

# Will Wie wear out welcome mat?

By Jim Litke  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The drawback to being a child star, as anyone who's watched "Hollywood Squares" can attest, is that most have nowhere to go but down.

That's not likely to happen to Michelle Wie, a 14-year-old already blessed with poise, a 100-watt smile and a picture-perfect golf swing. Then again, the last thing a young girl with designs on playing the men's tour one day and already burdened by comparisons to Tiger Woods needs is a sense of entitlement.

Wie went through more sponsors exemptions in the past year - a handful on the LPGA Tour, two more on men's minor league tours - than Woods did during his entire amateur career. And if her plans for early next year are any indication, she and her handlers aren't worried about having the welcome mat pulled out from under her anytime soon.

Last week, in a scene that was more pomp than circumstance, Wie showed up in Hawaii Gov. Linda Lingle's office to accept another free invitation, this time to play in the Sony Open. The first full-field event of the PGA Tour is being staged near the teenager's home in Honolulu, and motivated as much by economic development as player development, the governor even boasted about lobbying the title sponsor for the free pass.

"I believe this will bring added exposure to the tournament and to the state. Michelle brings a lot of pride to our people. Everybody knows I'm not a golfer," Lingle said, "but nobody is prouder than I am of Michelle."

The governor then proved

she wasn't a golfer by praising Wie for showing "that she has the maturity and ability to hold her own" - which is only true up to a point.

Wie had what is best described as an eventful season. She became the youngest player to win a USGA title for adults in the U.S. Women's Amateur Public Links and made the cut in six of the seven LPGA tournaments in which she competed. It was highlighted by a tie for the ninth in the season's first major, but marred by a run-in she and her father, B.J. Wie, had with veteran pro Danielle Ammaccapane over several breaches of etiquette at the U.S. Open.

Her outings with the men, however, weren't as memorable. Playing on sponsors' exemptions and from the same tees, Wie missed the cut on the Nationwide Tour's Boise Open and the Canadian Tour's Bay Mills Open Players Championship.

Wie had tried earning a spot in the Sony twice before in a one-day qualifying event and failed. Maybe that's why she didn't seem the least bit fazed by how it came about this time.

"I like the easy route," she said. "I know how hard it can be. It's a one-day deal, and anything can happen. I like this way better."

By the end of this year, at least a half-dozen women will have played against the men on tours around the world. It began with Annika Sorenstam, who was looking for a personal challenge at the Colonial after wearing out the competition on her own tour, and the novelty has been wearing off steadily since. The only woman to actually earn her spot, teaching pro Suzy Whaley, did it by winning a PGA club pro

sectional from a shorter set of tees and then, like Sorenstam, missed the cut at the Greater Hartford Open.

Not long ago, PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem was asked whether he expected the gender-blending to continue.

"I don't see a trend involved here where a lot of tournaments are going to want women golfers to play," he replied. "I frankly don't think there are many that add much to a tournament at this point in time."

Sponsors can invite anyone they want, of course, and as Sorenstam proved over the objections of Vijay Singh, the exemption couldn't have been put to better use. Likewise, Wie's appearance at the Sony will help sell tickets and juice the TV ratings. Whether she will benefit nearly as much is a trickier question.

Even while doubting that women playing on his tour would catch on, Finchem allowed that Wie might be a special case. She already drives the ball as far as many PGA regulars. "The question on everyone's mind," the commissioner said, "is how far can this young gal go?"

But if Wie's ultimate destination really is the PGA Tour, her education will be better served by making her earn a place instead of having a governor shell for it. Riding the wave of celebrity has its moments, but it won't teach her anything about her golf game.

Earl Woods chose his son's spots with great care for that reason. He believed the most important thing was learning how to win. Tiger accepted a few exemptions into pro events while still a teenager, but he won three U.S. Juniors and the same number of U.S. Amateurs before he was unleashed on the

PGA Tour.

"I wasn't going to send Tiger out there until I knew he could beat those guys, and I wouldn't send him out there," Earl said, "until he knew he could beat those guys, too."

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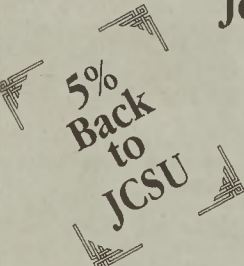
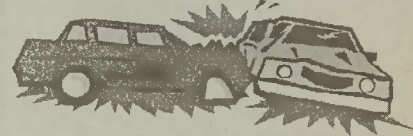
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## Prodigious athletes don't need or deserve double standard treatment

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becoming a professional, just like Tootie from "The Facts of Life," right? Right?

The thing is, Adu has been a professional for quite a while now, long before signing his contract with D.C. United of Major League Soccer.

Since this summer, he has played in England, Finland and South Korea. For the past few years, he has lived and trained at the IMG Sports Academy in Bradenton, Fla., while his family resided in the Washington, D.C. area. Months ago, he signed an incentive-based contract with Nike that could be worth \$1 million.

Adu is more equipped than any teen-ager in history to be a professional athlete at age 14. And that includes the great LeBron James, who is shining in the National Basketball Association as an 18-year-old. Seriously, in a few years, folks, we could be talking about Adu being the best soccer player ever.

Believe me, Freddy Adu is going to be all right. We have more reasons to worry about Lil' Bow Wow, Lil' Romeo - and all the other prepubescent "Lils" in the music and television worlds.

In retrospect, it should have made us cringe when Michael Jackson became an international - "professional" - music star long before he reached puberty. But nobody clamored to keep Michael from doing his thing in a grown-up arena; we only supported him by rushing to buy his records, as did many of our parents.

We should cringe particularly hard since Michael has transformed from a young black boy into an old white woman right before our eyes. But that's another column.

The point right now is, we're too selective, as a country, about who we will and won't allow to be young millionaires. And that's wrong. Either it's bad all the way around, or it isn't.

The key now is what Adu does from here. He should go on and get, at least, a high school diploma. He should try to go to a prom or a Sadie Hawkins Dance before he turns 18. And, yes, he should be squirreling away money for his future.

But make no mistake: There's absolutely nothing wrong with him getting a few years' jump on his savings account. Especially since there would be nothing wrong if he were into singing and sitcoms rather than soccer.

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## Aggies focus on I-AA playoffs

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a touchdown return.

"We shot ourselves in the foot too many times," Small said. "You can't afford to make those types of mistakes against a team like that. We didn't execute well at all."

A & T, which went 4-8 last season under former coach Bill Hayes, was picked to finish sixth in the conference in preseason coaches poll. Despite playing their first six games on the road, the Aggies went 5-1 during that stretch and went on an

eight-game win streak to wrap up A&T's first MEAC title since 1999.

Winning the school's first I-AA national championship will likely require four more road wins. The S.C. State loss and Appalachian State's exclusion from the post-season likely cost A&T a chance of hosting a game. Athletics Director Charlie Davis did submit a bid to the NCAA to host a game.

A win Saturday would earn A&T a trip to Jacksonville (Ala.) State or defending national champion Western Kentucky, one of four Gateway Conference teams to make the 16-school tournament.

A surprise in the selection show came when A&T's MEAC rival Bethune-

Cookman was awarded a first-round home game against Florida Atlantic. The Wildcats earned an at-large berth after they rallied Saturday to beat Florida A&M 39-35.

The MEAC has an automatic bid but rarely has gotten at-large berths since the demise of the Heritage Bowl three years ago, and only once has gotten a home playoff game. Strength of schedule was a drawback for the league, but Bethune-Cookman (9-2) had a better record than most teams on the playoff bubble, including 7-4 Appalachian State.

For ticket information, call the A&T ticket office in Greensboro at (336) 334-7749 or Wofford at (864) 597-4090.

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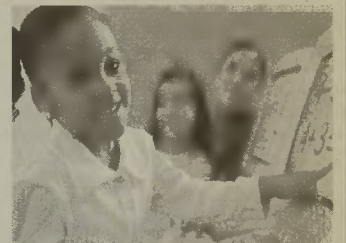
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