

I first become aware of Michelle Kwan before the 1998 Winter Games in Nagano, Japan when she became America's sweetheart and was on the cover of every magazine that you can imagine including Sports Illustrated as well as being the face of virtually ever sponsorship deal you can imagine too.

She is one of the greatest figure skaters in the history of the sport: multiple time world champion, multiple national champion here in the States and I had an opportunity to speak with her about her experiences growing up in the sport as well as her experiences spreading the values of her sport around the world. As always, real interesting conversation. We had a great time catching up and talking. Without further ado, here is my interview with Michelle Kwan.

(Music)

Morgan: And you are?

Michelle: Michelle Kwan

Morgan: And what do you do? Or what did you do?

Michelle: Yea...I used to be an Olympic ice skater. Do twirls...twirls and twirls

Morgan: And split falling leaf too.

Michelle: Split falling leaf, inside outside spirals. I used to do...what was my favorite jump? I would say lutz.

Morgan: The triple lutz?

Michelle: The triple lutz.

Morgan: Or triple toe to triple toe? Is that...?

Michelle: Oh no..that was my least favorite.

Morgan: You still landed one, right?

Michelle: I triple toed to triple toe, yes. And then my least favorite I would have to say is triple low because its a back outside edge. And its the most scary feeling to rely on doing three rotations on a back outside edge.

Morgan: Where did you grow up?

Michelle: Torrance, CA

Morgan: Torrance....and you went to public school til 8th grade?

Michelle: Yea, I went to public school til 7th grade and it was a hard because the school wouldn't allow you to miss more than 1 week total. So of course, when I traveled to international competitions I would miss 4 days here and there and suddenly it was just time where I had to independent and home school.

Morgan: How did you end up on the ice? How old were you?

Michelle: I was about 5 years old when I started skating and it was sort of an after school activity

Morgan: How did your parents even think? Your parents were Chinese immigrants.

Michelle: Chinese immigrants. I think it was by happenstance. There was a skating rink inside a mall close by and so my parents always said that we have to stay active and I was always known as the "jumping bean" or the "little monkey." My grandmother used to call me the little monkey jumping around and can't sit still so let's try to do something good with that energy. So my parents decided, "hey, why don't you take up ice skating?"

Morgan: And when did you know that this was a) something you enjoyed and b) that you were special?

Michelle: I don't think I ever realized I'm special. I'm going to be a great skater.

Morgan: Not even when you were standing on top of the podium?

Michelle: I never really thought about it, but when I was 5 years old I started skating and I was not born to skate. I was holding to the rails for dear life. My brother picked it up quite quickly and he would actually try to scare the living daylights out of me. He would grab my hand and of course being a big brother....

Morgan: Yea..that is what big brothers do..

Michelle: I know, exactly. He'd hold my hand and fling me across the ice and of course I'm like uaghhhhhhh. Just running into people but I think I caught up quickly as you know a younger sibling with an older sister and older brother and I loved it. I would eat candy. I remember my first video my mom took of me ice skating. I would stroke around the ice and have nerds and eat it on the ice. Stroke, stroke, stroke and then eat some more nerds.

Morgan: Positive reinforcement

Michelle: Exactly...my own positive reinforcement

Morgan: It works with rats and skating prodigys. When did you start competing locally? Did your coach at the rink see something in you?

Michelle: I actually don't remember, but my parents talk about how the coach pulled my parents aside and said your daughters Karen and Michelle are improving quite quickly and were in group lessons where you have 10 kids on the ice at the same time. I think they have improved so much that I'd advise doing private lessons and I think it was a gradual like ok, we learn so quickly that we started to do jumps and started to do spins and they improved. Then our coaches decided to enroll in skating competitions.

Morgan: How much time were you spending on the ice when you were 10 years old?

Michelle: I remember it used to be once a week kind of thing where we have group lessons. Then, we improved so quickly that we had once a week private lessons and then it was a couple times a week and then before you know it it was skating 5 days a week. Then we got to a point where I was 6-7 days a week and enrolling in local competitions, then national competitions. By the time I was 13, I was competing at the national level and the world level.

Morgan: There are two tracks I want to pursue here: 1) that couldn't have been cheap

Michelle: Definitely was not cheap. I saw it every days...my parents...

Morgan: Who were immigrants to the US

Michelle: Immigrants to the United States and trying to make ends meet let alone spending a lot of money on skating costumes which we had one. Our equipment which was skating boots and blades and to a lot of people they think we have a lot, but we have one pair of boots and blades. It was expensive. Skating lessons at the time were \$20.

Morgan: But that adds up.

Michelle: It adds up times two. My sister skated. At some point in my career I remember I really didn't think that my parents would be able to afford it because it was so costly and my parents were juggling three different jobs just to provide food on the table, roof over our heads and a silly thing called figure skating.

Morgan: Where did your folks work?

Michelle: We had a Chinese restaurant and my dad was sometimes behind in the kitchen cooking. He worked for what was Pacific Bell now AT&T. My mom was working for a bank as a teller and accountant. It was just very very difficult.

Morgan: They were clearly role models in your life for hard work and work ethic.

Michelle: Yes. My parents are to me my role models for life in terms of how strong they are. When I think of the word courage I think of my parents because they immigrated to the United States with nothing but that seed of hope for a better future and more opportunities for their kids.

Morgan: I want to put a pin in that because we are going to come back to the importance of sports and America's role in the world in a little bit. The second avenue I want to pursue here is when you think of America figure skaters before 1988 its the Dorothy Hamills and the Peggy Flemmings of the world. Who did you look up to? And you are Asian American, was it difficult to not have somebody to look up to and say oh, we are similiar, we have a similiar background.

Michelle: I remember growing up and watching Janet Lynn. Of course I wasn't alive when Dorothy Hamill won the Olympics or Peggy Fleming, but I watched old videos of their performances. The classics really and the legends in the sport. Kristie Yamaguchi won the '92 Olympics and I really looked up to her being Japanese American. Oh wow, this is a possiblity. I can be just like her.

Morgan: Do you remember the first time you met her?

Michelle: I remember the first time that I didn't meet her. I didn't have the courage to say hello.

Morgan: It's like when you and I first met.

Michelle: You didn't say hello? Yeah, you did! But Kristie skated in LA. She might have been doing a show and I told my parents that Kristie Yamaguchi is practicing in this rink. Let's go skate with her. You can imagine all the kids wanted to skate and be on the same ice, but I avoided her because I didn't want to get in her way. She had more important things to do.

Morgan: How far is Torrance from LA? I'm sorry about my California geography.

Michelle: I say LA, but so we were...I think we were.....

Morgan: Is Torrance southern California?

Michelle: Yea...yea...sorry, sorry.

Morgan: So you guys are from relatively the same geographic

Michelle: She's in northern California

Morgan: Oh she is...ok

Michelle: San Fran

Morgan: What about coaching? At your rink did you just happen to find somebody that was capable of raising a world class figure skater? How did your parents position you to make that leap?

Michelle: I had incredible coaches growing up. People I really admired and guided me in the right path. When I started to compete in the international level, actually the national level, I came across Frank Carroll who in the sport of figure skating is a legend and has been amazing in terms of..grooming is the wrong word...guiding incredible figure skaters to be world champions. People suggested to my parents, you should take her to Frank Carroll. I remember my first lesson with Frank. I was star struck. Here is this world class coach helping me and I was hanging on every word and was so helpful. I worked with Frank Carroll for over 10 years. It was eye opening every day.

Morgan: How many hours a day?

Michelle: Geez...it used to be 7 days a week. The weekends were a little more..an hour or two..very minimal.

Morgan: What time were you getting on the ice?

Michelle: I had pretty structured routine when I was competing for the Olympics. It was 10:00, 1:00, 5:00 an hour on the ice. You have to remember there was a warm up and cool down so really two hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoon, two hours in the evening. After dinner, I would go to the gym for another hour or so.

Morgan: You needed cardio and core strength, right?

Michelle: Exactly, exactly. It was for figure skaters it was like you want to be limber, you want to be flexible and you want to do the spirals that are so pretty. What figure skaters you think of spirals and lay backs and you have to have flexibility and strength and agility. I used to have friends joke, figure skating is not a real sport. I'm like...let me tell you it is when you are doing a triple jump.

Morgan: The explosive nature of that, right?

Michelle: Yea, you have to have speed across the ice. The impact of actually jumping and 300 lbs like 5 times...I don't know the calculations, but is like 500 times the impact when you land and also when you fall.

Morgan: Not that that ever happened.

Michelle: Yea...no...no, never.

Morgan: You are at the National level. 1994 is your coming out getting ready for Lillehammer. Maybe we won't get into it in detail about your experience.

Michelle: That was a very interesting year.

Morgan: But you came in second at Nationals that year.

Michelle: I was second behind Tonya Harding at the National Championship to qualify me technically to the Olympic Games, but that year was also when Nancy Kerrigan got clubbed. I was right behind Nancy Kerrigan when that happened.

Morgan: Kerrigan, Kwan, right? In alphabetical order.

Michelle: Yes, exactly. Getting off the ice, seeing there is a hallway and there was a curtain and I was right behind Nancy and I heard something then screaming.

Morgan: Why me?

Michelle: Yea, it was frightening for a 13 year old. I was like what is happening? My parents definitely told me to avoid watching television, the news and really protected to make sure I was not afraid of my life. That year I was an alternate to Lillehammer.

Morgan: Because we would only send 2 back then.

Michelle: Yea, and at that time it was complicated because people didn't know and I think still don't know what Harding's involvement was in the situation. Either way they sent Tanya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan so I was sent as the first alternate and it was an incredible experience.

Morgan: Did you get to march in the opening ceremonies?

Michelle: I didn't. I was not part of the team-team, but I was still practicing in a close by ice rink just in case anything were to happen.

Morgan: After '94, then all of a sudden you start winning National Championships

Michelle: I won my first National title in '96.

Morgan: Then World Championships too.

Michelle: That same year.

Morgan: That same year. Was that just experience and age or is there anything you attribute to making that leap?

Michelle: I learned a lot from '94-'96 in terms of my improvement in skating and in terms of artistry and understanding musicality and also growing up. In '94, I was only 13 and was known as the "jumping bean". By the time '96 rolls around, I was skating to Salome and not in those two years discovered artistry, but I was surrounded by incredible skaters. I was on tour on Champions on Ice touring with the best of the best of the world.

Morgan: Not to be confused with Ice Capades.

Michelle: Or Disney on Ice, but really touring with these remarkable skaters..professional skaters. I think I soaked it all in and so the year '96 it was a very creative one where I would sit with my choreographer, Lori Nichol, and really listen to music and was with Frank Carroll and wanted to come out with two different programs. One was Romanza and one was Salome.

Morgan: You would have to skate twice in a World level competition.

Michelle: Yea so we have the short program and the long program.

Morgan: In a nutshell, what is the difference.

Michelle: They are called original and free program. But short, long. Short is 2:30 minutes. Four minutes is long.

Morgan: How do you pick your music?

Michelle: These days they allow words so you can skate to...you have more options. I think for skaters it is hit or miss, really. Some skaters just let their choreographer choose. I always wanted to feel it first. Hear it, feel it, play it in the ice rink and see if its something that is organic moves come out and inspire me.

Morgan: Because you would be living with that piece for a whole year.

Michelle: So you better love it. I think every piece that I chose to skate to it resonated with me. It terms of making that connection. I could feel it and the way I see it is the ice is a canvas and your body is an

instrument to express yourself. It really is a time where you need to find yourself and say does this piece of music resonate?

Morgan: Is there a rule that you have to choose a new piece of music every year or is that something you do?

Michelle: Some skaters choose to repeat programs. Like one year and then recycle it, if you will.

Morgan: You mentioned before that the costumes were expensive, but all of a sudden you met another Asian American, Vera Wang.

Michelle: Yes, a fabulous designer.

Morgan: Who also did your wedding dress too. I read that in People Magazine.

Michelle: But growing up, skating costumes were so expensive. My mom would sew costumes for my sister, both of us. I just remember late, late, late pulling an all nighter putting sequins on my costume. Just amazing and I had these amazing small skating costumes that my mom made, but when I was 22 I think...gosh when did I start working with Vera? I think when I was 19 or 20.

Morgan: In between Nagano and Salt Lake?

Michelle: Yea, exactly.

Morgan: Does she just have you come in?

Michelle: So Vera Wang, a lot of people don't know that she used to be an ice skater and competed in the National level.

Morgan: I did not know that.

Michelle: She was...my sister was working as an intern at Vera because my sister was PR Major at BU. She worked with Vera and we connected and Vera said, I'd love to make your skating costumes and I'm like how could I say no? She made my costumes for 6 years. For a number of years.

Morgan: Up until your wedding day.

Michelle: Up until my wedding day, exactly.

Morgan: And you are still friends?

Michelle: Oh yes, I see Vera all the time.

Morgan: Did she do Evan Lysacek too?

Michelle: She did Evan's, Nancy Kerrigan's...

Morgan: Not Johnny Weir..

Michelle: Yea, Nancy Kerrigan's in the '94 Olympics where she had gold costume. That was Vera's.

Morgan: I didn't even mean to go on that....

Michelle: Yea..Vera Wang!

Morgan: Very fascinating. You mentioned before that when you went on tour it really helped you to be exposed to other figure skaters. I realized when you were saying that that the other female Olympians I've interviewed for this have all been team athletes. They could all talk about the impact of Title IX and how it led them to getting into Notre Dame or the University of North Carolina. Having those role models 10-15 years before them helped open doors to be NCAA players and National team level players. There is no such thing as NCAA figure skating so you don't really have that, but being around other women, not to put words in your mouth, was that something that helped you make that leap? And you can say no if not.

Michelle: No...it made me think. When you watch the sport of figure skating and single skating you think of "oh you are doing it all by yourself", but there is a team behind you. My choreographer, the person that sharpens my skates, my parents that drive me to the rink, my coaches near the boards and its really a team sport. In terms of the women and the incredible figure skaters I was surrounded by, I wanted to be a lot like Nancy Kerrigan in '94. Watched Oksana Baiul from Ukraine. I admired the male skaters that were incredible. I think there is giants and people that led the way. I think of Billy Jean King and how she has led the way...

Morgan: Not a figure skater...hell of an athlete

Michelle: Not a figure skater...she has made a huge impact in women's sports and paved the way. I think of Peggy Fleming, specifically in figure skating, Peggy Fleming, Dorothy Hamill, Janet Lynn. All these remarkable women figure skaters who have paved the way in women's sports and women's figure skating.

Morgan: You have experience in film.

Michelle: In film....I starred in Arthur, The Simpsons

Morgan: The Simpsons, the Family Guy

Michelle: Where I looked kind of yellowish. More yellowish....

Morgan: I'm not going to touch that with a 10 foot pole! You are my first Simpsons character to appear on the podcast. What was that like?

Michelle: I was in the studio with Warren Sapp doing voice over and I had the opportunity to meet the voices of The Simpsons and one of their table reads. Not table reads, but when they talk about writing the next episode..

Morgan: Run through or writer's room?

Michelle: Yea..it was like a different...what is the word?

Morgan: You are the Hollywood...

Michelle: It was interesting because these are the masterminds of the creative process of The Simpsons.

Morgan: That was pretty cool and it features prominently on your Sizzle reel. You became a spokeswoman for Chevy..

Michelle: Chevy, Campbell's Soup, Yoplait

Morgan: Coca-Cola?

Michelle: Coca-Cola, but that was years later. Disney...

Morgan: I would say your parents' investment paid off in the long run. You were chosen by these major organizations because you were held up as a role model because you were a champion figure skater and you carried yourself with grace and representing your country well, but that wasn't enough for you. We could talk about the Olympics and stuff like that, but why you are actually sitting here more importantly is because of what you have done since you left the ice. You went to Denver for undergrad, right?

Michelle: I think for athletes..I can't speak for everybody, but transition from sports to...not real life, but transition out of sports....it is so time consuming. It's sort of your identity in so many ways.

Morgan: 7 days a week! 10 hours a day! From the time you were 5 years old.

Michelle: You have to have that dedication in order to be the best. I see it...when I see Olympians whether that is figure skaters or swimmers. The hours that they spend training on the ice, in the gym, in the pool, on the court...you name it. It is who you are. When suddenly you retire from the sport, it is an identity crisis if you will. Every morning I would wake up and I had such a set routine and suddenly that is all gone. What am I going to do?

Morgan: Would you say that figure skating was your passion?

Michelle: It was my passion. It was my first love. The moment I started skating when I was 5 til I was 26 when I finished. I think for a lot of people they linger a lot longer.

Morgan: You would have kept skating too, right? You thought about Torino?

Michelle: I was an alternate at Torino..not an alternate. I was in Torino and I was injured and pulled out. I think for all athletes..to me when I transitioned it was difficult. I found myself by going to school where I graduated from University of Denver. Before that I was at UCLA, but never graduating because something called the Olympics got in the way. When I graduated, I continued to get my Masters because I still felt that need to learn.

Morgan: What attracted you to Denver? Is it because of Denver's reputation as a major International Affairs school? Close to Colorado Springs?

Michelle: In a way...I loved my experience at UCLA. What attracted me to University of Denver was the GSIS Program, the Graduate School of International Studies. Also being in Colorado, I wanted to have that experience and also University of Denver...I just loved it. It was the size and environment I wanted and incredible faculty. Now GSIS is renamed Josef Korbel.

Morgan: Who is Korbel's daughter?

Michelle: Madeline Albright. Josef Korbel Graduate School was also where Secretary Condoleezza Rice went.

Morgan: We'll get to her in a second. Korbel himself was an immigrant too. Undergrad wasn't enough. You then go to Tufts.

Michelle: The Fletcher School. Yes...Law and Diplomacy. I think that was also very difficult for me. It's one to get my degree and then it's another to pursue a Masters degree. I was a little frightened.

Morgan: What was it about International Affairs? Was it growing up in a household with Chinese immigrant parents? Was it the fact that you traveled the world from the time you were 11 years old on?

Michelle: If you had asked me 15 years ago if I would ever get a Masters degree, I would be like no. What inspired me was my upbringing. Being a child of Chinese immigrants. Being able to speak another language. Having traveled the world representing the United States. Also coupled with my experience traveling as the first Public Diplomacy envoy and the work in diplomacy.

Morgan: When were you named the Public Diplomacy envoy?

Michelle: '06

Morgan: This was by Condi Rice?

Michelle: Yes, I was appointed as the first Public Diplomacy envoy in 2006 and I didn't know what it entailed. What do I do? My first trip was to China. The idea of talking about my experiences and what I learned through sports and being American and connecting with youth around the world. I saw in a very small picture way the impact of people to people dialogue, but in a bigger sense you bring countries closer together by talking about sports. Who doesn't like sports? It's a common language.

Morgan: You are adored in China. You've won awards. I remember we had a visitor in from China in Washington one day and he and I were walking out of the building and you walk up. The guy, a very very serious member of their Olympic Committee, and all of a sudden he becomes a fan boy. He says "Morgan take my picture!"

Michelle: They don't know me as Michelle. They know me as Guan Yingshan which is my Chinese name. It's always Kwan, middle name, first name.

Morgan: Interesting...Guan Yingshan. You speak Cantonese?

Michelle: Yea..and that is Gwaan Wihngsaan. It's a little different. So many dialects.

Morgan: In 2006, you are Public Diplomacy envoy. You went to China and Singapore. You were all over the place, right?

Michelle: I traveled to China, Russia, Ukraine, Singapore, Argentina, Korea.

Morgan: On behalf of the Department of State. Why did the State Department send you out on these programs?

Michelle: I don't know, Morgan. Maybe you can fill the blanks.

Morgan: I have to pretend like I don't really work for the Department. The State Department sends world class athletes like you out because it is a great way to represent our American culture and values which are often shared culture and values. It's a great way to open people's eyes to realize that we are all the same.

Michelle: You could not have said it better. I did not realize that as I was traveling as an envoy for a number of years until I realized the power it has in a global way. How the US Government does these exchanges and how powerful they are. Yes, you have professional athletes and Olympians, but the most common ones...the best exchanges are sports exchanges, music exchanges. It is a powerful way to bring people together.

Morgan: We call those universal languages. The cultural exchanges where it doesn't matter that you speak Cantonese and I speak English

Michelle: Differences are put aside. Religion, color of your skin, your beliefs. You share this universal common language.

Morgan: Hard work, teamwork.

Michelle: Building a better future, the power of education, the importance of family.

Morgan: And it shouldn't be a surprise to you that girls that pick up sports are set up for success so much better because it translates to the academic setting, women's health, it's a huge aspect.

Michelle: It was very powerful when Pakistani young girls came to the US Department of State for a tour. They were field hockey players. I remember having the opportunity to meet them and it made a huge impact on me because here were these group of young women who often get laughed at, do not have the opportunities as boys. When they talk to their parents, they question why are you playing sports? That is not what girls do. When they had an incredible experience in the United States, they went back to Pakistan and said yes, I can do this. I can learn and be an athlete and I can do this for my body and my mind. It translates into other areas of their lives. Fast forward 10 years from now, I'm sure these young women are going to be so empowered and believe that they can do anything.

Morgan: What I'm hearing you say is its one thing for Michelle Kwan to go overseas and I heard you mentioned three different continents showing the universal appeal of figure skating. You are touching dozens, if not hundreds of boys and girls, because it's important that boys see you also. You also think there is a lot value in the athletes coming..

Michelle: There is immense value. You have the Olympians and professional athletes traveling. Having their notoriety and fame being able to reach out and talk about their upbringing, being an American and American values and the American dream. It's another to have these incredible to have these smaller exchanges that are almost more powerful because it changes their lives and opens their eyes as well.

Morgan: It's like an intense 2-week period, but you are creating 15 sports envoys that don't leave after 2 weeks when they go back to Karachi or Lahore.

Michelle: Their lives are made better for it. The State Department does such an incredible job bringing people together through music or sports. I always sports is the most popular one, of course.

Morgan: I'm with you. I'm biased too.

Michelle: I remember when there was the Edward Murrow program and here there are journalists that travel all over the country and get to be paired up with an incredible mentor and host and shadow them for 2-3 weeks.

Morgan: There is an intro and exit.

Michelle: Sort of a toolkit so when you go back to your own country and have that relationship it is so powerful. These exchanges make the world a better place.

Morgan: I think I know the answer and I think you made it clear. How are we doing time-wise?

Michelle: It's 11 and no one has kicked us out yet.

Morgan: Is sports something that the US Government should be delving into from your first hand experience and even from your policy experience from working at the Department or having relatives that are interested in elective office?

Michelle: The United States is one of three countries that doesn't have a Sports Ministry. You have the United States Olympic Committee, the NB, the United States Figure Skating. It's amazing that we have so many athletes around the country and you benefit so much from sports, but a lot of my friends in the sport of figure skating as well as other sports benefit from having grants provided for. I think we were talking about this last conversation.

Morgan: If you grew up in China, you would have been picked up at 5 and put into an academy system and everything paid for.

Michelle: That is not just elite athletes. It goes down to school.

Morgan: And that is how they identify the elite, right? It's mass and 100 girls in and create...

Michelle: Sometimes you wonder..this is probably a little controversial. Does this impact why in the United States the obesity rate is so high? How in schools the first thing they cut is music and recess or physical activity. I remember growing up I was always very...I was the monkey. I was literally on the jungle gym hanging off. I think of what we did at phys ed when they did stretching and the contests. I was always very active. Cutting those kinds of programs can lead to..

Morgan: Phys ed has a lot more value than just learning games. There are life skills that come out of phys ed and by cutting that there may be unintended consequences.

Michelle: So we are both advocating for a Sports Ministry basically.

Morgan: Or at least something like a Sports Czar. Somebody that the Executive Branch could reach out to like Condi Rice or...

Michelle: I wouldn't say czar. I would say a coordinator, but having a focus not on recreational sports.

Morgan: Last thing on that, you see the value in having some sort of federal or even local-level sports administration that is tied into a government.

Michelle: In some way. We do already have associations. For the Olympics, it's the United States Olympic Committee. You have the NBA and NFL, but having coordination or having some sort of grass roots that can reach young kids and get them more involved and physically interested. I see young kids on their phones, playing video games and how that affects your life, being physically active. They see it. They see the results. Kids that are more physically active have better grades, better attention spans.

Morgan: This is something Evan Lysacek really pushes is healthy lifestyle. He says the body is a machine that wants to be in motion and wants to be moving

Michelle: Which these days I need to get myself in the gym more often which reminds me.

Morgan: Is there anything else that I should have asked?

Michelle: No, you covered a lot!

Morgan: Thank you for your time.

Michelle: Thank you, Morgan

Morgan: Good luck with everything coming down the pipeline.

Michelle: Thanks

(Music)