



SPORTS TALK

with Michael Emmett

Mayfair's own 3 times National Champion
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Disastrous Year a Wake-up Call for Michelle Wie

Ever since Michelle Wie won the Women's Amateur Public Links title as a 13-year-old, she has been pegged by many high profile golf experts a "can't miss Hall of Famer." Touring pros like Ernie Els said in 2005 "it's just a matter of time before she wins more Major Championships and is recognized as the best female golfer ever." However, many are changing that tune after the 18-year-old American, who endured a miserable season in 2007, is looking to find her game. An injury to her left wrist in early January forced her to miss the first 5 months of the golfing season.

It would have been hard to imagine a worse year for the super talented teenager from Hawaii. Wie competed in 9 official events in 2007 and either missed the cut or withdrew in 6 of the events. Wie went the entire year without once breaking par. And perhaps the biggest shock of all was that she won just over \$22,000 in prize money.

Unfortunately, for Wie, her year will be remembered by an incident at the Ginn Classic hosted by Annika Sorenstam. The LPGA has an 88-rule: Any non-tour member who shoots 88 or higher is barred from competing in LPGA Tour events for the remainder of the year. Wie was 14-over-par in her first round when she walked off the course prior to teeing off on the 17 hole. Wie later admitted that she did not know of the 88-rule and would not have walked off the course without her parents and manager interfering. Wie had no choice as B.J. Wie (Michelle's father) made the decision for her as he knew the consequences could be severe if Michelle went on to bogey both remaining holes.

The question is this: is there anybody who is buying Michelle's excuse that she re-aggravated one of her wrists and that was the reason she withdrew from Annika's tournament? Several players, including one of her playing partners said this was "shady" and that everybody saw the likelihood that she would lose 2 more strokes – given that her round included a double bogey, a triple bogey and a 10 on a par-5.

She was in the media tent soon after her round, and promptly assured the press how much she wants to play next week's McDonald's LPGA Championship, for which she has a sponsor's exemption. Oh, that wrist injury? "Yeah, you know, it felt good when I was practicing but, you know, I kind of like tweaked it in the middle of the round a little. So, I'm just taking caution measures, and I know what to work on."

Does that sound like a serious enough injury to withdraw from an entire tournament? *I kind of like tweaked it...a little bit!!*

Folks, it doesn't get more obvious than this. Rather than stand behind her abysmal round - or, hey, here's a thought, try to make a few pars - Wie got scared. The pressure of losing her LPGA playing privileges for a year caused this horrible error in judgment. 24 hours later she showed up at the McDonald's LPGA Championship and hit balls on the range for over 2 hours and likely ruined her reputation forever.

Watching her struggles this year (scoring average was about 77) and her season capping second-to-last place finish at the Samsung World Championship – the knee-jerk reaction is to blame it on injuries. But in my opinion the problem goes much deeper. In the sports world, the term "prodigy" is thrown around very loosely. Whenever a young child – like Wie – comes along and shows huge potential, heaps of pressure is thrown on him or her and they become a prodigy. The can't miss prospect! Only problem is, no matter what they do, they can never escape the criticism. Because such high expectation is placed on them at such a young age, more often than not they'll succumb to the pressure.

Michelle Wie, who has five top-5 finishes in major championships, has long been discussed as a future great.

In 2004, Wie competed in a PGA tournament, the Sony Open. She shot a 72 and a spectacular 68 (still the best score by a woman in a men's PGA event), and came within one stroke of becoming the first woman to make the cut in a PGA event. The hype was almost suffocating. Will Michelle Wie one day beat men on a regular basis? That is what was asked to a girl still only 14 years old. Wie possesses the drive capabilities few women have. Her talent is limitless. As the hype started to spread, so too, did Wie's legend. As an amateur, she was given special exemption to enter the US Women's Open.

In 2005, Wie continued her quest to qualify at a men's PGA event. While she missed out on that again, Wie did finish second at the LPGA Championships, a major, losing to only Annika Sorenstam. Clearly, she has what it takes to succeed. At just 15 Michelle Wie had almost won a major. She also finished 3rd at the Women's British Open. She was tied for the lead in the US Open entering the US Open but a final round 84 did her in.

In October 2005, Michelle Wie turned pro. The news was big. There was no turning back now. Michelle Wie had crossed from lovable youngster to a woman serious about what she does. In her first pro event, Wie was disqualified for moving her ball. If she had stayed legal, she would have finished 4th.

These were the good days, and clearly the young women's confidence has been shattered. It's beyond obvious that, if she's happy and healthy, she can play. But after her parents, agents and managers pushed her through this season to forget, the biggest question is, does she still know she can play? And more to the point, does she even want to play. If the answer's no, no one will be surprised. If it's yes, if she emerges from this to be the champion everyone thinks she could be, one imagines she'll have to first find herself and the love of the game that seems to have disappeared during this season to forget. ■