

Flashes of Brilliance

Sasha Cohen and Michelle Kwan Compete in a Battle of Skating Brilliance

By Jim Pasero

Can Sasha Cohen beat Michelle Kwan this January at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Portland? That's like asking if the Boston Red Sox can beat the New York Yankees.

And Michelle Kwan is the New York Yankees of the figure skating world.

Kwan's record is staggering. She's the seven-time defending American champion. She's also won Worlds five times, and is a two-time Olympic medalist. Or as Michelle Kwan's agent, Shep Goldberg, commented on Michelle's record, "She hasn't been off the podium since '95"—and that means all competitions she has entered.

Her incredible record makes her one of the most famous athletes in the world. And as Michael Jordan was the face of Wheaties, Michelle was the face of Campbell's Soup. You don't get much bigger than that. Even Joe Torre's Yankees with their four world titles, seven American league pennants, and nine consecutive division titles can't compete.

Can Sasha? Well, Sasha's gaining.

Not only is Sasha Cohen a brilliant talent, but she's also a once in a generation skater. Think Peggy Fleming but possibly with even more talent. She defeated Michelle Kwan at the '04 World Figure Skating Championships in Dortmund, Germany, finishing second to Kwan's third, behind Japan's only current world champion, Shizuka Arakawa.

Cohen, who admires the skating of past Olympic champions Kurt Browning and Kristi Yamaguchi, is, at 20, four years Kwan's junior. If she can control her extraordinary talent and skate the elusive "clean" long program, she may be ready to challenge her rival for the title. Cohen talked with *BrainstormNW* about the challenges of skating "clean."

"Every year I get stronger and stronger. Last year I did four clean long performances. The year before I did only two. It is extremely difficult to do a clean long performance. It is not easy out there," says Cohen, good naturedly commenting about past mishaps on the ice. "People say when someone falls that they weren't focused, or they were nervous, but the blade is only an eighth of an inch. You have to be very precise."

Are the skaters as nervous on the ice as they appear on television? "Yes," says Cohen, "but more nervous at the beginning. You feel more solid with every jump you land."

And when is she the most nervous? "Anytime you are not on the ice, that's when you are the most nervous."

Does she every wonder if all the hard work and the high-wire, nerve-shattering world of figure skating is worth it? “Yes,” says Cohen, “there are times that you feel this is so tough, all that agony. But that feeling you get when you skate well makes it all worthwhile...then I want to go out and do it again.”

Cohen’s right about the agony. “It takes ten months to get in shape and you can get out of shape in a month.”

Sasha Cohen grew up in Southern California. Her father, Roger, is American-born, but her mother, Galina, was born in the former Soviet Union, in Kiev. Her maternal grandfather once performed for Stalin, she says, in a parade in Red Square. In March, the World Championships are in Moscow, and Sasha looks forward to returning to Moscow for the competition. “The Russians are great skating fans, and they’ve always been really supportive.”

But before Sasha Cohen gets to Moscow, she’s coming to Portland, and will be arriving in January from her new home in Manhattan, a city that has become a retreat for her both because she find its stimulating and becomes sometimes even someone as famous as Sasha Cohen can get lost in the crowd. “Sometimes I am recognized in New York, and sometimes I am not. Not everyone is a skating fan.”

New York city is also close to her new coach Robin Wagner (former coach of Olympic gold medalist Sarah Hughes), whom Cohen calls “fantastic and so supportive.”

As for Portland, Cohen is no stranger to the city. Her uncle lives here. And he will be in the stands on January 15th when Sasha Cohen and Michelle Kwan perform their long programs for the national title. With Cohen focused on defeating the seven-time national champion, does it leave room to get to know Michelle socially? “No,” says Sasha, “competitors don’t socialize with each other. We say, ‘Hi, nice to see you,’ and ‘Goodbye.’”

She is, however, friends with some of the male skaters and the pair skaters. That makes sense, because just like when the Red Sox are playing the Yankees, there is only so much time for talking...Portland, Oregon, you are in for a treat.