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Cain, LeDuc wrap up whirlwind campaign in Tokyo

Team views World Team Trophy as chance 'to make our elements stronger'

Posted 4/19/17 by Lynn Rutherford, special to icenetwork



The thought of competing together at the World Team Trophy this week would have been unimaginable to Ashley Cain and Timothy LeDuc at this time last year. -Jay Adef

Around this time last year, Ashley Cain was competing in the senior ladies division at the Skate Dallas. The 2011 U.S. junior pairs champion had not skated with a partner in four years.

Timothy LeDuc had just finished up a stint as a cruise ship performer and was contemplating a return to the competitive pairs ranks after a two-year break -- *if* he could find the right partner.

About the last thing the skaters, who train outside Dallas in Euless, Texas, thought they would be doing 12 months later was reading a text from Ashley Wagner welcoming them to the U.S. group competing at the World Team Trophy in Tokyo this week.

"Sometimes, it doesn't sound real," Cain, 21, said. "Life is pretty crazy right now."

When the pair takes the ice in Tokyo on Thursday, it will mark the fifth time Cain and LeDuc, who teamed up last May, compete internationally this season. A fourth-place finish at Nebelhorn Trophy last September led to trips to two other ISU Challenger Series events, including the Golden Spin of Zagreb, where they earned the bronze. Solid performances at the 2017 U.S. Figure Skating Championships -- they won the short program and took third overall -- preceded an assignment to the 2017 Four Continents Championships.

"The only competition that was set in stone into our year was nationals. Everything else was an add-on," Cain said. "U.S. Figure Skating has been really supportive of us, and we're truly, truly grateful. We felt at every competition we did this season we progressed as a team, and we were able to show we can be competitive internationally."

"Mitch Moyer (U.S. Figure Skating's senior director of athlete high performance) put us together, suggested we try out," LeDuc said. "He saw we both had a strong history of pairs and he thought we could be a good match because of our long lines and, obviously, our jumping ability."

The duo was at work in Eules's Dr. Pepper StarCenter with choreographer Serge Onik and head coach Peter Cain, father of Ashley and a former Australian pairs champion, when they got a call to go to Helsinki. Alexa Scimeca Knierim had arrived at the 2017 World Figure Skating Championships feeling unwell, and Cain and LeDuc were first alternates.

"We arrived on Tuesday and luckily were told later that day Alexa was fine, and she and Chris [Knierim] would compete," Cain said. "So we were there from Tuesday until the following Monday, and we were able to practice at the rink there and stay in shape. Plus, they got us tickets to the pairs short and long, and the men's long program, so that was great."

Watching top pairs like China's Wenjing Sui and Cong Han, Germany's Aliona Savchenko and Bruno Massot, and Canadians Meagan Duhamel and Eric Radford from the comfort of the stands made a big impression.

"We weren't competing, and we were able to sit and watch without emotion attached," Cain said. "They were so confident in every step they were doing. We sat down after and made a list of things to apply to our programs and our training this season."

"The way the pairs moved across the ice so well together, they were just made of steel," LeDuc said. "That's something we're really looking to add to our programs, to have that worlds look, because we want to be part of that final group. It was a great learning experience for us."

The Helsinki trip, plus the World Team Trophy assignment, briefly interrupted the team's efforts to build even better programs for next season.

"We started on new jumps -- triple flip-double toe-double loop -- and more difficult lifts," Cain said. "We were in the midst of all that when we got the call for Helsinki and then Worth Team Trophy, so we put that on pause right now to focus on two good performances in Tokyo."

They're not ready to announce music, but Onik has already put two new programs together.

"What we've picked will showcase our personalities and the team we are now," Cain said. "This season, we were focusing on improving while also staying injury free, which meant maybe having more basic lifts. The biggest thing was being able to run a pair program again, having the stamina to do a lift or a throw at three-and-a-half minutes in."

"I think this season we're both a lot stronger, more confident in our ability and our bodies, so I think more difficult lifts will come easier," she continued. "With my tall body (Cain is about 5'6"), we're looking to have lines that stand apart and to highlight that in our lifts."

The skaters also hope adding jump difficulty, including the aforementioned three-jump combination, will help pile on points.

"Other teams may go to a quad twist or throw, maybe we can build (our score) up with jumps," Cain said.

First, though, is this week's competition in Tokyo, which also features teams from Canada, Russia, Japan, China and France. The event has been contested four times, with the U.S. winning gold on three of those occasions.

The emphasis, primarily, is on entertaining the 13,000 fans who will fill the stands in sold-out Yoyogi National Gymnasium and cheering for teammates.

"We expect a lot of USA gear, a lot of team spirit," LeDuc, 26, said.

Considerable prize money -- \$1 million -- is at stake as well, with \$200,000 awarded to the winning country. Everyone, too, wants to end their season on a high note.

"We want to represent our country well," LeDuc said. "For us, our goal going into any competition is to improve on our last competitive outing, to make our elements stronger, our performances stronger. None of those things have changed."



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