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Kayla Harrison’s Winning Spirit: Takes First U.S. Gold in Judo, Speaks Out on Sexual Abuse

Kayla Harrison won the first judo gold in U.S. history. But she has a much bigger mission

By **SEAN GREGORY / LONDON** | August 2, 2012 | +

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KIM KYUNG-HOON / REUTERS

Kayla Harrison of the U.S. celebrates after defeating Britain’s Gemma Gibbons in their women’s -78kg final judo match at the London 2012 Olympic Games on August 2, 2012.

As Kayla Harrison, who won America’s first-ever gold medal in judo on Thursday afternoon, watched the Jerry Sandusky case unfold back in early November, she’d get in arguments with her friends. Some were saying that **Joe Paterno** got a raw deal. “It was personal,” Harrison, 22, told TIME during a **New York City** breakfast discussion in early July before heading to London. “I was very disappointed with my peers. I was like, ‘really? You really think that? Knowing what I’ve been through?’”

When Harrison was in her early teens, a male judo coach had sexually abused her. And she had just publicly discussed her abuse for the first time, in an interview with **USA Today**. The infamous Penn State student rioting really got to her. “I couldn’t believe that,” Harrison says. “I mean, there are multiple victims whose lives had been changed forever — forever — and they’re rioting about a football coach who lost his job? I couldn’t fathom that.”

Since the Sandusky scandal broke, Harrison has repeatedly shared her harrowing story, offering herself up as an example of someone who overcame abuse to reach the Olympic stage. And that candor helped her win a gold medal. “It was definitely therapeutic for me,” Harrison said after she dispatched **Great Britain’s** Gemma Gibbons, in front of a charged crowd that

included British prime minister David Cameron and Vladimir Putin. “I’m at peace. I’m the Olympic champion.”

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Harrison won the 2010 world title in the 154-170 pound weight class, achieving one of her two career goals — the other being an Olympic gold medal. After that championship, Harrison says it was easier for her to cope with her memories. Now, she thought, it was time to help other victims. “I saw a lot of things that really pissed me off,” says Harrison. “I decided I wasn’t going to sit around and take it anymore.”

Her coach, Daniel Doyle, started abusing Harrison when she was 13. “I mean, it was definitely grooming,” said Harrison, who grew up in Middletown, Ohio. “I moved to the club when I was eight years old. From a young age, I had a very keen drive to please people. I wanted everyone to love me. I wanted to be the center of attention. You know, Daniel definitely fed off that.”

Harrison’s mother eventually found out about the abuse, through one of her daughter’s friends, and reported Doyle to the police. In November 2007, Doyle plead guilty to a count of “engaging in illicit sexual conduct in a foreign place.” Some of the abuse took place while Doyle and Harrison traveled overseas for judo tournaments. He’s serving a 10-year federal prison sentence. “It was just years and years of me being in the same environment, and wanting to please him,” says Harrison. “I thought I loved him. I thought that it was OK. I didn’t think it was OK – but I thought it would be all right, I guess. I was very, very confused. I was extremely depressed – those are turbulent years, and I was going through this at the same time. So, it sucked.” She lets out a laugh.

After all Harrison had been through, the family knew she needed a change of scenery. They connected with the Pedros, a father-son judo coaching tandem who trained athletes in Wakefield, Mass., north of Boston. (Jimmy Pedro Jr., the son, won a pair of Olympic bronze medals, in 1996 and 2000). Their pupils lived together in an apartment, and Harrison moved to Massachusetts, at 16.

But moving didn’t mean Harrison could escape her demons. “She was not in a good state of mind,” says Jimmy Pedro Jr., who received Harrison in his arms after she won the gold. “She was somebody who had no self-esteem. She didn’t know, really, right from wrong. She was somebody who didn’t know if she wanted to go on with life or not.” One time, Pedro says, he found Harrison on the roof of a two-story apartment, contemplating whether or not to jump. “It was just a very, very, very low point.”

Her sport provided no comfort. “I hated judo,” Harrison says. “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 one who overcame everything.” But eventually, the Pedros, and her fellow judo trainees, convinced her to turn things around. “That’s why I owe all of this to the Pedros, to my teammates,” Harrison says on Thursday, after her victory. “They’re the ones who got me out of bed in the morning and said, ‘we’re going to lift.’ They’re the ones who picked me off the mat when I was crying and wanted to quit. I’m forever grateful to them for that.”

Over the past year, Harrison has stuck to a ritual. “Every night before we go down to sleep,” says Aaron Handy, Harrison’s fiance, who was waiting for her in a venue corridor after the victory ceremony, “she closes her eyes, and visualizes this moment.” On Thursday, she repeated a mantra in her head. *This is my day. This is my purpose. This is my day. This is my purpose. Kayla Harrison, Olympic champion.* And from the start, she fought with aggression. “I wanted to brawl,” she says.

Now that Harrison has achieved her other career goal, she wants to use her Olympic platform to fight against sexual abuse. “This is proof that you’re only a victim if you allow yourself to be,” said Harrison after her win. “Nothing can stop you.” Even before the Olympics, Harrison was reaching people. “I have had a lot of young people, girls even, come up to me, and you know, tell me certain things,” Harrison said in New York City. “It’s scary. It’s really scary to be someone they trust you with that. But I want to be the one that they come to. I want to be someone who can change their life, and fix it, and make it better. I want to be what the Pedros were for me, and show somebody that there are good people in the world, who do the right thing no matter what, and prosper in the end. We’ll see. We’ll see after London.”

And now that the gold is hers?

“I can’t wait.”

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