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## Tennell remains unchanged amid recent success

19-year-old delivers stellar short in San Jose; Wagner looks to rebound

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*Thanks to her even-keeled personality, Bradie Tennell has been able to focus on her skating duties despite the added attention surrounding her. -Getty Images*

SAN JOSE, Calif. -- Bradie Tennell's life has changed dramatically over the last six weeks.

But the 19-year-old doesn't seem to have changed at all.

The Tennell who won Wednesday night's short program at the 2018 U.S. Figure Skating Championships in San Jose by delivering a record score was unruffled by suddenly being in the spotlight, nerveless when it shone on her and buoyed again by a consistency of execution that even she struggles to understand or explain.

There is apparently only one thing that shakes this young woman who has gone from unknown to the top of the U.S skating scene almost overnight.

"I love good storytelling -- books, TV, movies -- and an unresolved storyline makes me nervous," Tennell said. "It's weird."

In the next two days, Tennell will show how she copes with the unresolved storyline of a bid to make the 2018 Olympic team, something that seemed like a wild fiction until her senior Grand Prix debut Thanksgiving weekend at Skate America.

For Friday night's free skate, the 19-year-old from suburban Chicago is likely to use the same psychological tool that allowed her to deal with the pressure of the short program: binging on episodes of "How To Get Away With Murder" or something similar on her computer.

Either that or consult her mother, Jean, a registered nurse.

"When I'm nervous, I talk about it with my mom," she said.

Tennell now has performed with steely resolve over three straight clean programs on the two biggest stages of her career -- Skate America, where she won a bronze medal, and these nationals.

Starting with a strong triple lutz-triple toe combination that drew the maximum Grade of Execution score from five of the nine judges, Tennell went on to rack up 73.79 points, topping the U.S. championships short program record of 72.82 set by Karen Chen last year.

Having saved the landing of her triple axel well enough to stay upright, Mirai Nagasu was second at 73.09.

"I was like, 'Wow, I'm a cat!' I'm still on my feet," Nagasu said.

Defending champion Chen, who has not skated well this season before nationals, also overcame a wonky landing on her opening jumping pass to take third at 69.48. Angela Wang was a surprising fourth at 67.00.

For all that, the most noteworthy part of the evening may have been how the judges reacted to a desultory performance by three-time U.S. champion Ashley Wagner, who failed to breathe much life into the "Hip Hip Chin Chin" program she has used twice in the past three seasons.

"This feeling is so old," she said of a program that left her fifth at 65.94, with component scores as low as 6.50.

It left her discussing what happened in terms that sounded like rationalizations.

"Actually, I'm very pleased," Wagner said. "My main focus going into the short program is not to get too far behind. I'm a long program skater. That's where I make my money."

It still would be wise not to bet against Wagner doing well enough in the free skate to get onto the podium. Finishing fourth overall would put her Olympic fate into the hands of a selection committee that gave her the benefit of the doubt four years ago but might not be inclined to do it again.

Tennell, who has gone from longshot to favorite, can come up with just one reason for her success after finishing ninth at nationals a year ago.

"It's a credit to how healthy I have been this season," she said.

Stress fractures in two different areas of her lower back had cut seriously into her preparations for each of the two previous seasons. A pain-free year following the second injury in the summer of 2016 has allowed her to attain a competitive shape that became evident in low-level competitions last summer and produced better and better results in the fall. Her jumping skill is unfettered and impressive again.

"My biggest feeling right now is pride," Tennell said a few minutes after her short program Wednesday. "I'm proud of how far I've come this season, overcoming my injuries."

She was especially pleased in the results of working on the parts of skating reflected in component scores. Her PCS was third, 0.89 below that of Chen but just 0.03 below Wagner, an experienced, usually polished performer. Tennell's element score was second only to Nagasu's.

"I'm very happy with that," Tennell said. "It's what I've been practicing, not different for me."

It is about the only thing that hasn't been different for her from the start of this season to now. She came to nationals with the top two scores this season by a U.S. woman and, over two minutes, 50 seconds, showed complete command of her emotions and what is at stake.

"I try to ignore that aspect of it," she said.

Yes, the ending of this story still is unresolved. But Bradie Tennell gets to write it herself, and Wednesday's penultimate chapter gave a pretty good clue to how it will turn out.



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