

Aug 02 Kayla Harrison: From Victim to Olympic Champion



LONDON – Since the day last fall that Kayla Harrison first publicly told her story of being sexually abused by a judo coach as a young teenager, she has been focused on using the Olympic podium as her platform for helping other abuse victims.

On Thursday, she climbed that podium. After methodically defeating four competitors, after closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she stepped to the top of the Olympic medal stand.

Then she sobbed and she laughed, and she tried to mouth the words to the national anthem through tears.

“This is exactly what I wanted,” she said later, cradling her Olympic gold medal, the first ever for U.S. judo. “I can’t wait to help grow the sport of judo, to help victims overcome things and hopefully change somebody’s life, make a difference.”

She first had to change her life. The abuse began when she was 13, according to court documents. She told a friend, who in turn told Harrison’s mom, when she was 16.

The coach is serving a 10-year federal prison sentence after pleading guilty in November 2007.

Harrison, now 22, wrote suicidal notes in her journal during the years the abuse was happening. As the case was being investigated, the Middletown, Ohio, native moved to Wakefield, Mass., to train with renowned judo coaches Jimmy Pedro, a 1999 world champion, and Pedro's father, Jim Pedro Sr.

Harrison questioned for more than a year whether she wanted to continue in the sport.

"I hated judo," she said Thursday. "I hated the Pedros. I didn't want to be the strong girl. I didn't want to be the golden girl. I didn't want to be the girl who overcame everything."

Her training partners pulled her out of bed in the morning to lift weights. They picked her up off the mat when she was crying.

"That's why I owe all of this to my Pedros, to my teammates," she said.

Their support, their encouragement, their insistence, ultimately put her on a different path.

"I've never done anything harder than having to go through that," she said. "The Olympics, it wasn't a breeze, but it was something that I was focused and that I wanted. I used everything as my fuel, and I was able to push it towards something positive and have a goal and have a dream."

In 2008, Harrison won the U.S. Open, a junior world title and the Olympic team trials. The USA, though, had not qualified the 78-kilogram (172-pound) class for the 2008 Games. Harrison went to Beijing as the training partner for Ronda Rousey, who won the first Olympic medal in U.S. women's judo history, a bronze.

Marti Malloy won the U.S. its second women's bronze earlier this week.

"The USA is not known to be a powerhouse of judo, but we've shocked the world here at this Olympics," Jimmy Pedro said.

In 2010, Harrison won a world title, the first for U.S. judo since Pedro's 21 years before. Last year, she won bronze at worlds, which Pedro said helped her prepare better for the Olympics.

"She was a different person training for this Olympics than she was training to repeat as a world champion, because she was hungry again," he said. "She wasn't coming in with all the pressure of being a No. 1 seed. She was out to prove that she's the best."

Ranked No. 2 in the world, Harrison faced Hungarian Abigel Joo, against whom Harrison was 0-2 before Thursday, in the Olympic quarterfinals. She went against top-ranked Mayra Aguiar of Brazil in the semifinals. She was 5-4 lifetime against Aguiar.

"I knew that was going to be the moment, that was going to be the gold-medal match," Harrison said of the semifinal.

The match went into the last minute scoreless, but Harrison ended it with an ippon (a match-ending throw) with 14 seconds remaining.

Afterward, Pedro declared: "Today is Kayla Harrison's day. We're going to make Olympic history today."

Awaiting in the final was British competitor Gemma Gibbons, ranked 42nd in the world. Gibbons had been the upset artist of the day, beating third-ranked Audrey Tcheumeo of France in the semifinals.

Harrison had the upper hand in skill, but Gibbons had the crowd. British prime minister David Cameron was in the house and a deafening roar surged from the stands, as fans chanted Gibbons' first name.

Harrison pretended they were rooting for her. "Gemma' sounds like 'Kayla,'" she said.

Harrison scored her first point, on a partial takedown, just one minute into the five-minute bout. It would be all she would need, although she scored another point before it was over.

At the end, she walked to the center of the mat and raised Gibbons' hand.

"I wanted the crowd to give her her due," Harrison said.

Then she ran and jumped into Pedro's arms. She found her fiancé, Aaron Handy, in the stands, and he handed her an American flag. She pointed and blew kisses to her family during the celebration.

"Stepping on the Olympic mat is nothing compared to what she's already beat," Pedro said. "That's what gives her incredible resolve. That's what makes her a true champion with character. And that's what makes her story so amazing."

Before going to sleep every night the last four years, Harrison would visualize winning Olympic gold. She would repeat a mantra to herself: "This is my day, this is my purpose. Kayla Harrison, Olympic champion."

She fulfilled it Thursday. And then she embraced it.

"This just proves that you're only a victim if you allow yourself to be and that nothing can stop you," she said. "I want to be a role model. I want to be USA Judo's poster girl. I want to be the person that stands up and fights for what's right."

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