

2006 WINTER OLYMPICS

What might have been

Golds that got away will define Michelle Kwan's career

By **TIM DAHLBERG**
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It ended in the middle of the night in the athletes' village, not center stage on the ice. In a way, that was fitting because Michelle Kwan didn't need one more public disappointment.

No athlete exemplified grace, class and character more than Kwan. No skater was so identified with her failures that it was almost impossible to appreciate her accomplishments.

Kwan cried when she won silver in Nagano, wept after having to settle for bronze in Salt Lake City. She skated through her adolescence and into adulthood chasing a gold medal that always seemed so tantalizingly close yet was always so far away.

Kwan wasn't going to win it here.

Not at age 25 with her practice limited because of a strained groin. Not when she was competing under new rules she still wasn't comfortable with. Not when she couldn't land difficult combinations like triple-triples that other contestants routinely do.

There was no reason to humiliate herself trying.

She decided at 2:15 Sunday morning she wouldn't, calling a doctor to get the official diagnosis and then her parents to let them know the dream she had nourished since she was a little girl was over.

It was a groin injury. The doctor didn't get around to examining her broken heart.

"My parents always wanted me to be happy and for their baby to win the gold," Kwan said.

She tried to do both, succeeding at one but finally failing at the other. Kwan didn't officially call it quits Sunday, but she might as well have. The next Olympics are four long years away, and the thousands of spins, jumps and falls on hard ice have taken a toll on her body far beyond her years.

If she's gone, she leaves with some remarkable accomplishments and one giant hole in her career. There were five world titles, an astonishing nine American championships and enough ancillary metal to stock the Federal Reserve.

Missing, though, was the Olympic gold that defines careers.

It wasn't for lack of trying. Kwan was more disciplined and dedicated than most in a sport that celebrates its young one day and casually tosses

COLUMN



Figure skater Michelle Kwan wipes a tear from her eye during a news conference Sunday to announce that she'd decided to pull out of the Turin Games.

them aside the next. She stayed with her first real coach, Frank Carroll, for an unheard-of 10 years and stuck with figure skating even through her most bitter disappointments.

"She was very eager to learn what she had to do to succeed," Carroll said. "She wanted to succeed very badly." She wasn't the only one.

NBC built two Olympics around her, and planned a third. You couldn't miss her Friday night in the network's coverage of the opening ceremony, and the story of Kwan coming back from a previous groin injury to be named to the team was critical to NBC's drive for primetime ratings.

Instead, she's heading home after just one practice session that went awry. The video the network beams out won't be of Kwan looking dazzling on the ice, but those of her dressed all in black sitting so alone and trying to make sense of it all to a crowd of journalists who somehow sensed it coming.

One glance at Kwan's face showed she had been crying, and she wept as she left the stage. In between, though, she spoke in measured, almost somber, tones as she tried to put an entire career into perspective with just a few sentences.

"If I don't win the gold, it's OK," she said. "I've had a great career, and I've been lucky. This is a sport, and it's beautiful."

Kwan was beautiful in her sport, too. The images many will remember will

be of a majestic skater so fluid on the ice and so precise in her jumps that, when she was on, she could leave a crowd breathless.

But on the world's biggest stage, the images were far more stark. Kwan was the gold medal favorite in 1998 in Nagano and skated well but was reduced to tears when Tara Lipinski skated a magical performance to snatch the gold away from her.

Unfortunately for Kwan, she will be remembered more for what she didn't do than what she did. Like Ernie Banks, who never got into a World Series, or Dan Marino, who made the Hall of Fame without ever winning a Super Bowl, she will be the great athlete who couldn't win when it counted most.

In her heart, Kwan still believed she could if given one final chance in Turin. In her mind, she must have known that this story wasn't going to have a happy ending.

Kwan finally listened to her inner voices of doubt in the early morning darkness nearly a half a world away from her California home. She came to the realization, however sad, that it was over.

There will be no Olympic gold for Michelle Kwan.

Not here. Not ever.

Tim Dahlberg is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press. Send comments to tdahlbergap.org

WEEKEND ROUNDUP

It was hardly a lost weekend for the U.S. Olympic team. The good news was just hard to find among all the disappointments.

Gold medals for speedskater Chad Hedrick and snowboarder Shaun White were nearly lost in a flurry of Winter Games woes that spread from sport to sport, and star to star. Big names fell short, or got no chance at all.

Skater Michele Kwan

Shut down by a badly injured groin muscle without ever stepping on the ice. Goodbye to the team's (and television's) most familiar Olympic face, tear-streaked by the turn of events.

Skiers Bode Miller and Daron Rahlves

Shut out in the downhill, where long-shot Frenchman Antoine Deneriaz won the gold.

Speedskater Apolo Anton Ohno

Skidded into fourth place in a semifinal heat, missing a chance to defend his gold medal in the 1,500 meters.

Luger Tony Benshoof

On the verge of winning the first-ever singles luge medal for the U.S., he slipped into fourth place Sunday, missing a bronze by 0.237 seconds. Instead, Latvia — yes, Latvia — won its first Winter Games medal.

The women's moguls team

Shut out Saturday in the freestyle despite fielding what was regarded as the deepest squad in the world.

Four years ago, the Americans won a staggering 34 medals with the home-field advantage in Salt Lake City, more than double their previous high of 13 in a Winter Games. In Turin, they were just a little staggered: two golds and a silver in two days.

Historically, countries that hosted the games experience a 41 percent drop in medals when they returned to foreign soil for the next Olympics. That would leave the U.S. looking at about 20 medals in Italy.

Jim Scherr, head of the U.S. Olympic Committee, declined to make a prediction for the U.S. medal haul. But he couldn't have predicted the early heartbreak suffered by the Americans, either. Kwan's sudden disappearance was perhaps the most devastating blow, since Miller, Ohno and Rahlves get to return in other events.

The 25-year-old skater smiled through her tears as she spoke about leaving Turin without the gold medal she chased for a decade.

"I've learned it's not about the gold, it's about the spirit of it and about the sport itself," she said.

So have a few of her teammates.

Career

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

weight around her neck. Now she's headed home, her neck as empty as her heart.

After waiting four years for one final chance, the gold is all but certain to remain a dream unfulfilled.

Her body isn't as indestructible as it once was — two groin injuries in less than two months — and she'll be 29 by the next Winter Games in Vancouver in 2010.

"I can't even think past right now," she said, biting her lip and fighting tears. "It's physical pain that's keeping me from performing and skating. But it's also emotional pain as well."

Emily Hughes, younger sister of 2002 Olympic champion Sarah

Elusive Olympic gold

U.S. figure skater Michelle Kwan's prolific resume boasts an impressive list of accomplishments, but no Olympic gold medals.



PHOTO: Kwan at a news conference on Sunday

SOURCE: U.S. Figure Skating

Hughes, replaced Kwan on the U.S. team and will join national champion Sasha Cohen and Kimmie Meissner. The women's competition doesn't begin until

Kwan's finishes in the top three

	Gold	Silver	Bronze
Olympic	0	5	9
World	0	5	9
U.S.	0	5	9

NOTE: In 1994, Kwan was the world junior champion and an alternate on the U.S. Olympic team, but did not compete.

Feb. 21, and Hughes plans to spend a few days at home in Great Neck, N.Y., and in school before leaving for Turin.

"It was fair that Michelle had

all the opportunities to make the Olympic team," said Hughes, who finished third at the U.S. national championships last month but was bumped after Kwan got a medical bye onto the Olympic team. "It's unfortunate that she was injured."

"I'm just ready to compete whatever it is. Right now it is the Olympics," the 17-year-old skater said.

For Hughes, this marks a beginning, her first major international competition. For Kwan, it's likely the end.

She's been the face of figure skating for a decade, beloved as much for her grace and humility in defeat as her long list of triumphs. Though she won five world and nine U.S. titles, she is best remembered for her heart-breaking finishes at both the Nagano and Salt Lake City games. The favorite at each, she settled instead for a silver

(1998) and a bronze (2002).

Indeed, the image of her sobbing as she stood below a beaming Tara Lipinski on the Nagano medals podium is as enduring as her majestic performance at the national championships a month earlier.

"I love her, win or lose," said Frank Carroll, her coach from 1991 to 2001.

For all the talk about Bode Miller, Apolo Anton Ohno, Chad Hedrick and Jeremy Bloom, no one owned the spotlight at these games like Kwan, even if she was there only four days. She was heavily promoted on television previews by NBC and in ads for several major sponsors.

"Michelle Kwan means more to the United States Olympic Committee than maybe any athlete that's ever performed," USOC chairman Peter Ueberroth said.

BIG FINISHES

Center Grove's recent team finishes at the state swimming finals:

1998: 2nd
1999: 2nd
2000: 4th
2001: t-8th
2002: 10th
2003: 11th
2004: t-23rd
2005: 10th
2006: 7th

Swimmers

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Central was third (210), Hamilton Southeastern fourth (187) and Columbus North fifth (170.5).

Chesterton (163), which picked up victories in four of the 12 events, was the only other team to finish ahead of Center Grove's 140 points.

McKeehan, a sophomore, won the 200 IM in 2:00.99, one-hundredth of a second off her winning time last year and just 0.66 seconds off the state record.

She also won the breaststroke in a school-record time of 1:02.07, just nine-hundredths of a second off Swander's state record.

McKeehan's victories in the last two state breaststroke races, coupled with Swander's victories in 1999-2000, means that Center Grove has won the title in the event four out of the past eight years.

"We had a couple of letdowns (in the preliminaries Friday), but we came back very strong (in the finals)," Trojans coach Jim Todd said. "The girls never quit; they just kept going, and to get three school records is great."

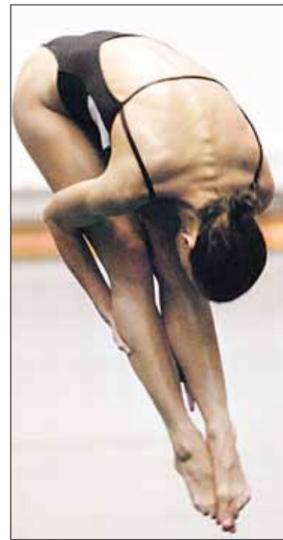
Center Grove started Saturday's finals by placing fourth in the 200 medley relay. The team of junior Melody White, McKeehan, senior Katy Todd and sophomore Shelli Kopetsky set the school mark with a time of 1:48.04.

The Trojans also closed strong in the day's last event, running as strong as third during portions of the 400 freestyle relay and finally taking sixth with a time of 3:34.78. The order of swimming in that event was White, Todd, Kopetsky and finally McKeehan.

Other top finishes for the Trojans came from White, who was fifth in the 200 freestyle, and senior Tien Tran, who was fifth in diving, one place better than last year.

Also in diving, Whiteland senior Jami Sears placed seventh, and Franklin junior Courtney Watson was 14th.

Center Grove placed three other swimmers in the top-16 during consolation events. White was ninth and Kopetsky 12th in the backstroke. And senior Kelsey Coffey was 15th in the breaststroke.



STAFF PHOTO BY SCOTT ROBERSON/roberson@thejournalnet.com

Whiteland senior Jami Sears dives during the IHSA swimming and diving finals Saturday at the IU Natatorium at IUPUI.

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JONI KENDALL, *Avon*

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