

Turning point

Michelle Kwan's silver medal becomes a golden moment

By Christine Brennan
USA TODAY

It was a simple news conference, no more than a half hour long. Two teen-age figure skaters sat at microphones facing several hundred reporters at the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano. At the time, nothing seemed unusual about the question-and-answer session featuring the surprising new Olympic gold medalist, Tara Lipinski, and the strong favorite who had just finished second, Michelle Kwan.

Nearly a year later, however, the news conference is subtly remembered within the realm of international athletics and women's sports as one of the more significant off-the-field events of 1998.

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For those who keep track of issues involving the behavior of athletes, it is seen as a model of sportsmanship, of how a very visible athlete accepted defeat in today's win-at-all-costs society. And it has become the defining moment in the career of one of international sport's youngest and most admired heroines: the 18-year-old Kwan, a very strong favorite to win her third national title in four years this week in Salt Lake City.

After the medal ceremony at White Ring Arena on the night of Feb. 20, 1998, Lipinski and Kwan filed into the news conference. Kwan, a high school senior who had been billed by the media as the star of the Games, soon was faced with

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Kwan will 'always be a hero'

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questions about what had gone wrong.

"I knew this competition wasn't going to be a piece of cake," she said.

"I came here looking for a good performance and I skated my best. I trained hard. There was nothing more I could have done."

And she said: "This might not be the color medal that I wanted, but I'll take it. *C'est la vie*,

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right? It's life, right? You never know what you're going to get."

Relieving the tension

When a reporter asked the two U.S. rivals to talk about each other, Lipinski — whom Kwan deferred to throughout the news conference by allowing her to answer first — blurted out that Kwan "skated great," even though the understandably giddy 15-year-old had not watched Kwan's performance.

It was Kwan's turn. She took the microphone and turned to look at Lipinski.

"I like you, Tara," she said, and a roomful of tired, jaded reporters burst into relieved laughter.

"Of all the losing locker rooms I have visited in two decades as a sportswriter, listening to grown men rationalize ninth-inning errors and air balls at the buzzer," wrote Mike Penner in a Feb. 23, 1998, column in the *Los Angeles Times*, "I have never seen anyone cope with crushing defeat with more poise, dignity and maturity than a teen-age girl named Michelle Kwan."

The *San Francisco Examiner's* Gwen Knapp said in a year-ending column pairing Kwan and Sammy Sosa: "And there was Michelle Kwan, who let Olympic gold get away but held onto her extraordinary grace, who at age 17 had the poise to say that life guaranteed her no prizes, no matter how hard she worked for them."

Praise for Kwan came from unexpected places. Mary T. Meagher, the winner of three Olympic gold medals in swimming, watched Kwan from afar at the Goodwill Games five



By Lynne Sladky, AP

Grace under fire: Michelle Kwan's poise after earning silver, to Tara Lipinski's Olympic gold, earned praise for her dignity and maturity.

months after the Olympics.

"She's one of the classiest athletes you could ever find," said Meagher, who had never met Kwan. "I don't care how she skates, she'll always be a hero."

"The way she handled herself, she'll be remembered forever."

At the White House

Two months after Nagano, Kwan was selected by the United States Olympic Committee to present a team jacket to President Clinton at a White House ceremony.

Clinton introduced Kwan, calling her "... a person whose grace and excellence on the ice, and, I must say, even more after the competition, must have been a source of enormous joy and pride, not only to her teammates, but to all Americans."

The adulation of Kwan made sense to Richard Lapchick, director of Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society.

"I think we've come to expect an edgy answer from athletes, even in victory sometimes," he said. "So when we get somebody who represents the best aspects of sports and

really acts like a sportsperson, they really stand out.

"It's so refreshing and welcome today."

The Women's Sports Foundation thought so, naming Kwan its 1998 Sportswoman of the Year for individual sports over tennis star Martina Hingis and golfer Se Ri Pak, among others.

"I don't think there's any question that her graciousness at the Olympic Games amid the shenanigans of the men's pro hockey team and in the middle of all the garbage of men's pro sports brought us all back to what sports is supposed to be like and what your heroes are supposed to be like," said Donna Lopiano, executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation. "Every competitor knows how hard it is to be gra-

cious when your dreams came in. That was a most courageous act."

Life magazine listed Kwan as one of the "100 Best Things About America Now." *Sports Illustrated for Kids* published its top five vote-getters for 1998 Athlete of the Year: In order, Michael Jordan, Mark McGwire, Kwan, Ken Griffey Jr. and Sammy Sosa. *The Sports Business Daily* said Kwan was the second-most marketable female athlete in the world, to soccer's Mia Hamm. (It's estimated Kwan has earned several million dollars so far in her career.) Disney signed her for four television skating specials and an eight-book series. She was a spokeswoman for the 1998 Goodwill Games and already is seen on promotional materials for the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

"She's what people want a champion to be — and more," said Turner Sports President Harvey Schiller, whose company owns the Goodwill Games and hopes to continue its affiliation with Kwan. "She went to the Olympics, did her best and was happy with it. Whether she wins or loses, she's the same person. There aren't a lot of athletes like that. No wonder she's someone the public has fallen in love with."

Something to say

Kwan said she continues to be surprised by the reaction to her comments in Nagano.

"I just felt like I had something to say, to tell the public, 'I'm OK,' to be an example, like this is how things work out sometimes," she said. "I wanted to say, 'I'm not down about it. It hurts, but it's not that bad. I'm going to have a great life even though I did not win the Olympics.'"

Sometimes it doesn't all work out perfectly and you've got to face that right away."

Lapchick hopes other athletes pay attention.

"If athletes read about the reaction to Michelle," he said, "that they could be rewarded for that kind of behavior, even finishing second, they can say, 'Here's this woman who did the noble thing and was rewarded for it.' It can be a signal for athletes that this is a way they should behave."