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Hockey mom energizing run for presidential victory

By LAWRENCE C. LEVY

All week in Denver, the Democrats held their breath. The overall outcome was never in doubt; Barack Obama would be the party's nominee. But every night the political soap opera brought another cast of characters and questions.

Would Michelle come across as warm and patriotic? Would Teddy make it across the stage? Would Hillary give it up gracefully? Would Bill stop sulking? Would Barack bring it all together, unifying party loyalists and soothing swing voters, at an audacious acceptance pageant?

Would it rain? Now that all those questions have been answered in Colorado – very well for the Democrats – it's the Republicans' turn to hold their breath in Minnesota. Beginning Monday at the GOP convention, in the party's answer to *As the Clintons Turn*, the drama revolves around a single character, a single question: How will Sarah Palin do?

Before Saturday, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin had the political credentials that might have earned her a podium appearance – but hours removed from prime-time, in a mostly empty arena. As John McCain's surprise pick for a running mate, this hunter, fisherman, beauty pageant winner, this self-described "suburban hockey mom" of five, including an infant with Down Syndrome, will have as much of a choice of a speaking slot as anyone except the nominee himself.

And however Palin eventually does, and even before she arrives for the first rounds of delegate receptions and media interviews, her selection already has paid her party dividends.

Republicans, including New Yorkers concerned about how convention would play after the nearly flawless Obamapalooza, have greeted her enthusiastically. Democrats have reacted clumsily as they vacillate between derision and respectfulness. And the public, especially women still fuming over Hillary's fate, seemed to be tuning in with at least an intrigued curiosity.

"I didn't know much about her," said Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos (R-Rockville Centre). "But the more I hear, the better she sounds. She is the fresh face everyone is talking about, a woman, making history as our party's first female vice president. And she'll help us in the suburbs, which are so

important, because one of the first things she talked about was cutting property taxes."

Sen. Betty Little (R-Queensbury) sees Palin as the personification of girl power. "She comes across as a strong, independent woman who beat two incumbents, took on the oil companies and the good old boy network," said Little. "I had a Democratic woman just call me and say, 'Wow, you know who I'm voting for now.' "

In the long run, although she reinforces McCain's image as an unconventional politician, Palin makes McCain seem as much gambler as maverick. It lets Democrats raise the age issue with impunity: Her inexperience in national affairs might reasonably deter voters who fear she wouldn't be ready to lead a nation at war if the 72-year-old president, who has survived multiple cancers, were to die in office.

Then there's the closer scrutiny she will face – such as into the firing of a state trooper in a custody battle with her sister – that could reveal a damaging scandal. And the pressures of a national campaign, such as the spotlight of a debate against Joe Biden, that could force her into disqualifying gaffes.

But for now, Palin is a political plus.

First, her selection changed the conversation. Only hours after the confetti cannons stopped echoing in Denver, suddenly no body was talking about Obama's speech or, for that matter, about President George Bush's appearance Monday.

Second, she is being heard, if not yet embraced, by those white middle-class women who decide national elections – and who may be miffed that Hillary wasn't named vice president. Whether or not Palin's opposition to abortion and her other conservative positions will be a turn-off, especially to Clinton's more liberal supporters, her gender alone will earn her consideration. It could only take a sliver of defectors, as Bush found in 2004 on security issues, to give the GOP a victory.

Third, she has lured the Democrats into a political bear trap. Instead of taking the "experience card" off the table, her selection has started a debate over who has the thinnest resume – Palin or Obama. This only makes McCain's CV seem thicker.

"A dangerous choice for VP," said an e-blast from the liberal MoveOn.org.

But the danger may very well be to the Democrats. Obviously they must point out her flaws. But the more they talk about how conservative she is – that she continues to support at least classroom discussion of creationism – the more she helps McCain fire up the GOP base.

And the more the Democratic talking heads carp about her inexperience, the more they will anger women who feel they know something about being marginalized and penalized for balancing family and career.

If Democrats continue to play Palin badly, the return for McCain might grow right through Election Day. Right now everyone is holding their breath.

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