

# This storybook ending too late

Skating loves a good drama. And though Michelle Kwan's petition for a medical bye to the Turin Olympics doesn't quite compare to Nancy Kerrigan's in Lillehammer, it's still good for ratings and a bit of hype. But is it good for the sport?

**AMY E. TUCKER**  
COMMENTARY

Without question, Kwan has America's sympathy vote. She's the underdog. And who wouldn't want to see her finally achieve Olympic gold?

The question is, does she have what it takes to pull it out this time? Bob Horen, chairman of the U.S. Figure Skating International Committee, felt confident enough Friday to say she could. I'm sure that would make NBC and dozens of Olympic sponsors who pre-invested in Kwan happy, but the evidence suggests otherwise.

Her programs still lack a triple-triple combination, literally the gold standard in the sport. Russia's Irina Slutskaya is coming off an undefeated season, and Japan boasts world champion Shizuka Arakawa, two-time world bronze medalist Fumie Suguri and two-time national champion Miki Ando, who is the only woman to land a quadruple Salchow in competition.

Then there are her fellow Americans, reigning national champion Sasha Cohen and silver medalist Kimmie Meissner. Cohen's free skate is a gold medal package from music to costume to choreography if she overcomes her demons and skates it cleanly, and Meissner has a triple axel in her arsenal.

All have triple-triple combinations, and Kwan's higher marks on transition moves won't hide that she doesn't.

In figure skating, one bad night can end your dreams, just as the performance of a lifetime can send you to the top of the podium. Just ask Sarah Hughes. The only constants a skater can rely on are training and consistency, two things Kwan's lacked of late.

With three coaching changes in two years, she finally committed to Rafael Arutunian in November 2003. But the nine-time national champion, the most



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**PUMPED UP** because she's healthy again, Michelle Kwan has yet to make the moves she might need to beat the world's best skaters in the Turin Olympics.

decorated figure skater in U.S. history, has failed to recapture the magic of her prime. When skaters and coaches were struggling to understand the idiosyncrasies of the new judging system post-Salt Lake, Kwan "opted" not to compete in the Grand Prix series and gain essential knowledge and feedback from the judges. Timothy Goebel was vanquished by the new system, but Johnny Weir mastered it and used it to his ultimate advantage.

This season, injuries prevented Kwan from competing in all but an audience-judged event where she performed no triple jumps. And, in Friday's run-through of her short program and free skate, Kwan lacked triple-triple combinations and fell on the double axel, the move that caused the groin injury that kept her out of the U.S. championships.

Kwan, in a conference call with re-

porters, said she got great feedback from the monitoring committee and had lots to work on in the next few weeks. But her enthusiasm and dedication seem too little, too late. Her Olympic shot was in 1998. She held back and Tara Lipinski rose to the challenge. In Salt Lake, she faltered again, and Hughes grabbed the spotlight.

Kwan is part of an elite group of world-class skaters who never won Olympic gold, a list that includes Kurt Browning, Jill Trenary and Rosalynn Sumners. She would do well to remember what she said following Nagano: "I didn't lose the gold, I won the silver." And leave it at that.

► *Amy E. Tucker, a local free-lance writer, has covered figure skating for more than a decade.*