

# Oceanside's Samantha Cesario nails her free skate

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Samantha Cesario knew she could skate far better than she had during her short program Thursday at the 2014 U.S. Figure Skating Championships. She took the TD Garden ice Saturday night to prove it.

Landing six triple jumps in her "Carmen" free skate, the Oceanside resident performed one of the best programs of the evening, scoring a 119.09 in the segment to give her a 173.97 score overall and a fifth-place finish. Cesario had the night's fourth-best program, which was 2.94 points over her career best.

"[Tonight] was much better," the 20-year-old said. "It felt good to get the program out there that I knew I could do."

Tenth after the first phase of competition,

Cesario's prospects for a medal looked dim. "Everyone was saying to me, 'you have nothing to lose,'" Cesario said. "But I wanted to go out there and redeem myself. I was a little angry after the short program."

Cesario opened her free skate with a textbook triple Lutz jump, which she landed securely. She followed with a triple loop with a good flow out of the ending. Her first jump combination, a triple flip-double toe loop, had ideal height.

In perfect timing with her halting music, Cesario launched into a flying sit spin, nice and low to the ice. She completed a triple Salchow with the same effortlessness as her previous jumps.

Challenges presented themselves through the midpoint of the four-minute program. Cesario's layback spin was deducted, just as on Thursday. Her next jump combination, a triple loop-double Axel, appeared clean, but deducted for a cheated rotation.

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Her last element, a double Axel, was completed with ease, and she launched into a spiral and step sequence, enacting the tragic end of Carmen herself. Given how well she had hit every element, Cesario fought to control her excitement.

"It's hard to perform [this program] full out and do all the jumps," Cesario said. "But after that last double Axel, that is the best part of the program."

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Gracie Gold performed a sparkling long program, holding on to her short program lead, winning her first U.S. championship with a score of 211.69. Polina Edmunds, 15, earned the silver medal with a 193.63. Mirai Nagasu, an Olympian in 2010, finished third with a 190.74. Two-time defending champion Ashley Wagner fell twice and finished fourth.

Cesario's fifth-place finish leaves her on the outside looking in for an Olympic spot, but an international team selection committee planned to meet overnight to determine future assignments. Cesario hopes her performance Saturday night, along with a few international placements, will earn her a spot on the U.S. team for either Four Continents or World Championships.

Merrick's Joelle Forte completed a triple flip and triple Salchow, double toe loop and double loop combination to score a 73.07, good for 123.60 overall and 21st place.

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