



AL THELMANS

W H E R E A R E T H E Y N O W ?



After a career highlighted by five world titles, the most decorated figure skater in U.S. history is moving in new circles as a diplomatic envoy for the State Department

Michelle Kwan

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE / Photograph by HEINZ KLUETMEIER

During her decadelong reign as America's ice queen, Michelle Kwan would witness her share of geopolitical theater, but nothing that approached the spectacle of the White House luncheon she attended with President George W. Bush and Chinese president Hu Jintao in April 2006. The event was part of an official visit by the Chinese president—who had traveled to Washington, D.C., to talk energy, trade and human rights—and it provided Kwan an up-close look at diplomacy

in action as well as insight into some of the personalities commanding the world's stage. No two played more opposite to type than Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who buttonholed the lithe skater on her way through the receiving line and whisked her away for a White House tour, fawning over her like crush-stricken schoolboys.

POLITICAL FIGURE

While finishing her master's degree, Kwan will travel as a representative of the Obama Administration.

President Bush, however, was exactly as advertised. "He's known to be the guy that you'd want to have a beer with, and he was definitely that," recalls

the 30-year-old Kwan, who sat next to the two presidents at the head table. But once they settled in, Bush flashed a sterner side and issued an executive order for quiet. "He was like, Michelle, not to be rude, but for the first 30 minutes we [he and Hu] have to do some business," she says. As Kwan and the more than 100 diners made hushed small talk over corn broth and Alaskan halibut, the two leaders engaged in an intense tête-à-tête that sucked in two translators and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

By the end of the session Bush was back to his playful ways, elbowing Kwan during Hu's postmeal toast to point out a slack-jawed and slumbering Henry Kissinger just a few tables over. But Rice and

Kwan were about to strike a deal of their own, although that wasn't immediately clear to Kwan as the two were parting after the lunch. "I don't know why I said this, but I told her if there's anything I can do for the State Department, let me know," Kwan says.

And thus was Kwan's postcompetitive career in politics and foreign relations officially born. The five-time world champion and two-time Olympic medalist had yet to definitively retire from skating, but that was merely a matter of time. Naggling hip and groin injuries kept Kwan off the ice for most of the '06 season, a hiatus that spurred her to get working on the next chapter of her life. She started by finishing college. The Torrance, Calif., native, had begun a psychology major at UCLA in 1999, but skating often interrupted. "I tried to get the whole experience of living in the dorms and all that," Kwan says, "but training at six in the morning wasn't really conducive to hanging out."

Similarly, seven years of part-time long-distance learning wasn't conducive to earning a diploma. So in the fall of '06 she transferred to the University of Denver and majored in international studies. In November of that year Rice took Kwan up on her whimsical help offer, appointing her the State Department's first public diplomacy envoy.

For Kwan, who has retained the unpaid post under the Obama Administration, it remains the ultimate study-abroad experience, one that has sent her hopscotching to schools in Ukraine, Argentina and China to preach such sports-themed concepts as discipline, dedication and teamwork in a bid to forge common ground with students. Kwan's overall mission is simple. "The goal is very soft-power, making that connection," says Kwan, citing a roundtable discussion with Beijing University students as her most

profound. "I looked around and thought, These students are going to be the leaders of China someday."

Still, keeping a place at the table would be a challenge for Kwan as long as skating still tugged at her. Sometimes, she'd fill study breaks by watching clips of herself on YouTube, reliving crowning performances like the ones that yielded five world championship golds from 1996 through 2003. Lesser performances that she once couldn't bring herself to relive now provide perspective. "When I used to fall on a triple Lutz, I thought, Life is over," she says. "I don't worry about that now."

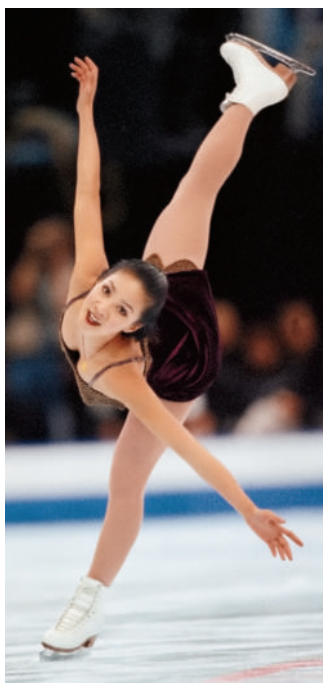


refreshing change from the environment she knew as a jock, where conversations usually centered on "how tired we are, how to get rest and what movies to watch," she says. At Fletcher she juggles a full-time schedule that has her attend-

ing six classes a week, reading more than 100 pages a day and receiving tutoring in Mandarin. (She is fluent in Cantonese.) All the while she tries to participate in class discussions, which sometimes become so intense that they leave her speechless. Says Kwan, "Every so often I'm like, Whoa . . . what just happened here?"

Her immediate plans, on the other hand,

"When I used to fall on a triple Lutz, I thought, Life is over," Kwan says. "I don't worry about that now."



GILDED MEMORIES

A championship competitor for more than a decade, Kwan will continue to skate in exhibitions even as she pursues her new career.

That said, she still can't bring herself to watch her long program from the '02 Salt Lake Games, in which an early stumble on a triple toe loop sealed a bronze medal finish. "It wasn't perfect, but it was courageous," gushed TV analyst Scott Hamilton at the time. "She never gave up."

Come her graduation from Denver last spring, as her aches and pains subsided and her jumps returned, Kwan was bent on retaking the ice and redeeming that moment. She choreographed a short program and set a goal of qualifying for the Vancouver Games. But when a grad school opportunity arose at Tufts University's Fletcher School, a renowned hothouse for aspiring diplomats, Kwan let school interrupt skating this time, opting to pursue a master's in foreign policy. The bookish milieu was a

are liable to leave others breathless. In July she traveled to Seoul to perform in the All That Skate 2010 Summer exhibition, along with '10 Olympic gold medalist Kim Yu-Na. After that there will be one more year of grad school to complete, during which Kwan hopes to fit in extracurricular assignments for the State Department and for President Obama's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition, to which she was named in January. The hands-on experiences give her a range of postgrad career options, which include possibly pursuing a Ph.D. in public policy. That would open up more vistas in politics, she says—such as a run for office.

Still, her first love is diplomacy, and skating couldn't have prepared her better for it. In addition to the worldwide travel and multicultural interactions, the sport exposed Kwan to failure—something she gained a reputation for handling with singular grace. That would seem a particularly valuable trait to be armed with in international relations, in which the best-laid plans often go awry and no one ever totally gets his or her way. "It's always, you move an inch forward, and then the other person moves an inch forward," she says. "It might not be the perfect relationship, but nothing's perfect."

That she has a knack for getting close, though, should stand her in good stead. □