

Rippon comes full circle on Gardena trip

By Adam Rippon

It had been a while since the first international event at which I had the honor of representing Team USA. I was 15 years old, wearing my Team USA jacket everywhere I could and had no idea where this opportunity would lead me. I vividly remember so many of the details from that trip.

When I was assigned to compete at this year's Gardena Spring Trophy, I was fresh off an injury that had forced me to withdraw from the Four Continents team. I was thankful to be going to Italy but also somewhat hesitant. I reminded myself in training that I was only going to get points to improve my ISU world ranking.

I found out rather close to the event that I would be going, and before I knew it, I was sitting on a bus from the Munich Airport on my way to Italy for the competition. This bus was filled with all of my fellow team members.

Gardena is a competition that the U.S. usually only assigns its younger athletes. To give you an idea, I was the senior of this team, with the exception of Brandon Mroz, by almost an average of 10 years.

Once we arrived we were given the option of having 15 minutes of practice ice. Our team leader, Lindsey Weber, asked if anyone would like to take advantage of this. No sooner had she finished her question than did everyone's hand go up; except for mine. I looked around and could not believe these kids wanted to skate already. The last thing I wanted to do after traveling from California to Toronto to Munich, on to a bus through Austria, to finally arrive in Italy, was skate. To be honest, my feet were probably too swollen from the travel for this practice to even be an option. Needless to say, the other skaters were excited to be there.

Before the events had started, we all had the chance to get to know each other a little better. We walked around the city, had dinner and enjoyed what the town of Gardena had to offer. During a few of our talks at dinner, we would come to a point when someone would ask me about my past trips and what I did when I was their age.

Was I seriously at the point when people wanted my advice?

It hit me all at once that my fellow Team USA members were ME a time not too long ago. Although I'm not done with my journey as a competitive skater, I'm still almost 10 more years into it than they are. I realized that all they wanted to know was if they would survive. I had totally forgotten about

the nights I would lay awake in my bed and think about what it'd be like to hear my name announced as a skater representing the United States of America. This was it. This was the beginning of their dreams coming true, just like it was mine.

The events all ended one by one. The younger ones all medaled and skated well. I had the chance to watch a few of their skates and was blown away at their adult composure during the competition. They grow up so fast!

The senior men's free skate was the last event of the competition. As I stepped onto the ice to skate my long, I looked over and saw all of my new friends. As excited as they were to compete, they were just as excited to cheer me on. I looked at them and I knew I really wanted to skate a strong program. I couldn't pass out advice and not follow through with it myself. I ended up having a nice, clean skate of my new long program and won the free skate. I wanted to be a role model for them.

I was so proud of how well the team did. It was such a wonderful opportunity to, in some way, mentor the next group of future champions.

As we all celebrated that night, I was quickly reminded of how young everyone was. I could see all the kids getting their coats on and getting ready to leave. Polina Edmunds came up to me and asked if I'd like to join her and the rest of the team in a snowball



Adam Rippon has a ball on his trip to the Gardena Spring Trophy. The veteran won the free skate and finished with silver.

fight. I looked around and knew that if I were a part of this snowball fight, someone would get hurt. The someone most likely being me. I had to decline. We all had a good time that night. I promised myself that I would do my best to never lose touch with that excitement I saw in their eyes. As much as they might have thought I gave them, they gave me just as much back.

Team USA enjoyed a great competition in Gardena, Italy, as well as a strong camaraderie among the athletes.

