based around the fact that we know what it takes to get where we are, and we can be supportive of each other while still striving toward our individual goals.”

While Chen is not taking his foot off the gas by any means, he is taking some of the pressure off himself when it comes to Beijing. Mostly, he’s taking things one day at a time and looking forward to having a little more fun this go-around.

“My feeling is, let’s enjoy the experience, enjoy the time, recognize how lucky I am to even have the opportunity to compete,” Chen says. “I think having that mindset has definitely helped me over the past couple competitions and is something I plan to bring into this Olympic cycle.”