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Wie taking careful steps to golf's next level

By Tom Spousta, USA TODAY

His voice takes on a higher, concerned pitch as B.J. Wie discusses his daughter's future. Forget that he's the dad of teenage golf phenom Michelle Wie — he's still worried his girl might be growing up too fast.



Without even picking up a golf club as a professional, Michelle Wie could initially bring in up to \$10 million a year through endorsements.

By Matt Dunham, AP

"Sometimes I can't sleep well or eat well," he says.

He knows the decisions he and his wife, Bo, finalize in the next couple of weeks might have long-term consequences for Wie, who turns 16 Oct. 11. As a minor, she must have their approval even as she gets ready to cash in on endorsements that soon will make her one of the world's highest-paid female athletes.

"Once she turns pro, everything changes," her father says. "That's why you get nervous. In case you make a stupid mistake."

By most accounts, Wie can't go wrong. When she announces she's turning pro — possibly in time for the Samsung World Championship, Oct. 13-16 in Palm Desert, Calif. — a sports marketing machine rarely seen for either gender will crank up around the globe. Wie's pro debut against the men, announced Tuesday in Tokyo, would be Nov. 24-27 in the Casio World Open, one of the richest events on the Japan Tour.

Wie will be represented by the William Morris Agency, according to three people close to the negotiations. The agency is best known for its clientele of actors and actresses, which might mean a crossover into fashion or modeling. She'll join the Nike stable that includes Tiger Woods, whom marketing people say Wie might try to emulate with a logo and clothing line.

Hoop earrings. Jewelry. Jeans. Video games. All might fit into the packaging of Wie, who many predict will advance quickly into the world's most recognizable women's sports star.

"This is the first coming of the Tiger Woods of the female gender," says Vinnie Giles of Octagon Golf, whose Virginia-based agency was with IMG in the Wie derby. "But jewelry is even something Tiger can't do. Everybody's got watches."

Indeed, Wie's decision to turn pro has created a sports marketing buzz that's drawn comparisons to LeBron James' jump from high school to the NBA.

"She can generate more endorsement money than any woman in history," says David Carter, a sports business professor at Southern California and principal of Sports Business Group in Los Angeles. "She's going to be in front of us for decades."

Making a statement for women

Wie's earning power initially could reach an estimated \$8 million to \$10 million a year through her contract with the William Morris Agency, based on similar golf and tennis deals. Included is about \$3 million to \$5 million as part of a deal with Nike.

Even before she competes for her first paycheck, Wie would become the highest-paid female athlete on *Forbes'* list behind tennis' Maria Sharapova (\$16.7 million in endorsements) and Serena Williams (\$11.6 million). Wie would replace Annika Sorenstam as the top female golfer, almost doubling the Swedish star's \$5.4 million.

That's just upfront money. If she can successfully launch an apparel line with a personal logo, she could earn another \$15 million to \$20 million a year in royalties.



Once she turns pro, Michelle Wie will most likely be wearing the Nike 'Swoosh' logo a lot more often.

By Matt Dunham, AP

"Once the apparel line gets rolling and you have a couple other major endorsements," her earnings could reach \$30 million to \$40 million a year, says Brandon Steiner of Steiner Sports Marketing in Westchester, N.Y. "There's still a huge variance between the need for celebrity women athletes and what's out there."

Steiner sees a trend where some women's sports might soon enjoy significantly more popularity than men's because of athletes such as Wie and auto racing's Danica Patrick.

"Anytime you can have a woman compete with men, it engages people. Always has," he says. "There's a message being sent here: Start making some real room — and money — for us because we're not going away. Women don't have to be better physically. Just more exciting."

By eschewing IMG and Octagon in favor of celebrity-heavy William Morris Agency, Wie appears to have designs beyond golf. Carter says, "It's a very appropriate admission that she's in the entertainment business and a global entity."

Wie was born in Hawaii and has Korean heritage, an ethnic background expected to drive even more deals in Asia. She has prepared to handle language barriers, too — Wie speaks fluent Korean and has taken Japanese for three years and Chinese for two years among her high school classes.

Carter believes Wie is positioned to develop into an international icon like Woods or Yao Ming, the Chinese center for the NBA's Houston Rockets: "Her talent and poise is what's very compelling for companies. Her ethnicity is icing on the cake."

Susan Reed, editor-in-chief of *Golf for Women*, says the magazine had a noticeable bump in sales when Wie appeared on the July 2004 cover. Reed predicts Wie will continue to break down "the kind of dowdy reputation" and stereotype that has been associated with women's golf.

"For little girls — and little boys — she's that Tiger-like figure that makes people who aren't interested in golf want to watch," Reed says. "She has that 'it' factor, that cool factor, that you can't describe."

'Big dreams' for the taking

For now, her parents say Wie will wait until she's 18 to become a member of the LPGA tour. The decision not to petition new Commissioner Carolyn Bivens for a special exemption to that rule, her dad says, centers around whether his daughter could play the minimum required events.

"That's why we're not filing a petition," he says. "Some take it as Michelle's less interested in competing on the LPGA tour, but that's definitely not true. It has nothing to do with her interest in playing the men's tour."

If Wie were an LPGA member, she would have to play 10 events and finish among the top 90 money-winners to retain full-time

status for the next year.

Wie's appearance in the Samsung World Championship will be her eighth and final LPGA tournament this season. If she had been a pro, she would have earned \$640,870, good for 12th on the money list.

But as a non-member, she's allowed six exemptions, plus opportunities to play in the U.S. Women's Open and Weetabix Women's British Open. And she'll be able to pocket prize money.

Bivens has not indicated whether she would approve or deny a petition from Wie. Like many, Bivens believes winning should be a priority for the teenager. Despite her media exposure, Wie has only one significant victory, the 2003 U.S. Women's Amateur Public Links Championship, when she was 13.

"Outside the golf world, most people don't care if Michelle Wie is a member of the LPGA or not," Bivens says. "She's going to be good for all of golf. And when she does come out (on the LPGA tour), we want her to play for a long, long time."

Giles, whose company's roster includes Anna Kournikova, Michael Phelps and Mia Hamm, cautions Wie to go slowly with endorsements and start producing on the course. "The first five years, let her establish herself as the best player first. The appearances and travel and things she'll have to do now take up a lot more time than you think. You can get burned out pretty easy."

Still, Wie's ultimate goal remains qualifying for the PGA Tour, one of many dreams her father and mother wanted her to have.

"As a parent, in my opinion, it's a very, very slim possibility," her dad says. "We've been encouraging her since she started playing golf. We were always talking, joking, about how to beat Tiger, about, 'Can she play in a Masters?' People take it seriously and are offended, but that's not our intention.

"Girls have big dreams. She started thinking about those things herself. We didn't do it purposely to market her. All that is a byproduct."

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