

With Kwan out, TV ads will change

By DAVID BAUDER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK

Michelle Kwan's withdrawal from the Winter Olympics forced two major television advertisers who were featuring the figure skater in their campaigns to re-evaluate their plans.

Coca-Cola has decided not to go ahead with one of its two ads that feature Kwan, while Visa USA is sticking with her.

A series of Coke ads that feature rabid fans cheering for their favorite athletes included one in which they were rooting for Kwan. The skater is not seen in the ad.

"Given that it's cheering her on to win, hopefully, and she is not competing, we didn't think the ad was still relevant," Susan McDermott, a spokeswoman for the soft drink company, said Monday.

Coke will substitute ads featuring other athletes in the spots.

Kwan and speed skater Apolo Anton Ohno had their names used in another Coke ad where an announcer says, "Without ice, Apolo Anton Ohno would be a speed-swimmer, Michelle Kwan would be a water-skater, and our Cokes would be warm."

That ad will stay on the air, McDermott said.

A 15-second Visa ad set to debut on NBC Monday night featured footage of Kwan skating, illustrating the theme of "life takes poetry," said Susanne Lyons, chief marketing officer for Visa USA.

Since it's not tied specifically to the competition, Visa decided to go ahead with the campaign, she said.

"Maybe people will look at it with a little bittersweet emotion, but they will enjoy it because it's a tribute to a beautiful skater," she said.

Visa is hoping for better luck with some of its other featured athletes, including skier Bode Miller, who finished fifth in the men's downhill but has other opportunities to compete.



KWAN

Contrast in styles

Miller, Weir must step up their games to win gold

By LARRY McSHANE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TURIN, Italy

The last time Bode Miller skied, a couple of beers the night before turned into a fifth, his finish in the men's Olympic downhill.

Just last month, figure skater Johnny Weir referred to his routine in the U.S. nationals as best suited for an audience mellowed by cognac and cigarettes, while praising another skater's bit as an invigorating vodka shot.

Interesting analogies. Both Miller and Weir need to raise their personal bars if they intend to jump into medal contention in Turin. NBC's prime-time coverage tonight includes Miller's return in the men's combined after his disappointing start and Weir's debut in the short program of figure skating.

There's a half-dozen medals up for grabs in all, and the biggest action could come in a sport where play hasn't started.

Wayne Gretzky, executive director of Canada's Olympic hockey team, is due to meet with reporters in the wake of allegations that his wife is embroiled in a New Jersey gambling ring.

Odds are 2-1 that very few questions for Gretzky will deal with the Olympics, where the Canadians are the defending gold medalists.

On NBC, the nightly 8 to 11:30 p.m. program features the men's figure skating, the men's combined and the 500-meter women's speedskating. U.S. opening ceremony flagholder Chris Witty, a five-time Olympian, hopes to earn the second gold of her career.

Two-time Salt Lake City bronze medalist Jennifer Rodriguez will also vie for one of the top three spots.

An afternoon show on NBC, beginning at 4 p.m., will highlight the finals in the women's luge, where American Courtney Zabolocki sits in fourth place, just four-one-thousandths of a second away from a medal. The top three spots heading into today's two runs belonged to the dominant German team.

The United States has never won a woman's single luge medal.

And the network's late-night coverage, from 12:05 to 1:30 a.m. Wednesday, features the men's team sprint final in cross-country skiing and a trip to the medals plaza.

A LOOK AHEAD



American Bode Miller reacts after finishing the men's downhill at the Turin Winter Olympic Games in Sestriere Borgata, Italy, on Sunday. Miller finished in fifth place.

There may not be two more disparate athletes in all of Turin than Miller and Weir.

Miller likes a cold brew, shoots from the hip, lives in an RV. Weir prefers a good shopping spree, was unhappy about accommodations in the athletes' village and plans to compete in a swan outfit.

He's described previous skating costumes as "an icicle on coke" — not the official Olympic sponsor, either — and "a Care Bear on acid."

The three-time reigning U.S. figure skating champion has already said the gold medal is Russian Evgeni Plushenko's to lose. Plushenko, the Salt Lake City silver medalist, is the favorite in the two-night event, which concludes with the Thursday free skate.

Weir, 21, has jettisoned the "cognac and cigarettes" routine, promising something fresh for the games. U.S. teammates Evan Lysacek and Matt Savoie will join Weir in chasing the Russian in Turin.

For Miller, the combined offers him another chance at winning a medal after his disappointing downhill finish this past weekend. Miller, who won two silvers in 2002, was one of the most-

hyped athletes before the game and generated endless stories with his outrageous comments.

He was hardly rattled by missing out on a medal at his first Turin event. Instead, Miller said, he would approach the combined with the attitude of skiing "100 percent with risk and 100 percent with execution."

Although Gretzky will get most of the hockey attention, the U.S. women's hockey team is back in action against Norway in its final preliminary round game. The Americans, in their first two games, outscored their opponents 11-0 but face their toughest opponents yet in Finland.

In Sunday's win against Germany, 18-year-old Sarah Parson scored a pair of dazzling goals for the Americans. The Finns have won their only game so far in Turin.

The game airs live at 2:30 p.m. on USA, while three other women's hockey contests air live on MSNBC between 7 a.m. and 2 p.m.

There's also live coverage of the U.S. women curlers against Canada; the U.S. men curlers against New Zealand; and the men's biathlon 10km sprint, all on USA.

• Start

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Curl Girls. But there were a lot scarier things going on for American athletes in the mountains outside this factory city.

Two frightening crashes. Two medal hopefuls lying in hospitals.

NBC might have liked it because nothing sells like some good wipeout videos. Three days into these Olympics, though, injured Americans are piling up, and U.S. medal projections are plummeting faster than General Motors' car sales.

If it weren't for those wacky snowboarders grabbing air and kicking rear, the United States wouldn't even be on the first page of the leaderboard in the thing most important to those who dole out Olympic money, the medal count.

Three days into these Olympics, America's biggest, and supposedly best, team is off to a start that might be described as slushy, at best. The medal count doesn't look bad at six, but four of those were won in a sport that didn't even become part of the Olympics until eight years ago.

Maybe it's time to invent some more sports like America did with snowboarding. Better hurry, because the United States is terrible at things like ski jumping, biathlon and cross-country skiing, and it doesn't seem to be getting better in other winter sports.

It's too late for Turin, but how about a combination of Frisbee golf and downhill skiing? We could call it Friski, and Americans should be able to dominate for a few Olympics before the rest of the world catches up.

Don't like that? Then think speed ice fishing. The 2010 organizers can freeze some kiddie pools full of trout, build little shacks on top of them and give competitors five minutes to reel in all they can. Minnesotans should sweep the medals in this event.

Right now, though, NBC would be happy just to have the team they spent so many hours promoting. By the second day of the Olympics their biggest star was gone, their biggest mouth was muted and there were still nearly 400 hours of television time left to be filled.

Michelle Kwan bowed out tearfully with an injury, then rejected NBC's pleas to stay on as a commentator. Bode Miller finished out of the money in the downhill, and Apolo Anton Ohno nearly ended up sliding on his soul patch.

2006 WINTER GAMES



Medal count

Through Monday
16 out of 84 medal events

COUNTRY	G	S	B	TOT
Norway	1	3	4	8
Russia	3	3	1	7
United States	4	2	0	6
Germany	2	0	1	3
Netherlands	1	2	0	3
South Korea	1	1	1	3
Italy	1	0	2	3
China	0	1	2	3
Canada	1	0	1	2
France	1	0	1	2
Austria	0	2	0	2
Finland	0	1	1	2
Estonia	1	0	0	1
Czech Rep.	0	1	0	1
Latvia	0	0	1	1
Switzerland	0	0	1	1

Miller and Ohno will have more chances, while the 17-year-old sister of 2002 gold medalist Sarah Hughes will fly to Italy to take Kwan's place. Some good lineage can't hurt, but there was a reason Emily Hughes wasn't brought to the games in the first place.

Outside of dressing Chad Hedrick in sequins and teaching him a quick triple-triple, though, options were limited.

Things got worse Monday when America's gold medal hope in the women's downhill, Lindsey Kildow, crashed horribly at high speed and had to be airlifted to a hospital. Later in the day, American luger Samantha Retrosi suffered a concussion and short-term memory loss when she crashed on the ice.

Hedrick may turn into the star that saves this team. He won the first gold for the United States in speedskating, will be favored in two other races and has a chance to medal in yet two more.

Get used to speedskating. The Dutch do it a lot, and they seem to enjoy it.

Don't get used to seeing the United States near the top of the medal standings, as it was when Americans won a record 34 medals in Salt Lake City.

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• Skating

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

"I always felt like if I did something big, I wanted to give something back," Cheek said. "The best way is by helping someone else."

Cheek was so committed to the idea that, just a few hours before the race, he went to the athletes' village office of Koss' group, Right To Play, to read up on some literature.

It was time well spent when Cheek skated the two best races of his life, posting a combined time that was 0.65 seconds ahead of the silver medalist, Russia's Dmitry Dorofeyev. That's a huge gap in a furious sprint race normally decided by hundredths of a second.

South Korea's Lee Kang Seok took the bronze.

"I'm kind of stunned that I skated that fast," said Cheek, the only one to break 35 seconds all day, and he did it in both of his back-to-back races. "Obviously, I wanted to get some medals here, but I had no idea it would come together like it did."

After the first race, Cheek initially misread the scoreboard, thinking his time was 35.37. Actually, that number belonged to Canada's Jeremy Wotherspoon, who skated in the adjoining lane. The American's time was 34.82, which put him a commanding 0.42 ahead of Dorofeyev.

Cheek flipped back the hood on his skinsuit and revealed a sheepish grin, as if he really couldn't believe he had skated so much faster than everyone else. When he returned a couple of hours later for the second 1¼-lap trip around the oval, all he had to do was avoid a fall.

"I don't want to jinx him," teammate Tucker Fredricks said, "but there's no way he's going to lose."

Fredricks was right. Starting slowly but building speed with every frantic push of his clap-skates, Cheek put up another time (34.94) that was better than any of his competitors.

Cheek has been prepping for this moment since he started roller skating at age 10, another of those refugees from the wheeled sport who turned to ice with hopes of capturing Olympic gold.

In fact, ex-inliners from the unlikely places have won the first two American speedskating golds of the Turin Games: Chad Hedrick, the Texan who captured the 5,000 on Saturday, and now Cheek, from Greensboro, N.C., giving the United States its second straight victory in the 500.

MONDAY ROUNDUP

A look at what happened in the Turin Winter Olympic Games on Monday.

U.S. snowboarders dominate again

When it comes to snowboarding, the Olympics are America's halfpipe, and the rest of the world is just shredding in it.

That point was driven home again Monday, when Americans Hannah Teter won gold and Gretchen Bleiler won silver, adding more hardware to the two medals the U.S. men won the day before.

"USA. Representing," Bleiler said. "We're doing a good job. That's about all I can say."

Were it not for Norway's Kjersti Buaas throwing the run of her life, the Americans would have earned the sweep they almost had when Shaun White, Danny Kass and Mason Aguirre finished 1-2-4.

But Buass' run was worth the bronze and when Kelly Clark, the 2002 Olympic champion, slipped after her final jump — a tough, 900-degree spin — in an attempt to make the medal stand, she wound up 0.9 points short of third.

Gretzky heads to Turin

Before leaving for Turin, Wayne Gretzky side-stepped questions about the gambling investigation that has engulfed him and his wife and insisted Monday he won't distract the Canadian Olympic team despite a scandal that has shaken all of hockey.

Gretzky spoke for just 4½ minutes in a news conference cut off by a Hockey Canada official when the NHL great repeatedly was asked about the integrity of the game.

"That's not for me to talk about," Gretzky said.

Gretzky's shoulders sagged at one point, and he reacted with a nervous laugh a couple of times. On several occasions, a team official said Gretzky would take only game-related questions.

"There's no story about me, that's what I keep trying to tell you. I'm not involved," Gretzky said.

Suspended skiers cleared to compete

Four suspended cross-country skiers will get their chance at an Olympic medal, passing new hemoglobin tests administered Monday after serving five-day suspensions.

Two of the athletes cleared were Americans, another a German gold medalist. Now, eight more have to hope they get the same results.

Last week, a dozen skiers were given five-day suspensions for elevated levels of hemoglobin, the part of the red blood cell that can increase endurance. The rest chose to put off their tests because they weren't scheduled to compete in the men's and women's team sprint events today.

German cross-country skier Evi Sachenbacher and the two Americans — Kikkan Randall and Leif Zimmerman — were among the four who were retested Monday. The identity of the fourth skier was not immediately released.

Russian domination continues in pairs

Tot and Max's Russian rout made the judges' job easy.

Tatiana Totmianina and Maxim Marinin eliminated any chance for controversy and kept their nation's domination of Olympic pairs going Monday night with a balletic free skate reminiscent of the greatest Russian couples.

A Russian or Soviet pair has won the gold medal every year since 1964, and this one was as good as any. Add Totmianina and Marinin to Gordeeva and Grinkov or the Protopopovs at the top of perhaps the greatest dynasty in Olympic sports.

Their huge margin, 14.75 points over China's Zhang Dan and Zhang Hao, also erased thoughts of any judging improprieties.

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