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Coming To Grips At Last

America's first family of judo offers rising star Kayla Harrison a safe haven

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The giant studio in the Boston suburb of Wakefield smells of sweat and echoes with grunts and thuds—hardly what one would expect of a setting hailed as an affirming sanctuary by a 21-year-old woman who has spent far too long looking for just that. But Kayla Harrison happens to be the finest judoka in the country, and the mats and pads of Pedro's Judo Center suit her just fine. "It's become my home," says Harrison. "New goals, new hopes." Start with this one: This summer Harrison could become America's first Olympic judo champion. The U.S. has won 10 judo medals, but never gold, at the Games. Two of those medals—both bronze—went to Jimmy Pedro. In 1999 he won the country's last world title, before coaching Harrison to victory at the worlds in Tokyo in 2010. "This is what we've given our lives for," says Pedro (*right*, with Harrison), whose father, Big Jim, an Olympic alternate in 1976, coaches with him. "If Kayla won, we could almost retire from judo. We'd have done it."

In Harrison's eyes they've already done far more than that. For at least three years, until she was 16, Kayla was sexually abused by her then coach, Daniel Doyle (who pleaded guilty to illegal sexual conduct and is now serving 10 years in jail). "When I was 15, I was extremely suicidal," she says. "I still thought I loved him. He was my sun. I wanted his approval. In my journal I wrote to God asking for strength to do the right thing. Then I'd ask if anyone would really miss me." She filled whole pages with the repeated words, "I hate my life."

In May 2007 her mother and stepfather sent Kayla from her home in Middletown, Ohio, to the Pedros, as much for their character as for their coaching. Harrison welcomed the move. Coming to terms with the abuse has been far harder. "Once people knew what happened," she says, "I worried they'd avoid me or think I was weird." Instead the Pedros embraced and drove her. They insisted she finish high school and attend therapy. They moved her up two weight classes, from 139 pounds to 172, so she wouldn't have to cut weight. Almost daily Big Jim told her not to let the past define her. "You can't find a nicer person," says Jimmy. "She's always putting other people ahead of herself."

Harrison followed her gold at the 2010 worlds with a bronze in '11. She knows that if she plays to her strengths in London, she has a real chance at gold again. But her hunger to reach the top of the medal stand goes beyond the desire for personal glory. Harrison trains now with greater goals in mind: speaking about her past so other young victims can find courage to come forward, and filling the void for the family that has filled hers. "If I do win, it's not just for me," she says. "It's for Jimmy and Big Jim. I owe them my life."

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